



# The “Body of Christ” in Evangelical Theology

F. LERON SHULTS

WHEN INVITED TO WRITE ON THE USE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PHRASE “body of Christ” in evangelical theology, my first question was: How do you define “evangelical”? To which the editor responded: We were hoping you would know! Discussing the boundaries of any faith community is always a sensitive task, and it is hard to miss the irony of writing about the idea of the *one* body of Christ as viewed by a particular segment of the divided church. Nevertheless, it is important to undertake such endeavors in the service of ecumenical dialogue. After a formal description (1) of the American “evangelical” movement, I will briefly review the literature on the body of Christ in (2) evangelical biblical scholarship and (3) evangelical systematic theology. In fact, this biblical phrase has not played a significant material role for evangelical theology. I suggest that factors contributing to this lacuna include the evangelical focus on the salvation of the *individual*, insistence on the autonomy of the *local* congregation, and general anxiety about anything *bodily*. The final section (4) identifies some recent trends that may help to open conceptual space for a deeper incorporation of this biblical image into evangelical ecclesiology.

## I. WHAT IS “EVANGELICAL” THEOLOGY?

In its broadest sense the predicate “evangelical” simply implies that a theological position is committed to a faithful presentation of the gospel (εὐαγγέλιον,

*The “body of Christ” has not played a significant theological role in the ecclesiology of American evangelicalism. Signs of change, however, may be visible.*

good news) of Jesus Christ. In parts of Europe the term "evangelical" often functions as a synonym for "Protestant," and in North America it sometimes has a special meaning for a denomination like the *Evangelical* Lutheran Church of America. Over the last six decades, however, the term "evangelical" has come to carry a particular connotation in American religious life.<sup>1</sup> It refers to a broad coalition of like-minded theologians, evangelists, church leaders, and laypersons who identify themselves with a movement that emerged in the 1940s as a search for a middle way between fundamentalism and liberalism. Important milestones for this movement include the founding of the National Association of Evangelicals in 1942, the organization of the Evangelical Theological Society in 1949, and the creation of schools like Fuller Theological Seminary (1947) to foster academic engagement with contemporary culture from a conservative (but not fundamentalistic) perspective.

Billy Graham's willingness to cooperate with "liberals" in organizing his early evangelistic crusades infuriated fundamentalists, and he saw the need to create a new theological and political space for proclaiming the gospel. Graham was influential in the founding of the magazine *Christianity Today* in 1954, which became the popular voice for those inhabiting this new identity-space. The emergence of a distinct "evangelical" identity in American religion did not occur overnight, but over several years the evangelical movement did manage

to open 'space' between fundamentalism and liberalism in the field of religious collective identity; give that space a name; articulate and promote a resonant vision of faith and practice that players in the religious field came to associate with that name and identity-space; and invite a variety of religious players to move into that space to participate in the 'identity-work' and mission being accomplished there....In this way, evangelicalism created an agenda distinct from fundamentalism's around which a variety of Protestants could rally and establish some degree of commonality and solidarity.<sup>2</sup>

As used in this context, "evangelical" does not refer to a denomination or even to a clearly defined doctrinal position, although one can identify certain "family resemblances," including a strong commitment to the authority of Scripture, a devotion to Jesus Christ as the center of doctrine and piety, and a passion for evangelizing the world. It is not possible here to provide a narrower set of material criteria for "evangelical" theology, for the boundaries are still in flux. In fact, the theme of the 2001 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society was "Defining Evangelicalism's Boundaries." The purpose of this article is not to engage in this debate, but simply to examine the use and significance of the phrase "body of Christ" among those who operate within this identity-space.

<sup>1</sup>For a historical analysis of the key players in the evangelical movement, see Stanley Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000).

<sup>2</sup>Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 14-15.

## II. THE “BODY OF CHRIST” IN EVANGELICAL BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP

Many of the leading American evangelical exegetes were trained in England and Scotland, and we find a closer connection between American and British evangelicalism in biblical scholarship than we do in systematic theology. Some of the earliest evangelical treatments of the phrase “body of Christ” were in response to the proposal of J. A. T. Robinson,<sup>3</sup> who downplayed its metaphorical nature. Troubled by the idea that Jesus has a “body” in heaven, Robinson argued that the church is an extension of the incarnation; it *is* the body of Christ. Evangelical exegetes, who wanted to maintain belief in the eventual bodily return of the resurrected Jesus, wanted to make a clear distinction between his body and the visible church. Pointing to similar corporate metaphors in the Old Testament and in ancient Greek writings, they argued that the phrase would clearly have been understood as metaphorical in its original context.

Materially, evangelical exegetes argued that Paul’s intention in using the metaphor was to stress the need for unity in the local church and for dependence on Christ as the “head” of the body.<sup>4</sup> These earlier efforts were supplemented in 1975, when H. Ridderbos argued that the use of “head” (κεφαλή) in Paul’s writings (e.g., Eph 5:23; Col 1:18; 2:19) was not intended physiologically but had a political meaning: Christ as sovereign or leader of the church.<sup>5</sup> A year later, Robert Gundry provided the most comprehensive evangelical response up to that time, arguing that as it applies to the church this phrase “can be understood only in a figurative way.”<sup>6</sup> Further, Gundry argued that the genitive “of Christ” might be taken as a possessive rather than an explicative genitive, which would strengthen the distinction between the church and the resurrected body of the man from Nazareth.<sup>7</sup>

In evangelical commentaries on the relevant passages, one finds that the phrase is usually interpreted as a metaphor that emphasizes the need for unity in diversity as each individual plays a part in the church.<sup>8</sup> Several “charismatic” evangelical biblical scholars embrace the term “body of Christ,” but the focus of their exposition is typically on the gifts of the Spirit within the church.<sup>9</sup> From the title of

<sup>3</sup>J. A. T. Robinson, *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology* (London: SCM, 1952).

<sup>4</sup>E.g., G. J. C. Marchant, “The Body of Christ,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 30 (1958) 3-17; David W. Middleton, “The Church: The Body of Christ,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 31 (1959) 82-89; Brian Daines, “Paul’s Use of the Analogy of the Body of Christ,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 50 (1978) 71-78.

<sup>5</sup>H. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 378ff.

<sup>6</sup>Robert Gundry, *SOMA in Biblical Theology: With Emphasis on Pauline Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) 228.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 231. For further explication of this thesis, see Gosnell L. O. R. Yorke, *The Church as the Body of Christ in the Pauline Corpus* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991).

<sup>8</sup>E.g., F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 338ff.; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 763ff.

<sup>9</sup>E.g., Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 601ff. Cf. Ralph P. Martin, *The Spirit and the Congregation: Studies in I Corinthians 12-15* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), and David Watson, *I Believe in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) chap. 7.

N. T. Wright's *The New Testament and the People of God*,<sup>10</sup> one might expect a treatment of the phrase, but the key biblical passages (e.g., Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 12:12; Eph 4:12; Col 1:24) are not even included in the index. When biblical images of the church are examined by evangelical scholars, the body of Christ is almost always listed but does not serve a vibrant or integrative function.<sup>11</sup> The major exception is James D. G. Dunn, who argues that the body of Christ is one of the most important concepts used by Paul and "provides a crucial key to Christian understanding of ecclesiology and Christology and their mutual relationship."<sup>12</sup> For Dunn, the phrase helpfully illustrates what he sees as the core of Paul's soteriology, which is participation "in Christ."<sup>13</sup> For the most part, however, the idea of the body of Christ has not held a vital position in evangelical biblical theology.

### III. THE "BODY OF CHRIST" IN EVANGELICAL SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Although the phrase is common in popular evangelical discourse, it has not played a significant material role in theological argumentation. It often appears in the titles of books (e.g., *Evangelical Reunion: Denominations and the Body of Christ*<sup>14</sup> and *The Church: The Body of Christ in the World Today*<sup>15</sup>), but its meaning is not carefully defined and its use is generally exhortative, calling evangelicals to be unified in the evangelistic task. The phrase appears only once in a dependent clause in the chapter dedicated to the church in *New Dimensions in Evangelical Thought*,<sup>16</sup> and David L. Smith devotes only a few paragraphs to it in *All God's People: A Theology of the Church*.<sup>17</sup> Even among evangelical theologians who are committed to ecumenical dialogue, the phrase "body of Christ" does not play a key role, but appears only incidentally, if at all.<sup>18</sup> In his call for an evangelical retrieval of genuine "catholicity," Rex A. Koivisto uses the phrase in a generic sense, broadly linked to the ideas of the "universal" or "invisible" church.<sup>19</sup> These remarks are not intended as criticism of these proposals; I am simply making the observation that, in fact, the

<sup>10</sup>N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

<sup>11</sup>E.g., Robert B. Sloan, "Images of the Church in Paul," in *The People of God: Essays on the Believer's Church*, ed. Paul Basden and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman, 1991) 148-165.

<sup>12</sup>James D. G. Dunn, "'The Body of Christ' in Paul," in *Worship, Theology and Ministry in the Early Church*, ed. Michael J. Wilkins and Terence Paige (Sheffield: JSOT, 1992) 162.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 533-564.

<sup>14</sup>John M. Frame, *Evangelical Reunion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).

<sup>15</sup>Ed Hayes, *The Church* (Nashville: Word, 1999).

<sup>16</sup>Boyd Hunt, "New Dimensions in Church," in *New Dimensions in Evangelical Thought*, ed. David Dockery (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998) 338-353.

<sup>17</sup>David Smith, *All God's People* (Wheaton: Bridgepoint, 1996) 262.

<sup>18</sup>E.g., Donald Bloesch's *The Future of Evangelical Christianity: A Call for Unity amid Diversity* (New York: Doubleday, 1983), does not engage the image of the "body of Christ" as a resource for dialogue. Cf. the *Festschrift* for Bloesch, edited by Elmer M. Colyer, *Evangelical Theology in Transition* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), in which ecclesiology is noticeably absent.

<sup>19</sup>Rex A. Koivisto, *One Lord, One Faith: A Theology for Cross-Denominational Renewal* (Wheaton: Bridgepoint, 1993).

body of Christ has not functioned as a crucial material concept for evangelical ecclesiology.

The same tendency may be observed in most evangelical systematic theologies. Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest follow the common evangelical exegetical interpretation of the body of Christ as a metaphor that points to the need for unity in diversity, but it plays no function in their systematic formulation of the doctrine of the church.<sup>20</sup> For Millard Erickson, the image of the body of Christ is used to emphasize that the church is the locus of Christ's current activity, that Christ is the head of the church, and that believers are interconnected with each other and with Christ.<sup>21</sup> Thomas Oden elevates this Pauline idea more than most, calling the body of Christ "a more concise definition of the church than any other descriptive phrase," because it so well illustrates the organic, incarnate, and metaphorical logic of ecclesiology.<sup>22</sup> From a charismatic perspective, Rodman Williams spells out the meaning of the image of the body of Christ in terms of the vital relationship of believers with Christ and with one another, and of the call of the church to serve all of humanity.<sup>23</sup>

One commonly finds evangelical theologians expressing anxiety about focusing too strongly on this metaphor. Under a minor subheading on "Metaphors for the Church," Wayne Grudem singles out body of Christ in order to warn against the "Roman Catholic" interpretation of the church as the "continuing incarnation" of the Son of God and to emphasize that this is only one metaphor among many.<sup>24</sup> This general lack of interest and even wariness about the phrase may be traced back to the early twentieth-century theologians after whom so many American evangelicals have modeled their systematic formulations. For example, the massive systematic theologies of Augustus Strong<sup>25</sup> and Hendrikus Berkhof<sup>26</sup> each devote only one brief paragraph to the image of the body of Christ, emphasizing that it cannot be taken as a comprehensive definition. Charles Hodge, the most important nineteenth-century predecessor of contemporary evangelicalism, subsumed ecclesiology into a broader treatment of soteriology,<sup>27</sup> and the doctrines of atonement and salvation continued to dominate the theological consciousness of early American evangelicals. Only in the latter part of the twentieth century has ecclesiology become a focus for those in this religious identity-space, and so it is not

<sup>20</sup>Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 3 volumes in 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 3:265ff.

<sup>21</sup>Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 1047.

<sup>22</sup>Thomas Oden, *Life in the Spirit*, vol. 3 of *Systematic Theology* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992) 287ff.

<sup>23</sup>Rodman Williams, *Renewal Theology: Systematic Theology from a Charismatic Perspective*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 66-71.

<sup>24</sup>Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 859.

<sup>25</sup>Augustus Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 3 volumes in 1 (Philadelphia: Judson, 1907) 888.

<sup>26</sup>Hendrikus Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941) 557.

<sup>27</sup>Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (1871-1873; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981).

yet clear whether the body of Christ might come to play a more crucial role in the evangelical understanding of the church.

#### IV. TENSIONS AND TRENDS IN EVANGELICAL ECCLESIOLOGY

Without implying that the body of Christ ought to play the *central* role in evangelical ecclesiology, we may wonder why it has not played a more significant role. I suggest that at least three salient factors have contributed to the evangelical suspicion of the phrase. These factors are related to tensions found in three different pairs of concepts: individual and community, local and catholic, soul and body. Early American evangelicals attended carefully to the first concept in each of these pairs; the focus is on the salvation of the soul of an individual, who is then urged to attend a local congregation. More recently, some evangelicals have explored the importance of sociality, catholicity, and embodiment, and developed arguments that challenge the dichotomous (either/or) approach to these conceptual pairs. Not surprisingly, this exploration has been undertaken by evangelical theologians who have more rigorously engaged the concerns of postmodernity, especially its fascination with context, ritual, and body. In what follows, I limit myself to a brief description of the three factors that have led to the neglect of the body of Christ, followed in turn by an examination of one theologian who illustrates a growing trend that may open up space for a more radical incorporation of the image into evangelical ecclesiology.

The first factor is the tendency of American evangelicals to focus more on the salvation of individuals than on the social aspects of redemption. Here we see the effects of the common evangelical appeal to seventeenth-century Protestant scholasticism, where discussions of the transformational power of the gospel of justification by faith were canalized by the debates over the *ordo salutis*, i.e., the order in which an *individual* experiences the steps of salvation (justification, sanctification, etc.). Stanley Grenz is the most well known evangelical theologian calling for a recognition of the importance of the "communitarian" turn for the casting of evangelical theology.<sup>28</sup> With coauthor John Franke, Grenz has recently traced the roots of individualism and its relation to modernist epistemological foundationalism; they call for a deeper engagement with postmodern culture, and argue that "community" should become theology's "integrative motif."<sup>29</sup> Earlier, Grenz had identified the body of Christ as one important picture of the church, but, along with other images, he subsumed it under the more central categories of "kingdom" and "community."<sup>30</sup> He treats the biblical phrase in more detail in his systematic theology, whose title (*Theology for the Community of God*) demonstrates his commit-

<sup>28</sup>Stanley J. Grenz, "Articulating the Christian Belief-Mosaic," in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 121f.

<sup>29</sup>Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001) chap. 7.

<sup>30</sup>Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993) 172, 180.

ment to this integrating theme. In the context of this systematic presentation, Grenz places the concept of the body of Christ into a larger trinitarian vision, in which the church is the image of God.<sup>31</sup> Such a move makes it possible to embrace the individual *and* communal dimensions of life in Christ.

A second factor contributing to the evangelical wariness about the “one body” of Christ is their typical preference for congregational forms of church government, which allow for the autonomy of each local fellowship of believers. Although American democracy shaped this religious history, a general worry about universalizing political hierarchies may be traced back to the Reformation protest against centralized papal control. Like the reformers, contemporary evangelicals believe in the “catholicity” of the church, but we can see why they would be on their guard against interpretations of the “one body” of Christ that challenge their polity. Among evangelicals, Miroslav Volf has provided the most comprehensive treatment of free-church ecclesiology in ecumenical dialogue with representatives of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. Against Ratzinger’s view of the universal church as a single *subject* and against Zizioulas’s *identification* of the body of Christ with the church at the eucharist, Volf proposes that “it is precisely as partially overlapping entities that both the local church and the universal church are constituted into the church through their common relation to the Spirit of Christ.”<sup>32</sup> Volf supports this claim by interpreting the body of Christ as a metaphor that is not so much organic as communal; it expresses “ecclesiological relations that shape the very being of Christians.”<sup>33</sup> This proposal attempts to uphold both the evangelical emphasis on the fellowship of believers *and* a concern for the relation of local churches to the catholic (universal) church.

A third factor, which may be due in part to a Puritan influence, is the tendency of American evangelicals to become very anxious when discussing anything “bodily.” Under the reign of fundamentalism, the pietistic concern for self-control led to a legalism that continues to haunt evangelicals. This denigration of the body often presupposes a hard dualism between soul (or spirit) and body. It may also be related to the weak sacramentology of many evangelicals, who worry about the real presence of Jesus’ body at the Lord’s Supper. The postmodern interest in embodiment, especially evident in feminist<sup>34</sup> and liberation theology, has challenged this dualism. One example of positive evangelical engagement with postmodern concerns may be found in the work of James Wm. McClendon, Jr. Challenging the organization of traditional systematics, which begin with prolegomena and move immediately into doctrine, McClendon’s systematic theology begins with a volume called *Ethics*.<sup>35</sup> After two introductory chapters he leaps into a treatment of “Body

<sup>31</sup>Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994) 607ff., 628ff.

<sup>32</sup>Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 141.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>34</sup>Cf. Molly T. Marshall, “The Fullness of Incarnation: God’s New Humanity in the Body of Christ,” *Review and Expositor* 93 (1996) 187-201.

<sup>35</sup>James W. McClendon, Jr., *Ethics*, vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986).

Ethics," applauding black American Christianity for its spirituality of embodied virtues. In calling white evangelicals to embrace embodiment, he explicitly appeals to Paul's use of the "body" as a metaphor for our solidarity with each other and Christ.<sup>36</sup> Here we see an emphasis on the spirituality *and* the embodiment of ecclesial life.

We have observed that while the phrase "body of Christ" is quite popular in evangelical parlance, it has not played a significant *theological* role in its ecclesiology. This may change as evangelicals interact more deeply with postmodern concerns about narrativity, community, and embodiment, and engage more fully in the broader ecumenical dialogue. As they do so, we may hope that they will bring along their distinctive insistence on the responsibility of individual believers, their commitment to the dynamism of local fellowship, and their passion for spiritual transformation. ⊕

*F. LERON SHULTS is associate professor of theology at Bethel Theological Seminary. His first book, The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology, was published in 1999 (Eerdmans), and he is currently working on projects in theological anthropology and soteriology.*

<sup>36</sup>Ibid, 90.