

A Living Organism

By Greg Ogden

Chapter 20 of Discipleship Essentials

The body of Christ is the fundamental biblical image for the church. In all, ninety-six word pictures have been identified in the New Testament that convey various aspects and angles of the place of the church in God's plan, but the one that dominates the New Testament and truly defines who we are is the image of the body of Christ. By this we understand the church to be a living organism.

What is Christ's Relationship to the Church?

The apostle Paul ingeniously selected the image of the human body to convey the organic manner in which the church is to function. We can look at the human body from two stand-points. First, we see the body as a functional whole with all its part under the central coordination of the head. But on closer examination we notice that the whole is made up of diverse parts, each with a distinctive, unique function. The hands are for grasping, the eyes for seeing, the feet for walking and so on. The body is the prototype of unity in diversity.

Paul uses the human body analogy to convey Christ's relationship to the church in an arresting and even shocking fashion. Not the startling conclusion to I Corinthians 12:12. "The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ." Is this the way we expect the verse to conclude? We expect Paul to write: "So it is with the Church." In fact, we tend to read right over Paul's actual words and supply the previous phrase. Paul must mean that the church is like a human body made up of diverse parts and coordinated under its head. But Paul is saying far more than that. For Paul "the body of Christ" is not just a metaphor or a helpful word picture, but it also points to the reality that Jesus dwells among his people and gives his life to them.

In other words the church is not a human organization that has contracted by common consent to keep alive the memory of a great historical figure. On the contrary, the church is a divine organism mystically fused to the living and reigning Christ, who continues to reveal himself in his people. Ray Stedman put it this way, "The life of Jesus is still being manifest among people, but now no longer through an individual physical body, limited to one place on earth, but through a complex, corporate body called the church."

Paul understood the church as an organism from the moment of his initial encounter with Christ. Saul, the firebrand and self-righteous protector of the Hebrew law, was on his way to Damascus, having received authority to arrest and bring Christians to Jerusalem, but his plans were dramatically altered. A blinding light filled the sky and engulfed his field of vision. Thrown

to the ground, he heard a voice, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Saul replied, "Who are you, Lord? The heavenly voice responded, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:4-6). But wait! Saul was not persecuting Jesus but those who claimed to be his followers.

What does this incident tell us about the relationship between Jesus and his followers? Jesus indwells them. If you touch a christian you have touched Christ. Christians are a sacramental people. A sacrament is a means of grace, a symbol that mysteriously bears presence of Christ and through which believers encounter Christ.

Thomas oden summarizes Christ's relationship to the church. "Christianity is distinctive as a religious faith in that it understands itself to be living as a continuing community through the living Christ....Its uniqueness lies in its particular relationship with its founder....It is the resurrected presence of the living Lord that continues to be the sole basis of the present reality of the church. Jesus is not merely the one who founded the community and left it, but rather the one who is present to the community now and in each historical period as the vital essence of the church.

What is the Church's Relationship to Christ?

The church is absolutely dependent on its head, Jesus Christ. Max Thurian captures both Christ's relationship to the church and our relationship to Christ: "Jesus does nothing independently of the church nor can the church do anything independently of Christ." The nature of the church's relationship to Christ is implicit in the phrase that Jesus is "head over everything for the church" (Ephesians 1:22).

The word head has two meanings in the Bible: "life source" and "ultimate authority." In our society head usually connotes authority, the one in charge, but in the original Greek head could equally mean "source" or "origin." The source of a river is called the headwaters. When you think of head as the life source, then Saul's use of head in Ephesians 4:15 and 16 makes sense. "Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does the work."

Whoever heard of a body growing into its head? Paul has exhorted the Ephesians to "become mature," to attain "the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" and to "no longer be infants." Paul reminded the Ephesians that the only way to become spiritual adults is to recognize their absolute reliance on Jesus to supply their life and that his likeness is the goal toward which they are growing. So Jesus is the head into whom and from whom we grow.

Second, for Jesus to be head means that the church is under his direct authority. The church's relationship to Christ means accepting obediently and fulfilling faithfully the particular role that God has assigned to each of us through the Holy Spirit. The most basic confession of the church

is “Jesus is Lord” (I Corinthians 12:3), but this is far more than reciting a creed. Paul intends this truth to be a functional, operational reality.

Jesus as head of the church means that he arranges life in the body. Each member is directly connected to the head and therefore is able to receive signals from the head. Paul Stevens says this well, “There is a direct and living connection between the Head and every member of the body....No church leader in the New Testament is ever called the head of a local body. That title is reserved for Jesus. The head does not tell the hand to tell the foot what to do. The head is directly connected to the foot. Therefore, people find their ministries not by being directed by the leaders but by being motivated and equipped.....by the Head himself.”

The church functions as an organism when those who make up the body of Christ obediently seek to fulfill the role God has assigned to them. We return to the analogy of the human body to understand how the church can function as a living organism. The human body functions beautifully when each part operates according to its design. The central command post, the head, sends forth the signals through the nervous system, which activates the body parts. These body parts have no will of their own. The hands and feet, for example, function, only in response to the head. If the hand could act independently of the head, there would be chaos in the body. When people in the body takes responsibility before the Head to know and exercise their assigned functions, the church becomes a living organism.

What is Our Relationship to Each Other?

We need each other. According to Paul’s body image, all the parts are interdependent and necessary for the health of the whole. Robert Banks says, “God has so designed things that the involvement of every person with his special contribution is necessary for the proper functioning of the community. The underlying message of I Corinthians 12 is that everyone is valuable. God in his wisdom designed us not as well-rounded, multi-talented, thoroughly complete and independent people. He made it so that we need each other and that each of us brings something of value. We are not self-sufficient. As one person put it, “We don’t have it all together, but together we have it all.”

When we forget this, the body ceases to function according to its design. Paul identifies two devaluing attitudes that undercut the proper functioning of the body. First, Paul mentions the attitude of inferiority, or low self-esteem, as detrimental to a healthy body. To capture this Paul personifies the body parts and puts them in conversation with each other. The extremities speak first: “If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand I do not belong to the body,’ it would not make it any less a part of the body.” Then the senses compete with each other: “If the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body” (I Corinthians 12:15-16 NRSV).

The Corinthians suffered from the same malady we do today. They exalted some gifts higher than others. They placed gradations of value on gifts. The church today is sick in part because we have so exalted preaching that no other gift can match that level of importance. Hear this statement from Martin Luther as the legacy of the importance of the preacher in the body of Christ: "A Christian preacher is a minister of God who is set apart, yea, he is an angel of God, a very bishop sent by God, a savior of many people, a king and prince in the Kingdom of Christ and among the people of God, a teacher, a light of the world. There is nothing more precious or nobler on earth and in this life than a true, faithful parson or preacher."

As soon as a hierarchy of gifts in the body is set up, two things happen: we compare our gifts to others and declare ourselves deficient. We play the "if only" game: If only I could be like so and so, then I would have significance and value. When we secretly envy the gifts of others, we denigrate ourselves and the unique design God has placed in us. Instead, the Lord would have us believe what Gordon Crosby writes: "Christ makes each of us something unlike any other creation fashioned by God—something wonderful, exciting, unique; something specifically needed in the total body of Christ. This uniqueness, this very self that is so hard to describe, this charismatic person is the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is the primary gift we bring to the body, and without it the body is immeasurably impoverished."

We copy those we admire. Instead of being ourselves we mimic others and cease to be the unique creation we were made to be. This is illustrated through a story from Native American lore. An Indian brave found an egg that had been laid by an eagle. Unable to return the egg to the eagle's nest, he put the egg in the nest of a prairie chicken. In due time the little eaglet was hatched alongside the prairie chickens. This little eagle, thinking it was a prairie chicken, did what prairie chickens do scratched the dirt for seeds and insects to eat, clucked and cackled, flew only a few feet off of the ground.

One day the eagle saw a magnificent bird flying overhead, floating with graceful majesty on the powerful currents. "What a beautiful bird," he said to his fellow prairie chickens, "What is it?" "That's an eagle," they replied, "the chief of the birds. But don't give it a second thought. You could never be like him." Not knowing he was an eagle, he imitated the prairie chickens and never soared to the heights he could have.

Copying is a sin against ourselves and against God. It was the Lord who designed us just the way we are so that we are needed in the body of Christ. "All these (gifts) are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines" (I Corinthians 12:11). To copy someone else is to be a pale imitation of yourself and to miss seeing the unique way God has designed you. You are needed as you are.

The second disruptive attitude is devaluing other members of the body by superiority. In verse 21 Paul sees the upper parts of the body looking down on the lower: eye over hand, head over feet. “They eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’” (I Corinthians 12:21).

Independence and self-reliance are enemies of community. Without vulnerability and an awareness of need there is no basis for community. Unfortunately, it is often in the church that we find the façade of having it all together. Kieth Miller writes of the average church, “Our churches are filled with people who outwardly look contented and at peace but inwardly are crying out for someone to love them....just as they are—confused, frustrated, often frightened, guilty, and often unable to communicate ever within their own families. But the other people in the church look so happy and contented that one seldom has the courage to admit his own deep needs before such a self-sufficient group as the average church meeting appears to be. Vulnerability is a gift to the community that says, “I need you. I welcome you into my life. I want you to be a part of me.”

Paul is telling us to value the gifts of one another. The actress Celeste Holm spoke for us all when she said, “We live by encouragement and we die without it; slowly, sadly, angrily.” Yet we so often devalue others in the body because they don’t think as we do or have the personal tastes we do. Practice this personal exercise: Picture those in the body toward who your attitude is “I have no need of you.” As an act of repentance place these people before God and say, I need you. I benefit because of you. You have gifts and a perspective that I don’t have.

Instead of inferiority or superiority, we need an attitude of inter-reliance. Inter-reliance means you are incomplete without me and I am incomplete without you. You need me and I need you. “We don’t have it all together, but together we have it all.” Or to use Paul’s summary, “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (I Corinthians 12:27).