

The Puzzle Has a Designer

Divine Design – Finding Your Fit in the Body of Christ – Part I

Romans 12:3

Introduction

It was in 1760 that John Spilsbury created the very first jigsaw puzzle. He was a London engraver and mapmaker. He came up with the idea to mount a map onto a piece of hardwood, then, using a fine jigsaw blade, he cut around the borders of each country, creating many different pieces. His plan was to create an educational tool that would be a fun way for children to learn geography.

By the mid-1800's, jigsaw puzzles had become wildly popular, with the help of photography and engraving. Advances in printing methods allowed the prices to come down and the production to go up.

Today, tens of thousands of jigsaw puzzles are created every year by taking a photograph and mounting it on a piece of cardboard. Then, through a process of applying the right amounts of heat and pressure, it is prepared for being cut into hundreds of uniquely designed pieces.

I found it interesting that during the Great Depression of the last century, the jigsaw puzzle sold incredibly well. Even though money was in short supply, the appeal of the puzzle was that it brought so much enjoyment for a small price, *and* it could be played over and over again.¹

The sciences have come along in the meantime, and have found, after conducting various experiments and studies, that working a jigsaw puzzle reduces stress.

That is not the case for me – it increases my stress! I can look for about three minutes for a piece and feel my blood pressure rising. My wife, on the

other hand, loves working on puzzles and finds them to be almost a relaxing diversion.

The only kind of jigsaw puzzle I could ever do, was the kind we had when our children were young. I am sure you know the kind – they had big wooden pieces with little knobs on top for you to hold. You could not miss with those pieces! That kind of jigsaw puzzle was fun!

For those of you who enjoy putting together a puzzle, you know there is one thing that helps more than anything else as you put the pieces together. It is to look at the picture on the box.

We are about to discover that a local church is much like a puzzle. They are all a little different.

Some puzzles have more pieces than others. They come in all shapes and sizes. I learned that one of the smallest antique puzzles is the size of a matchbox. Then again, some puzzles today, are created to glow in the dark. Some puzzles look like small boats, some like miniature horses, dolphins, and airplanes with moving parts. Some puzzles stand upright as replicas of castles and famous landmarks like Big Ben and the Taj Mahal.

However, no matter what the puzzle looks like; no matter what size or shape it takes; no matter how many pieces are used to form it, every puzzle has been created and produced by a designer. In the same way, the church universal, as well as every single local church, has been designed, down to each individual, by our great Designer and Lord, Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul is about to inform us that every person has a place in the puzzle. In fact, you could

say that every person is a piece of the puzzle, designed by God to bring glory to His name and advance His redemptive purpose on earth.

So, just as a puzzle designer and manufacturer helps their clientele by printing the picture of the puzzle on the top of the box, in the same way, our great Designer has put a picture of the church inside the Bible for us to study.

I cannot think of a better time to study this truth than now. At a time when our church has experienced unprecedented growth and expansion, it is a perfect time to study the picture and follow the divine design for the church of our living Lord.

Let us look at the entire biblical picture of the church that Paul provides for us in Romans, chapter 12. Follow along as I read the entire paragraph, beginning with verse 3 through verse 8.

For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.

For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function,

so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith;

if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching;

or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

Think!

View Our Place in the Church “Puzzle” With a Biblical Perspective

Now, before we try to identify the pieces in the puzzle; before we try to find our own place; before we compare this picture with our own church, Paul says, in effect, stop and think! This puzzle requires, first and foremost, the right perspective.

Notice verse 3 of Romans, chapter 12, again. That is as far as we are going to get in our discussion today.

I agree with one commentator who pointed out that it is remarkable that God crowds into one sentence the same word, four different times.ⁱⁱ

It is the Greek word for “think”. And Paul is not talking about intelligence or your mental state, he is talking about your attitude; your mindset.

Four times, the Greek word, “phroneo,” which means, “to think,” appears in this verse.

It appears twice in the first phrase,

. . . I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think . . .

Before we are even told any information about the pieces in the puzzle, we are warned to adjust our thinking so that we do not think we are superior to anyone, but are servant-minded toward everyone.

Paul is saying to the Roman church, “No one in your puzzle is a prima donna.”

There are no “big shots” in the body of Christ.

So before Paul gives us anything about the gifts and their operation in the church family, he warns us to approach the subject with the sensitivity of humility.

This past Christmas I purchased the ultimate jigsaw puzzle for my wife, Marsha. It was a large canister. On the top, sealed with saran wrap, were the pieces of a puzzle; inside the canister was popcorn. Was that great or what? She could do the puzzle, and I could eat the popcorn! Wasn't that a special gift?!

I can tell you, as I shopped for a puzzle last Christmas, I looked at quite a number of them. There were boxes galore – including that special discovery of the popcorn puzzle. However, in seeing all those puzzles, I never saw even one box with a warning label that said, “Do not attempt this puzzle without the proper mindset” or “Do not attempt this puzzle without humility”.

Puzzles have a way of humbling me anyway. If I did not start out with it, I got it along the way.

The surprising thing is, before Paul tells us anything about the way in which God has put the church together, he gives us this warning, “You'd better be thinking right about yourself – or you'll never get the puzzle right!”

That is exactly what Peter meant when he wrote, in I Peter, chapter 5, verse 5,

... all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

Without humility, you will experience a malfunction of ministry.

Paul warned the Corinthians as well, in I Corinthians, chapter 4, verses 6 through 7 (The Message),

Is there anything [anybody can] discover in you that you [can] take credit for? Isn't everything you have and everything you are sheer gifts from God? So what's the point of all this comparing and competing?

It is not surprising then, that Paul would begin a discussion on the ministry of believers within the church with a warning to have a mindset of humility. Before there can be true, genuine, Christ honoring service, there must be a true, authentic attitude of servant hood, right?

Paul delivered this same challenge to the believers living in Philippi, when he wrote, in Philippians, chapter 2, verses 3 through 7,

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves;

do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus,

who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped,

but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant . . .

You might say, "That's great – that's the Lord for you."

Oh no, you missed verse 5,

Have this attitude in yourselves which was in . . . Christ Jesus,

He had it . . . He modeled it . . . now the church is to practice it!

Have you ever listened to the descriptions of products in their advertisements? I have read that we are confronted by thousands of them every single day. This product is better, superior, the best, the only, especially made, one of a kind, sophisticated, exciting . . .

Have you noticed the way the church in America advertises along the same lines? It is dynamic, exciting, inspiring . . .

Did you ever notice the way Jesus Christ described Himself with His own words? Look at Matthew, chapter 11, verse 29a.

Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me,

. . .

Then does He say, "for I am dynamic, inspiring, miracle working . . .? No! Look at the next phrase in that verse.

. . . for I am gentle and humble in heart . . .

What kind of self-advertisement is that?! Donald Trump would have fired Him.

Do you want to be gentle? Do you want to be humble? Then, you must want to be a loser!

Our culture today looks down on true humility. It rewards brash, self-centered, ego building, self-promoting, self-exalting ambition, right?ⁱⁱⁱ

We are cheering on a generation to follow, not the example of Jesus Christ, but the example of Diotrefes who, described by the apostle John, in III John, verse 9,

. . . loves to be first among them . . .

No wonder we have to have our mindset radically altered after we have entered the church; the body of Christ. No wonder our thinking has to be revolutionized and renewed.

By the way, the word Jesus Christ used for "gentle" was the Greek word "*praus*," which was used in the New Testament of a wild stallion that had been tamed. It speaks of strength under control.^{iv}

It does not describe a wimpy, doe-eyed brunette who always looked sad and at a loss for words. In fact, it is the same Greek word which is translated "meek". Meekness is not weakness – it is power under control. The Lord Jesus Christ was divine power, under divine control.

The Lord said He was gentle and that His heart was humble.

That word "humble" in the original language, referred to the small and insignificant services by which one could help another person. It was a servant's word.^v

It was illustrated perfectly when the Lord wrapped Himself in a towel so that He could teach all of His big shot disciples an unforgettable lesson.

True greatness is not being served, but becoming a servant.

In Jesus' illustration, there was nothing dynamic, there were no headlines, no one was "oohing" and "aahing" – there was just a basin of water and a towel.

Do you want a place in the body of Christ? Then reach for a towel and look around – there are plenty of people to serve; there are plenty of dirty feet to wash.

However, it will require that you think differently about the church.

Paul provides the warning in verse 3 – we are not to think too highly of ourselves; that is, we are not to have an attitude of superiority.

This first appearance of the word "think," in fact, has the prefix from which we get our word, "hyper". In other words, Paul is saying, "Don't be so excited about yourself; don't get all hyper about you, settle down."

Now, let me add that if this is true, and it is, then the converse is implied and equally true. We are not to think too highly of ourselves, and we are not to think too lowly of ourselves. One is self-admiration and the other is self-depreciation. Neither honors God nor encourages anyone in the body of Christ!

I agree with Graham Scroggie, a wonderful British expositor who is now in heaven. Graham wrote, over fifty years ago, in his wonderful little book, *Salvation and Behavior*, these insightful words (follow this carefully),

Self-admiration is pride and conceit, which is bad for oneself, unjust to others, and throws the machinery of Christian life and work out of gear. On the other hand, self-depreciation neither honours God, encourages ourselves, nor blesses others. The person who over-estimates himself will try to do what he cannot do; the person who underestimates himself will not try to do what he can do, and in both cases the work [does not get] done.^{vi}

We are not to run around saying, "I'm good at everything" or "I'm good at nothing." Neither way of thinking will edify the body of Christ nor advance the glory and cause of His church.

So what is the solution?

You might expect Paul to tell us to stop thinking about ourselves altogether. However, believe it or not, the solution Paul provides is not to think less of

ourselves or more of ourselves; his solution is for us to begin thinking biblically about ourselves.

Paul writes in the middle of verse 3,

. . . not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment . . .

Sound judgment is a compound word that again, contains the same word "think". So Paul is telling us to, "Think about yourself in such a way that you have sound thinking."

The word means, "to keep the proper measure; not going beyond the set boundaries; to be reasonable and sensible."^{vii}

In other words, thinking within biblical boundaries will keep our thinking about ourselves balanced.

What Does the Bible Say About Our Place in the Church "Puzzle"?

So what does the Bible say about us? There are two things in Romans, chapter 12, verse 3, that directly relate to helping us find our place in the puzzle.

Everything we have received is the result of God's grace

1. Number one, everything we have received is the result of God's grace.

Paul begins verse 3 by saying,

For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you . . .

In other words, the only way Paul could have ever been a spokesman for God, and the only way he could then challenge everyone among them – literally every member of the Roman assembly – is by virtue of the grace of God.

Paul wrote constantly of God's grace.

To Timothy, he wrote,

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy . . . and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant . . . (I Timothy 1:12-14)

Paul never completely recovered from his conversion.

Do you know why any one of us could ever claim to belong to God? Only by His grace,

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; (Ephesians 2:8)

Do you know why any one of us could ever claim to be forgiven by God? Only by His grace,

. . . where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, (Romans 5:20)

Do you know why any one of us could ever claim to belong somewhere in the picture puzzle of Christ's church? It is the grace of God, as Paul emphasizes in Romans, chapter 12, verse 3.

The apostle Peter agrees and writes,

As each one has a received a special gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. (I Peter 4:10)

Everything we are that is good and everything we have that is good is related to the grace of God.

That leads us to the second way we are to think about ourselves.

Everything we do is the result of God's gift

2. Number two, everything we do is the result of God's gift.

Paul writes in the last part of verse 3,

. . . think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.

Would you note that Paul did not say, "God has allotted to each a measure of . . . knowledge, skill, personal charisma, physical appeal, personal dynamic . . ."

No. Paul said, "God has measured out to each of us . . . faith."

What Paul means is that God has doled out the correct measurement of faith; that is, just the right amount you need to trust Him and serve Him.

In addition, not only has God given to *all* believers the equipment they need to serve Him, God has given to all believers *all* the equipment they need in order to contribute to His cause.

You might say, "That's too good to be true. I don't believe it."

Then you are not thinking correctly and biblically and within the boundaries of God's truth!

This is what God says about you! He has given you the measure of faith to fulfill His design.

Believe it! Take it by faith! Accept it! Act on it!

You have a place in the puzzle!

What does that look like?

Application

Now, as we wrap up this first study on how to find your fit in the body of Christ, let me make several observations that will be rather obvious analogies of a local church.

All of the pieces in a puzzle are either directly or indirectly interlocking

1. First, all of the pieces in a puzzle are either directly or indirectly interlocking.

Everyone fits together in the puzzle. Paul will make that analogy crystal clear in the next few verses of Romans, chapter 12.

However, let me encourage you – some pieces may rub a little tighter than others. Sometimes you have to press a little harder in some places than others – the pieces seem to want to slip out of their place.

That reminds me of two women who had a hard time getting along in the church at Philippi. You may remember Paul having to speak to these ladies in the church, who were named Euodia and Syntyche. He actually wrote a word of challenge in his letter, which surely must have embarrassed them, but evidently, was needed. Paul wrote,

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord. (Philippians 4:2)

In other words, "Euodia and Syntyche, get along."

J. Vernon McGee renamed them, "Odious" and "Soontouchy"!

"Get along" – you might have to shave a little off a corner to fit smoother – iron sharpens iron – you will interlock! But it is going to take humility. That is why Paul starts with that challenge to our thinking.

You cannot be a big shot. No one piece of the puzzle can demand more space or elevated space. The table is level.

I want to come back to this idea in a moment, but let me move on to my second analogy:

It is not always easy to put the pieces of a puzzle together

2. It is not always easy to put the pieces of a puzzle together.

Have you noticed that of any puzzle, some parts take longer to put together than others?

If we were to spread out the pieces of a puzzle on this pulpit after the service, and seven or eight of us gathered around to put it together, we would all immediately look for the corner pieces, right? Then, we would move on to locating the frame, or the border pieces, with one straight edge – they are easy to spot. Sooner or later, we would finish the easy stuff and we would have to work our way into the interior.

Finding your place and your fit in the service of Christ's church is sometimes easy, but sometimes it is just hard work. Sometimes it is inspiration, and other times it is perspiration.

Frankly, we more naturally tend to think, "I want to go to church for what I can get – social interaction, programs I like, activities that meet my needs, people I know, traditions I'm comfortable with . . ."

The driving question can easily become, "What can the church do for me?"

So we arrive with our mental check list as we check out a church:

- parking space – check;
- friendly usher – check;
- plenty of seats to choose from . . . on the back section – I don't know, it looks kind of crowded back there;
- climate control – check;
- music I like – check;
- good message – check.

It is easy for this kind of thinking to creep in. And it is no wonder – we are surrounded by the dominant world views that hound us and deliver to us what we really want to hear:

- If it works for me, then it is good.
- If it satisfies me, that is good too.^{viii}

No wonder Paul does not even begin to address the issue of our serving one another without beginning with a challenge to the way we think. Our thinking has to radically change for us to get to the

place where we ask, "What can I do for someone else?"

A puzzle piece merely surrenders to the designer's placement

3. A third analogy is that a puzzle piece never demands its place, it merely surrenders to the designer's placement.

It is true that no puzzle piece ever said, "I don't want to be there in the puzzle – I don't want to be a clump of grass, I want to be one of those fluffy clouds! Hey, I don't want to be that guy's nose. Not there! Forget it! I'll make my own picture!"

No, this puzzle has a Designer! And the Designer has plans, remember? You will find that His plans are pure and pleasing and perfect.

There is no such thing as an insignificant piece of the puzzle

4. Finally, since each piece of the puzzle has been designed, there is no such thing as an insignificant piece to the puzzle!

Every piece counts! In fact, it takes the entire puzzle to reveal the completed picture.

Have you ever put a puzzle together and then discovered, at the end of your labor, a missing piece? You look on the floor, under the board, and in your seat. When there is a piece missing, there is a loss of accomplishment, a loss of enjoyment, an empty feeling. So, you crumble all the pieces up and throw them in the box.

In this analogy to the church, everyone loses when someone is missing. The church suffers loss of complete effectiveness; the world loses the benefit of our full testimony! Not to mention that the missing piece of the puzzle is missing what they were designed by God to contribute.

What will it take for everything to come together in this puzzle called the church?

Paul answers: humility, self-sacrifice, and an entirely new way of thinking biblically about ourselves and one another.

A new way of viewing ourselves and each other! I read an illustration of this kind of shift in thinking. Let me tell the story.

When the starter fired the gun, the contestants sprang out of the starting blocks, and even the casual observer could tell something was different. This was the Special Olympics.

It was special in that the contestants were developmentally and physically disabled. But it was special for a far greater reason than that. It was special because of the way this hundred meter dash was run. The runners moved down the track shoulder-to-shoulder. No one was ahead; no one was behind.

Suddenly one of the young women sprawled headlong on the track and turned over in some amount of pain and embarrassment. The rest of the contestants moved on for ten meters or so, but then, without any communication among themselves, they all stopped, turned around, and jogged back to their fallen friend. They picked her up off the track, comforted her, and then, arm in arm they ran together to the finish line.^{ix}

No one came in first place, but then again, they all came in first place. How different that is, but how refreshing and selfless.

No wonder Paul challenges us at the very outset of this discussion on how to serve together in a local body of believers, to start thinking an entirely new way – where everyone wins; where everyone finds their place of equal significance in the puzzle; where every piece is fitted together by divine design.

Then, we all, interlocking together, reveal to one another and to the world, the picture God designed us to exhibit. And God's name is glorified; His cause is advanced; His sons and daughters find fulfillment, accomplishment, and purpose, as they find their fit in the body of Christ.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 4/24/2005 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ<http://www.jigsaw2order.com>.

ⁱⁱ William R. Newell, Romans (Moody Press, 1938), p. 458.

ⁱⁱⁱ John MacArthur, Romans: Volume 2 (Moody Press, 1994), p. 159.

^{iv} Charles R. Swindoll, Improving Your Serve (IFL, 1993), p. 117.

^v Ibid., p. 118.

^{vi} W. Graham Scroggie, Salvation and Behaviour (Pickering & Inglis, 1952), p. 81.

^{vii} Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Zondervan, 1976), p. 377.

^{viii} Tod E. Bolsinger, It Takes a Church to Raise a Christian (Brazos Press, 2004), p. 43.

^{ix} Jim Dethmer, The Gift of Mercy, <http://www.preachingtoday.com>.