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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

THE CHURCH : THE BODY OF CHRIST

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THIS treatment of a subject which is in the forefront of theological and ecclesiastical debate today was presented at a Cambridge conference convened by the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Research in 1956. Mr. Middleton is pastor of a Baptist Church in West London.

I.

WHEN we study the Church as it is the Body of Christ, we are studying a live theological issue. Today we are being forced to make an attempt to fill what has been called "the great vacuum in Christian Theology", the doctrine of the Church, and in this attempt the New Testament language on the Church as the Body of Christ is being widely used. Newbiggin traces this modern interest in the doctrine of the Church to three main factors; first, the general breakdown of Christendom; second, the "experience of Christian Missions", the main implication being, of course, the status of the Church of South India; third, the modern ecumenical movement. To these might be added the advance of the Roman Catholic Church and Roman Catholic doctrine, on the mission fields and "at home". These and other factors are behind the modern interest in the doctrine of the Church, and most writers on this subject appeal to the concept of the Church as the Body of Christ.

This being so it is essential that we understand exactly what the New Testament does teach. As F. W. Dillistone says: "the question has become urgent because of a tendency among certain theologians to take this valuable metaphor and to use it in what can only be called an extreme and highly questionable way". If we are prepared to take the concept of the Body of Christ and treat it in the generous way that some parables have been treated in time past it will offer us all manner of attractive comparisons. Attractive, but dangerous; as we shall see in a moment, when this concept is loosely treated it can lead to conclusions quite for-

eign to the New Testament, and so it is necessary that nothing is taken for granted, and that we define the Body of Christ strictly according to the definition of the Word of God.

Let us notice briefly some interpretations which do go beyond the language of Scripture. First of all, it is wrong to argue that the concept of the Body of Christ is meant to teach, as a doctrine, that the Church is a visible continuous unity. The Church is called the *Body* of Christ, it is said, and a body is one visible, physical thing. To quote J. A. T. Robinson: "It is almost impossible to exaggerate the materialism and crudity of Paul's doctrine of the Church as literally now the Resurrection *body* of Christ". Again: "To say that the Church is the body of Christ is no more of a metaphor than to say that the flesh of the incarnate Jesus is the body of Christ". Again: "In the same way as no clear distinction can be drawn between the flesh body of Jesus and the body of His Resurrection, so there is no real line between the body of His Resurrection and the flesh bodies of those who are risen with Him, for they are members of it". He supports this interpretation by maintaining that the teaching of 1 Cor. 6 against fornication, and 1 Cor. 11 concerning the Lord's Supper, hinges on this physical identification with Christ. So when we read that the Church is the Body of Christ we are to understand it as teaching that the Church is an objective phenomenon in the world; individuals are incorporated into His Body by the objective rite of Baptism, and "the visible centre of the common life is the common sharing in the Lord's Supper in which the members are made participants in His body and blood". Newbiggin lists the ways by which it is taught that the individual is incorporated into the life of Christ. The first way is by hearing and believing the gospel; this characterizes the Church as "the Congregation of the faithful". The second way is that "we are incorporated into Christ by sacramental participation in the life of the historically continuous Church"; this characterizes the Church as the Body of Christ.

Now such an interpretation uses the concept as if it were a pulpit analogy rather than a New Testament doctrine. The New Testament nowhere says that the "Body of Christ" means that the Church is, or is to be, a visible continuous unity. To make this assumption is quite gratuitous. It is equally gratuitous to suppose that the Church is somehow consubstantial with the Risen Christ. The true Risen Body of Christ is that body with which His disciples saw Him ascend into Heaven, the body which He now has at the right hand of the Father, His glorious body, His spiritual body,

the body with which He will come at His Return. The Church is not that body. To say "the Church *is* Christ: the *totus Christus* is the whole Body made up of Head and members" is to go far beyond the New Testament teaching, and since this concept of the Body can be so dangerous if misused we dare not make even the most obvious implications outside of Scripture. Ultimately this sort of interpretation leads to the claim that the Church is the "extension of the Incarnation". Such words would certainly shock the writers of the New Testament. Newbiggin suggests that they spring "from a confusion of *sarx* with *soma*"; they are in any case a fanciful and unjustified inference from the Biblical teaching.

They, in turn, lead to the characteristically Roman Catholic position, that the Church as a visible organization is the sole organ of Christ's salvation. *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. This exactly reverses the Bible teaching. The Bible teaches that we come to the Church through Christ, not that we come to Christ through the Church. There are many shades of meaning within the general framework of this interpretation, but they are equally at fault in making the unwarranted inference that the concept of the Body of Christ points to the Church as an actual visible community.

We are not, however, to err in the opposite direction. The New Testament does not intend us to understand by "body" simply a social group. "We are not dealing here with the ordinary metaphor by which we ascribe a sort of corporate personality to a group of people organized for some common purpose" (Newbiggin). "Such a use", says Dr. A. M. Ramsey, "is never found in Christian literature, or in the Septuagint, or in the papyri". The Church is not "a body" of Christians, but "the Body" of Christ.

So then we are not to infer from the concept of the Body of Christ either that the Church is an extension of the Incarnation or that it is merely a social group. These two extremes form the Scylla and Charybdis of interpretation. Having taken account of them we may now turn to the New Testament itself.

II.

Perhaps the first thing to be aware of is that Paul's language is not uniform when he speaks of the Church as the Body of Christ. The Church is described in many ways. It is the Bride of the Lamb, the Temple of the Spirit, the Household of God, God's "husbandry", and the Body of Christ. These terms are not mutually exclusive, but all are needed to give us a complete picture of the Church. No one of them is complete in itself; each has its own particular teaching, and it would be wrong to take any one

alone as expressing the final reality of the Church's nature. So when the Church is described as "the Body of Christ", it is a metaphor as the other terms are metaphors. It indicates a reality as they indicate realities. Its teaching is definite and particular, and in his effort to put over that teaching the Apostle is not afraid to use language which is not formally consistent. Were he dealing with some kind of ultimate metaphysical reality his language would have to be consistent, because he would always be describing the same "thing".

The differences in language are worked out at some length by Dr. Ernest Best (*One Body in Christ*). The references to the Body of Christ are found, of course, in two groups; first, in Romans and 1 Corinthians, and then, in Colossians and Ephesians. In Romans we learn simply that we are "one body in Christ" (ἐν Χριστῷ); how the body is related to Christ under the terms of the metaphor is not dwelt upon. In 1 Cor. 12: 27 Paul writes: "ye are the body of Christ and members in particular". But again the exact relation of Christ to the body is left obscure; He is not the head, for in v. 21 we read: "the eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the *head* to the feet I have no need of thee". The head is on equal terms with the rest of the body. In Ephesians and Colossians, on the other hand, Christ is the Head of the body, and the body itself is not described in terms of its outward members—feet, eyes, etc., but in terms of its "joints and bands". Some have found such difference between the language and teaching on this concept in Romans-1 Corinthians and Ephesians-Colossians that they have been bold enough to suggest it as possible evidence for supposing that the latter two epistles are not from Paul's hand. (But from whose hand did they come if not from his?)

Now we must think of the doctrine positively. What does the New Testament teach us about the Church when it calls it the Body of Christ? We must begin by sketching the context of the doctrine. Any man who becomes a Christian, that is "alive unto God", does so by the grace of God, and by the agency of the Holy Spirit. He is then "in Christ", and Christ is in him; also he is "in the Spirit", and the Holy Spirit is in him (Rom. 8: 9). This constitutes the minimum definition of a Christian in the New Testament. But its implications are many. At the moment that he comes to belong to Christ, a man comes to belong to the Church of Christ. Peter teaches this plainly (as indeed he teaches most if not all of what we call Pauline theology). When he truly became

Petros, he became a "lively stone", and was built into the spiritual house, the Church. Christians before their regeneration "were not a people, but are now the people of God". A man is constituted a member of the Church by the regenerating act of the Holy Spirit, and every member of that Church has Christ in him, as he has the Holy Spirit in him. Our Lord when on earth did not speak of Himself, but as commanded by the Father; the Holy Spirit does not speak of Himself but of Christ. By the Holy Spirit, Christ indwells the Christian and expresses His life through the Christian. But the expression of His life is not uniformly the same in each individual.

Here we come to the *loci classici* on the doctrine of the Body of Christ. Romans 12 speaks of the gifts of *God*; 1 Cor. 12 speaks of the gifts of *the Spirit*; Ephesians 4 speaks of the ascension gifts of *Christ*, "when He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men". These are of course the same gifts, of the Father, by the Son, through the Holy Spirit. They are not only the gifts of the ministry; every new man in Christ has this spiritual inheritance. We all have "gifts differing according to the grace given to us".

In Rom. 12 the Church, in function of these grace-gifts in their full diversity, is the Body of Christ. That is, the Church is the Body of Christ as the life of Christ indwells the Church and is expressed through it. But the point is that the life of Christ is not to be conceived of as flowing through the Church as an impersonal whole but as it is diversified through the individual members. This is important; the doctrine of the Body of Christ does not teach the subordination of the individual to the group, or even assimilation into the group; rather it teaches the true dignity and significance of the individual. The Church only functions as the Body of Christ as each individual member is a vessel of the Holy Spirit. The argument in Rom. 12 is that this knowledge leads to humility as we realize that we all have need of each other if we are to know the fulness of Christ.

In 1 Cor. 12 the specific subject is "spiritual gifts". The teaching is that there are many different sorts of spiritual gifts, but not thereby many Spirits. There is only one Spirit, working with one purpose, but His giving is diversified and articulated through the many. The body concept is worked out in detail, to show how "God hath tempered the body together". Every part has need of what only the whole can supply. Thus the Church is the Body of Christ. Each member is unique, and uniquely expresses the life of Christ, so that only when all are together as one is His life com-

pletely expressed. No member should be thought of as "dishonourable" or "uncomely", for each expresses the life of Christ in a way that no other can. The complete expression is the Body of Christ. Indeed the Apostle shows in chapter 13 (chapters 12 and 13 must never be thought of apart) that the fruits of the Spirit are even more important than the gifts of the Spirit (both are part of what 12: 7 calls "the manifestation of the Spirit"). Foremost of these fruits is *agape*. It is the love of *God* shed abroad in our hearts by the *Holy Ghost*. It is also the love of *Christ* to be expressed through the individual member for the good of the whole body as it is "the bond of perfectness".

The close connection between the continuous work of the Holy Spirit and the Church as the Body of Christ, which is here almost taken for granted, needs to be emphasized. Verse 13 of chapter 12 says: "by one Spirit are we all baptized unto one body"—i.e., by the Holy Spirit's regeneration we become members of the church as the Body of Christ. Eph. 4: 4 likewise links "one body, one Spirit". Pentecost constituted the Church as the Body of Christ, when the "Holy" Spirit became "common" to all believers, and the Body of Christ throughout the ages is to be recognized, not by its external organization, but by the fruits of the Spirit which it exhibits.

So much for Rom. 12 and 1 Cor. 12. They teach us that the Church is the Body of Christ as His life is completely expressed, by being articulated in a distinct way through each member, for the profit and edification of the whole.

III.

We now turn to the second group of references, that is, those to be found in Ephesians-Colossians. F. W. Dillistone claims that "in Romans and 1 Corinthians the Body-metaphor is used to convey one set of truths, in Ephesians and Colossians another". Indeed he supposes that "there are in fact *two* great pictures of the Church as the Body of Christ and in certain respects these seem to be contrary the one to the other". We have already noted that the *language* is different, but, as we shall see, this is not because Paul intended to convey a different set of truths, but because he wanted to apply the same truth in a different way.

In Romans and 1 Corinthians we saw that the relation of Christ to the body, under the terms of the metaphor, was left rather obscure. We would infer that He is, by the Holy Spirit, somehow the life that indwells and informs the body. Paul does not dwell on the point because it was not relevant to what he was then teach-

ing. But in Ephesians and Colossians it is made clear again and again that Christ is the *Head* of the body. The reasons for this are not far to seek. In this second group of references Paul takes up the teaching of the first group, and then develops it.

First of all he takes up the earlier teaching. The body has need of "that which every joint supplieth" (Eph. 4: 16); it has nourishment ministered by its "joints and bands" (Col. 2: 19). Eph. 4 lists the ascension gifts of Christ, saying, in words reminiscent of Rom. 12: 6, "unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ". Colossians echoes the teaching of 1 Cor. 13 when it speaks of "being knit together in love" (2: 2) and of "love which is the bond of perfectness" (3: 14).

But then this earlier teaching is developed. The expression of the life of Christ through His body is teleological, and its *telos* is that the whole Body should grow up into the fulness of Christ. This is the distinctive teaching of Ephesians-Colossians. The expression of the ascension gifts of Christ is "for the edifying of the body of Christ till we *all* come in the *unity* of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Eph. 4: 13). Again, we are to "grow up into Him in all things which is the Head, even Christ" (4: 15). Again, the result of the proper functioning of the whole body is that it "makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love" (4: 16, R.S.V.). Again, in Col. 2: 19, as the Body has nourishment ministered and is knit together, so it "increaseth with the increase of God". The argument is quite clear. In Romans-1 Corinthians the complete life of Christ is expressed through all the members; now in Ephesians-Colossians as a result of that, the whole body grows up, matures, towards the fulness of Christ. In Romans-1 Corinthians the process was extensive; in Ephesians-Colossians it is intensive. In the first group it was historical, lateral. In the second group it is vertical, eschatological. But it is all the same process. It is the normal process of growth. Thus the Church is the "fulness of Him that filleth all in all" (Eph. 1: 23), as the fulness of Christ's life infills the Church through its various members, and causes the whole Body to grow up to the stature of His fulness.

The same concept is doubtless behind Eph. 2: 16 where Jews and Gentiles are both reconciled to God "in one body", for we without them are not to be made perfect. Also, in Col. 1: 24, Paul recognizes that his sufferings are really the suffering of Christ expressed through him, and they are for the sake of the whole

body. He, Paul, has yet to complete what is lacking in his own flesh of the afflictions of Christ for the sake of His body, the Church.

One or two comments need to be made on the teaching of Ephesians-Colossians. First, although the whole body is growing up as a body into Christ, this does not imply the loss of the individuals' identity, or a kind of merging into the mass. The whole body grows up into Christ as in the individual members "the new man is renewed in knowledge after the image of Him that created Him" (Col. 3: 10). Barth writes in his Commentary on Romans: "believers . . . are not a mass of individuals, not even a corporation, a personified society, or a 'totality', but The Individual, The One, The New Man". This is an exaggerated emphasis. The doctrine of the Body of Christ teaches the true dignity and significance of the individual member. Second, the picture of Christ as the *head* of the Church is used to make possible the concept of the Church growing "up into" Him, as we have seen. But of course it carries with it the ideas of rank and rule. Thus in Eph. 1: 22 and Col. 1: 18 it occurs in the context of Christological passages, and is used to describe His greatness in its "cosmic" significance.

Several other passages are relevant to the doctrine of the Church as the Body of Christ, but we have confined ourselves to the main sections. They teach us how the fulness of Christ is diversified through the members of the body so that the whole body should grow up into the fulness of Christ.

IV.

The practical significance of the doctrine is great. In Romans and 1 Corinthians Paul is addressing a local congregation, and he says, "ye are one body in Christ" and "ye are the body of Christ". For the health and growth of the local church there must be a genuine fellowship; every member must express the life of Christ as only he can. In Ephesians and Colossians the Church Universal is in mind, and if modern movements are to learn anything from this doctrine, they must learn that a true church is characterized by the fruits of the Holy Spirit, and that a true unity is not a matter of uniformity of procedure, but of fellowship in Christ Himself as we bring to each other the diversity of gifts He has bestowed upon us.

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