

THE CHURCH IN GOD'S PROGRAM

Lesson 4 – The Nature of the Church

Metaphors and the Church

The Scriptures use several metaphors to illustrate the nature of the Church. In the next few weeks we will be taking a look at these metaphors to help us understand nature of the church better. We will study in the following order: The Body of Christ; The Temple of God; The Bride; The Flock; and the Vine and the Branches.

The Body of Christ

“The Body of Christ” is Paul’s favorite description of the church. In this metaphor, Paul forms an analogy between the human body and the universal church, just as every part of the human body is essential to the proper functioning of the body, so it is with the Church – the Body of Christ. As the human head leads in the operation of the human body, so Christ, as the head, leads the His body -- the church (Col. 1:18; cf. 1:24; 2:19; Eph. 1:22-23; 4:4, 12, 16; 5:30; 1 Cor. 12:12-31; Rom. 12:5)

The Use of the metaphor

Who makes up the Body of Christ? The body is composed of all those who are united to Christ through the baptism of the Spirit.

1Co 12:12-13 For just as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body – though many – are one body, so too is Christ. (13) For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body. Whether Jews or Greeks or slaves or free, we were all made to drink of the one Spirit.

The human body is composed of many appendages and anatomical parts, but together these parts make up one body. The body of Christ (the Church) is the same. Christ is the head (the brains, director and leader) of the body, but all the rest of the body parts work together as one body.

“For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” does not appear to be a reference to water baptism, but rather that all believers, whether Jews or Greeks, etc. have spiritually become part of the one and the same body of Christ.

Questions:

Is “many members” in the above passage referring to the many individual persons of the Universal Church? Do you think Paul had in mind “many members” being a reference to the “Many Denominations” in the context of the universal church? Could “many members” be referring to many persons in the context of the local Church? Or, is “many members” referring to each local churches in the context of the Universal Church?

How could applications be made to an affirmative answer to each of the above questions?

Col 1:18 He is the head of the body, the church, as well as the beginning, the firstborn from among the dead, so that he himself may become first in all things.

It seems best to understand “Firstborn from among the dead” to mean that He (Christ) was the first to be resurrected from the dead. His resurrection set the stage for all subsequent resurrections and also put Him in position of leadership (the head) of all those that would be resurrected (the body of Christ – the Church).

Question: Christ is positioned as the Head of the church. The position is a Biblically objective reality. What does that mean?

On a practical level, how should Christ’s headship play out in the Church?

Is there a way to structure the local church so that Christ can better function as the head?

How can churches collectively work together to make sure the focus of the church is to recognize Christ as the head?

Eph 1:22-23 And God put all things under Christ's feet, and he gave him to the church as head over all things. (23) Now the church is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

The above passage complements other passages that teach Christ as put in a position of sovereignty over the universe, “all things under Christ’s feet.” If the church (we assume this is the universal church) is the body, the body has the feet, does this imply that the church is somehow over the universe?

How should the church behave in light of its position in Christ?

THE MEMBERS OF THE BODY

Unity

As the body is composed of many parts (members) and yet is one, so also is the church.

Gifts are given to the body for the sake of Unity.

1Co 12:3-7 So I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus is cursed," and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit. (4) Now there are different gifts, but the same Spirit. (5) And there are different ministries, but the same Lord. (6) And there are different results, but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. (7) To each person the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the benefit of all.

Who gives the gifts mentioned in the above verse?

Are the above gifts given for the purpose of edifying the person that has the gift, or to bring benefits to the entire body of Christ?

There must be no schism in the body.

1Co 12:25 so that there may be no division in the body, but the members may have mutual concern for one another.

Is it possible for one to use a gift, which was given for the benefit of the whole body, to actually cause schisms in the body through the improper use of the gift?

1Co 14:33 for God is not characterized by disorder but by peace. As in all the churches of the saints,

Where there is proper use of gifts peace ought to be the result, but it appears from Paul's discussion, that the Corinthians use of their gifts caused disorder instead. Have you witnessed schisms in a body of believers due to the improper use of one's gifts?

Additional passages emphasize the unity created by proper use of gifts:

Rom 12:4-5 For just as in one body we have many members, and not all the members serve the same function, (5) so we who are many are one body in Christ, and individually we are members who belong to one another.

*Eph 4:7-16 But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of the gift of Christ. (8) Therefore it says, "**When he ascended on high he captured captives; he gave gifts to men.**" (9) Now what is the meaning of "**he ascended,**" except that he also descended to the lower regions, namely, the earth? (10) He, the very one who descended, is also the one who ascended above all the heavens, in order to fill all things. (11) It was he who gave some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, (12) to equip the saints for the work of ministry, that is, to build up the body of Christ, (13) until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God — a mature person, attaining to the measure of Christ's full stature. (14) So we are no longer to be children, tossed back and forth by waves and carried about by every wind of teaching by the trickery of people who craftily carry out their deceitful schemes. (15) But practicing the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Christ, who is the head. (16) From him the whole body grows, fitted and held together through every supporting ligament. As each one does its part, the body grows in love.*

According to verse 12 in the passage above, what does Paul say is the purpose of the gifts?

Diversity

The body is composed of diverse members. The physical body is not composed of one member, but of many

1Co 12:14 For in fact the body is not a single member, but many.

Have you ever been in a church, where everyone seems to be cast in the same mold? They all have the same smile, or frown on their face; they all seem to speak the exact same things and they never show any signs that they may differ somehow? What does the above passage seem to say regarding this kind of sameness?

Not only is it alright for the members to be different, it should be expected that they will be different

1Co 12:17-20 If the whole body were an eye, what part would do the hearing? If the whole were an ear, what part would exercise the sense of smell? (18) But as a matter of fact, God has placed each of the members in the body just as he decided. (19) If they were all the same member, where would the body be? (20) So now there are many members, but one body.

These members vary in function

1Co 12:17 If the whole body were an eye, what part would do the hearing? If the whole were an ear, what part would exercise the sense of smell?

1Co 12:22 On the contrary, those members that seem to be weaker are essential,

Every anatomical part of the human body has an important function to the body. So it is with the Body of Christ. Every person within the church should be recognized as being essential to the proper operation of the church. There should be no favoritism or jealousy in regards to abilities and gifts of the members. Those that do the lesser jobs or exhibit lesser gifts ought to be as highly regarded as those that tend to more highly esteemed.

1Co 12:23 and those members we consider less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our unpresentable members are clothed with dignity,

Share some positive examples where you've seen the less honorable gifts honored.

Share some negative examples regarding the above principle. How can these be corrected? How can the local church better recognize the less honorable gifts?

Mutuality

Each member is not only related to Christ the head, but also to each other. They are "members one of another"

Rom 12:5 so we who are many are one body in Christ, and individually we are members who belong to one another.

*Eph 4:25 Therefore, having laid aside falsehood, **each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor**, for we are members of one another.*

This implies dependence one upon another and a cooperative functioning of the body (1 Cor. 12:21-25)

THE HEAD AND THE BODY

Sovereign leadership

Christ is sovereign as Head over the new spiritual creation which is His body, the church. (Colossians 1:18; see earlier reference).

Christ's exemplary demonstration of love to his Bride, which is also his body, is the manner that men are encouraged to treat their wives which are also viewed as their own body (Ephesians 5:24-31).

*Eph 5:24-31 But as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. (25) Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her (26) to sanctify her by cleansing her with the washing of the water by the word, (27) so that he may present the church to himself as glorious – not having a stain or wrinkle, or any such blemish, but holy and blameless. (28) In the same way husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. (29) For no one has ever hated his own body but he feeds it and takes care of it, just as Christ also does the church, (30) for we are members of his body. (31) **For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and will be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.***

The body of Christ ought to submit to its head -- Christ. The body of the husband (the wife) ought to submit to its head – the husband. Christ died for the bride – the body. Men ought to love as much as Christ and be willing to die for their wives. Notice how Christ takes care of His own body. Men also ought to give the same kind of care to their body – the wife. We will continue this analogy in the latter study on the “bride of Christ”.

The various members find their unity in the single Lordship of the Head. The multiplicity of gifts and personalities in the church are “knit together” or “compacted” as they individually respond to the command of the Head (Col:19; Eph 4:15-15).

Summary

Paul uses the metaphor of the Church being the body of Christ to explain the marvelous relationship Christ has with the Church. Just as there is one body with the head being the organizer, leader, and sustainer of the body, so Christ is the head of the church. The analogy between the human body and the body of Christ illustrates the unity, diversity, and mutuality of the universal church and gives an example for proper operation of the local church.

Questions:

Does the universal church demonstrate presently and historically a proper understanding of the above principles taught in the analogy between the human body and the body of Christ? Give both positive and negative examples.

Does your local church recognize the lesser gifts of its members, or does it seem to focus the more esteemed gifts?

What practical action can your church take to help it use its gifts toward unity, diversity and mutuality, while avoiding schisms?