



The Church as the Body of Christ: Engaging an Image in the New Testament

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“THE BODY OF CHRIST”—A LEADING ECCLESIOLOGICAL IMAGE OVER TIME—IS preeminent already within the New Testament. In his well-known survey of ninety-six images of the church in the New Testament, Paul Minear devotes an entire chapter to it.¹ It is an important image also in the Lutheran confessions.² In recent decades, however, the image has been eclipsed somewhat by another term, equally fascinating, “the people of God.”³ The latter is the primary term in *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church from Vatican II.⁴ But “the body of Christ” offers still an exceedingly rich and important image for the church, and its use in the New Testament assures it a permanent place in ecclesiological thought and discourse.

¹Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 173-220.

²See *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Articles 7 and 8 (on the church).

³A chapter on this image is provided also by Minear, *Images*, 66-104.

⁴The text is printed in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: Association, 1966) 14-101. The image of the church as “The People of God” is discussed in an entire chapter (pp. 24-37), while other biblical images are discussed much more briefly within other contexts. The point is made on p. 24, n. 27.

The church, local and universal, is the body of Christ. It is a body that must be cared for by its members and that, in turn, must care for each of its members. The body gathers for worship but continues to function in the world through the various vocations of its members.

I. GETTING THE IMAGE INTO FOCUS

It is possible that the entire phrase “the body of Christ” was coined by the apostle Paul. No one knows for sure; opinions are mixed.⁵ In any case, it is in Paul’s writings that we find the term used for the first time, and it is only in the Pauline corpus that the term is used at all in the New Testament.

The term “body” had been used to refer to a community in Greco-Roman literature prior to Paul’s time. The usage is found already in the writings of Aristotle in reference to the state, and it appears later in the writings of Philo, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Seneca, Plutarch, and others, referring to a social unit, the state, or even the cosmos.⁶ Yet it is not clear that the common use of “body” to refer to a socio-political or cosmic entity would have come naturally to Paul as a term to be used for the church. It has been suggested, therefore, that some other factor must have been at play. One possibility is that the term arose for Paul in connection with eucharistic celebrations. The eucharistic expression, “The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?” (1 Cor 10:16), is followed immediately by another, and that is an ecclesiological expression: “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body” (1 Cor 10:17). The common word for a corporate entity is therefore recalled and put to use, the argument goes, for the sake of ecclesiology, based on the eucharistic saying.⁷

But that is not the only possible explanation. It has also been suggested that Paul’s baptismal theology was the basis for applying the concept of the body to the church. At 1 Cor 12:12-13 Paul says that all believers form one body, and then goes on to say that “we were all baptized into one body, . . . and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” It is by means of baptism that persons are incorporated into Christ himself and into his body, the church; and the Spirit, given to those baptized into Christ, links the baptized with Christ and with one another. It is on the basis of this passage that some interpreters have concluded that baptism was the catalyst for Paul’s taking up the familiar Greco-Roman image of “the body” as a “corporate” term for the church.⁸

It is not necessary here to arbitrate between these two suggestions, or even to discuss further possibilities.⁹ What is certain is that the image is used by Paul to ex-

⁵That the term was coined by Paul is asserted by Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Church in the New Testament* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1965) 77, and Hans Conzelmann, *An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969) 263; reservations are expressed by Ernst Käsemann, “The Theological Problem Presented by the Motif of the Body of Christ,” in *Perspectives on Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 105.

⁶For references, cf. Eduard Schweizer, “σῶμα,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-1976) 7:1032, 1036-1041, 1055.

⁷Conzelmann, *An Outline*, 262; Leonhard Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981-1982) 2:146-147.

⁸Schnackenburg, *The Church*, 166-171; Werner G. Kümmel, *The Theology of the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973) 207-212.

⁹Various scholars have traced the origins of the image to at least nine different backgrounds, according to the survey by Gosnell L. O. R. Yorke, *The Church as the Body of Christ in the Pauline Corpus: A Re-examination* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991) 2-7.

hort his readers to realize their unity, drawing upon their own awareness of their baptismal incorporation into the one body, and reminding them of the unity that they share in partaking of the Lord's Supper. Moreover, his concept of the church as body goes beyond those uses of "body" as a social, corporate expression in Greco-Roman traditions, in which persons constitute a body through residence in a common *polis*. For Paul, the church is "the body of Christ." That is, it is not simply a body of persons who have a shared locale or interest. Nor is the phrase "of Christ" simply an identifying one. Paul employs a possessive genitive here.¹⁰ The body is Christ's own possession. Members do not create the body. Rather they are incorporated (a passive verb) by baptism into Christ and into his body and become subject to Christ's lordship.

There has been a long and vigorous debate about whether and to what degree the image of "the body of Christ" should be taken as a metaphor or something more. There are those, on the one hand, who have maintained that the image is a metaphor and nothing else.¹¹ On the other hand, there are those who claim that it is more than that, in some sense at least.¹² But can one be more precise? Right away, two "literal" meanings of the term must be excluded. The term refers to neither (1) the body of the earthly Jesus of Nazareth, which is no longer available to anyone, nor (2) the body of the risen Jesus, by which he appeared to his disciples in the accounts portrayed in the gospels (Luke 24:13-53; John 20:11-29), and by which he will appear at his parousia (Phil 3:21).

If the term "body" is restricted in meaning to refer to the human body (the "material frame" of a person¹³), it can be agreed that a metaphor is being employed. But the term "body" has taken other meanings as well, even if they are subsequent to—or even derivative from—it.¹⁴ One can speak, for example, of the main portion of an object as a "body" (e.g., the body of a letter or the body of an automobile), or one can speak in nonmetaphorical ways of heavenly bodies, a body of laws, a body

¹⁰C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 2d ed. (London: A. & C. Black, 1971) 292. Two interpreters who, rightly, claim that the genitive is not to be taken exclusively as a possessive, but also as an explicative one (so "the body that is Christ") include Robert H. Gundry, *SOMA in Biblical Theology: With Emphasis on Pauline Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) 231; and Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 143.

¹¹Ernst Best, *One Body in Christ* (London: SPCK, 1955) 98-101, 112; Edwin M. Poteat, "The Body of Christ as Metaphor or Fact," *Religion in Life* 25 (1956) 382-383; Gundry, *Soma*, 228, 234; Yorke, *The Church as the Body of Christ*, 7-10; Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 142; David J. Williams, *Paul's Metaphors: Their Context and Character* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999) 89.

¹²John A. T. Robinson, *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1952) 49-51; John Knox, "The Church Is Christ's Body," *Religion in Life* 27 (1957-1958) 62; Anders Nygren, "Corpus Christi," in *This Is the Church*, ed. A. Nygren (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1952) 10; Käsemann, "The Theological Problem," 104; Eduard Schweizer, "σῶμα," *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990-1993) 3:324.

¹³*The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed., ed. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, 20 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989) 2:354.

¹⁴As soon as the meaning of a term is no longer simply transferred from one referent to another, used analogously, it ceases to be a metaphor. Cf. *ibid.*, 9:676, for a definition of a metaphor: a "figure of speech in which a name or descriptive term is transferred to some object different from, but analogous to, that to which it is properly applicable."

of knowledge, and a “society, association, league, or fraternity.”¹⁵ These are all legitimate uses of the term in modern languages, and at least the last of them has ancient, pre-Pauline usage as well. To speak of the church as “the body of Christ” is therefore no more unusual than to speak of it as “the people of God,” “the children of God,” or “the household of God.”¹⁶ The image of the church as “the body of Christ,” Ernst Käsemann has written, “is not a metaphorical figure of speech,” for Paul asserts that “the exalted Christ really has an earthly body, and believers with their whole being are actually incorporated into it.”¹⁷ Likewise, Eduard Schweizer has written that for Paul the image “is more than a metaphor,” for “Christ himself is the body into which all members are baptized.”¹⁸ To be sure, the term lends itself well for metaphorical purposes, too, allowing for analogies to parts of the body (1 Cor 12:14-27), but those must be considered secondary. For Paul the body of Christ is first of all the eschatological community of the Spirit, the new creation, which exists already in the present world. Moreover, those incorporated into Christ share his destiny. What God has done in and through Christ’s redemptive death and resurrection is theirs. As they have “died to the law through the body of Christ,” so they “belong...to him who was raised from the dead” (Rom 7:4).

II. LOCAL AND UNIVERSAL

One of the features of “the body of Christ” image is that, like the word “church,” it can refer to either the church universal or the local community of believers. In his own writings Paul can speak of the church as a universal entity (1 Cor 10:32; 15:9; Gal 1:13; Phil 3:6) or as a specific congregation, meaning the church in that place (Rom 16:1, 5; 1 Cor 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1). The situation is more complex in the disputed letters of Paul—letters that are widely regarded as deutero-Pauline. In Colossians, as in the undisputed letters, the term “church” can refer to the church as universal (1:18, 24) or local (4:15-16). Within Ephesians, on the other hand, the term “church” always means the universal church (1:22; 3:10, 21; 5:23-32).

It is often assumed that for Paul “the body of Christ” always refers to the local community, while in the deutero-Pauline letters it always refers to the church universal. But the distinction does not really hold up. In the letters of Paul the body of Christ can, in fact, refer to the universal fellowship of believers in Christ. So he says that all Christians are members of the one body (1 Cor 12:13). In two specific cases it may appear at first glance that he is speaking of the congregation (alone) as the body of Christ, but that is not actually the case. In his words about participating in the Lord’s Supper at Corinth, when he writes to his readers about sharing in Christ’s body, he can hardly be referring to the Corinthian community alone, for

¹⁵Ibid., 2:355.

¹⁶Contra Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 142, n. 61, who restricts the use of “body” to the human body; anything beyond that is figurative.

¹⁷Käsemann, “The Theological Problem,” 104.

¹⁸Schweizer, “σῶμα,” *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3:324.

he says that “we who are many are one body,” even though he is himself absent (1 Cor 10:17). Another passage that appears to refer to a congregation (alone) is in Romans. When he refers to the church there as “one body” (12:4), Paul includes himself in that company, even though he is absent, and he goes on to speak of gifts of the Spirit within the body, any of which may or may not be present in any given congregation. On the other hand, when Paul speaks of the gifts of the Spirit at Corinth (1 Cor 12:14-26) and concludes with the statement “you are the body of Christ” (1 Cor 12:27)—not “a body of Christ”—he is referring in that instance to the local community. Likewise, when he calls upon the Corinthians to “discern the body” at their eucharistic gatherings, he is clearly referring to the local community (1 Cor 11:29). For Paul, it can be said that the local community is an expression of the one body. Put in a striking way, one can say that for him the body of Christ is not first of all the local congregation but the whole church; in the final analysis, the members of the body of Christ are not individual congregations but individual believers.¹⁹

Within Colossians and Ephesians, whenever the ecclesiological expression is used, it refers to the church as a universal fellowship (Col 1:18, 24; 2:19; 3:15; Eph 1:23; 2:16; 4:4, 12, 16; 5:23, 29), as summarized in the classic statement: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:4).

The Pauline and deuterio-Pauline conception of the church as “the body of Christ” deserves a hearing in an age of localism, congregationalism, and regionalism. The church in the New Testament has been described in classic lines formulated by Karl L. Schmidt long ago, when he said, “the sum of the individual congregations does not produce the total community or the Church. Each community, however small, represents the total community, the Church.”²⁰ Furthermore, he says:

The fact that individual congregations gradually formed larger organizations leaves an impression of development from the individual to the corporate. But we must not be dominated by this impression. What counts is that the congregation took itself to be representative of the whole Church.²¹

What is particularly striking about the New Testament communities of faith is that, according to the data we have, they had a sense of belonging to a fellowship that was larger than that provided by the local community. According to Acts, Christian communities arose in Palestine, Syria, Asia Minor, Rome, and elsewhere fairly quickly, and there was a sense of their belonging to a wider fellowship. So

¹⁹Best, *One Body in Christ*, 113.

²⁰Karl L. Schmidt, “ἐκκλησία,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-1976) 3:506.

²¹*Ibid.*, 3:535.

Luke speaks of “the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria” in the singular (Acts 9:31), as though there were one Palestinian church. The church at Jerusalem continued to exert leadership, and therefore to interact with other communities of faith, as long as the “pillar apostles” (Peter, James, and John) were there (Gal 2:9). But going beyond all that, something scarcely noticed in studies of the church in the New Testament and post-apostolic era is that there was an amazing interconnectedness, a networking, among the congregations, between apostles and congregations, and among ordinary members within different congregations, as the lists of greetings in Paul’s letters show. New Testament writings tell of visits by members of one community to another, the sending of financial aid from one to another, and intercessory prayer for the well-being of communities other than one’s own.²² The practice of extending hospitality is noticeably present in the writings of the New Testament, giving witness to “the presence of God or Christ in ordinary exchanges between human guests and hosts.”²³

The amount of documentation regarding mutual care and interchange among the communities is impressive. There are few analogies in antiquity, if any at all, to the amount of correspondence flowing among the early Christian communities,²⁴ which in itself shows how members of these communities had a sense of mutual care and accountability. The correspondence includes the letters of Paul, the deutero-Pauline letters, the catholic epistles, the epistolary materials in other books of the New Testament (Acts 15:23-29; Rev 2:1-3:22), the letters of Clement, Ignatius, Barnabas, and Polycarp, and many items of correspondence quoted or referred to in the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius. Generally it can be said that religious associations and cult groups in antiquity had an “inward focus,” while the Christian communities had an “international scope.”²⁵ That view concerning early Christianity can be confirmed by the sheer volume of known correspondence alone.

All this suggests that for the New Testament communities of faith—to say nothing of early Christianity in general—the church consists of the totality of persons who belong to Christ at the dawn of the new age. Paul’s image of the church as “the body of Christ” expresses that same viewpoint. It is an image that, when used, can recall individuals, congregations, and denominations to their ecumenical task. To say that the body of Christ is a given, or a gift, without at the same time realizing

²²All of this originated at least by the time of Paul. Cf. E. Earle Ellis, “Paul and His Co-Workers,” *New Testament Studies* 17 (1971) 439-452; and Robert J. Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 48, who cites such passages as Rom 16:1; 2 Cor 8:11-14.

²³John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 2.

²⁴Cf. Rowen Williams, “Does It Make Sense to Speak of Pre-Nicene Orthodoxy?” in *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, ed. R. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 12; and Petr Pokorný, *The Genesis of Christology: Foundations for a Theology of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987) 158-160; 205-206.

²⁵Cf. S. G. Barton and G. H. R. Horsley, “A Hellenistic Cult Group and the New Testament Churches,” *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 24 (1981) 28-29.

that it is a body in need of care is to turn a deaf ear (or blind eye) to the richness of the term bequeathed to the modern church by the apostle Paul.

III. MINISTRY WITHIN THE ONE BODY

Ministry within the body of Christ is to be carried out on several fronts. In Rom 12:3-8 Paul writes to the Christians at Rome concerning their various and varied gifts. Not all members have the same function, he says, and goes on to list the various gifts, seven in number. Three of those gifts are expressed through speech: prophecy, teaching, and exhortation. The other four are expressed in practical service: diaconal service, benevolences, leadership, and doing acts of mercy. In each case where a gift is listed, Paul adds a notation about making use of the gift mentioned. Common to all, however, is that they are gifts given according to the “grace” bestowed. The gifts may well be correlated with human abilities that people have, based on creation (so “natural endowments”), but the Spirit makes use of them for the body of Christ. And they are to be employed in order that the body of Christ might function well.

Another note altogether is heard concerning gifts of the Spirit in 1 Cor 12:4-31. Not only does Paul provide a considerably longer, and mostly different, list of gifts (wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment, tongues, and the interpretation of tongues, 12:8-11), but he exhorts the community at Corinth in a different way. To be sure, he insists later in the same letter that the various gifts are to be used for the edification of the community, which is much like his emphasis in Romans on the employment of gifts to make the body function well (14:3-5, 12, 17, 26). But the most remarkable emphasis he makes is that, although gifts differ, none is to be considered inferior (12:14-20), and none is to be denigrated (12:21-26). That is the other side of the matter, standing in contrast to what is said in Romans. There the apostle exhorts people to use their gifts; here he exhorts them not to despise the gifts of others.

The first type of exhortation is heard often in the churches of today. People are reminded constantly that they have gifts, and that they ought to use them. The impression given is that the existence of the church rests upon the exercise of the various gifts. The church is then comparable to a service club that depends on its members in order to flourish as an organization. And as long as the church is in the world, living in the “not yet” of historical existence, that kind of exhortation is needed. Members of a body must care for it.

But the second type of exhortation may need to be heeded even more. It is the more difficult: the body must care for its members. That is spelled out in Paul’s use of the human body as an analogy (1 Cor 12:14-26). The body consists of various parts, or members, and so does the church. One part of the body (such as a foot) cannot say that it is not a part of the body because it does not seem to be as good as another (such as a hand). Furthermore, one part of the body (such as an eye) cannot say to another (such as a hand) that the latter is not needed, and so on. Applying

the analogy directly, Paul concludes that if one member of the body suffers, all do, and if one is honored, all rejoice with that person.

It is more difficult to imagine how a corporate entity—a body—can care for the individual, rather than the other way around. Yet such a view is expressed in this passage from 1 Corinthians. What would it mean for a congregation to encourage the gifts of those who are reticent to use them? What would it mean for a congregation's leadership to seek out actively those gifts that are waiting to be expressed, but which are not expressed because of fear or possible ridicule? The very idea of a congregation as a body that cares for its members is difficult to entertain. But it is not impossible. Intercessory prayer at worship is one of the most obvious means for doing so. It can be even more effective when an announcement is made prior to the prayer concerning those for whom prayer will be made, and why. The visiting of persons in need or in trouble by pastors and other leaders is another way in which the body cares for its members. And the body cares for its members when financial or other resources are extended directly to them, or when it obtains help for them from an agency. The suffering of others with the one who is suffering (1 Cor 12:26) is one of the most overlooked forms of ministry there is.

The emphasis of Rom 12 (that the members of the body should care for the body) is heard frequently in churches far and wide, but that of 1 Cor 12 (that the body should care for its members) is not. And when that is the case, only one side of the body of Christ imagery is being looked at and heeded.

IV. THE BODY OF CHRIST IN THE WORLD

If the body of Christ is a community of the Spirit and the new age, but exists nevertheless in time and space, it relates to the world. It is characteristic of every body, whether it be physical or social, that it is related to others and to the external world.

It seems at first that whenever Paul speaks of the body of Christ, the matter at hand is one that is "internal" to the church, not one that has an "external" dimension. Yet it is by means of his body, the church, that the risen Christ relates to the world. It is not necessary to adopt the view that the body of Christ is an "extension of the incarnation" in time and space.²⁶ But one can claim, nevertheless, that it is through that body that Christ continues to relate to the world. For it is through his body, the church on earth, that Christ continues to be known. To be sure, he is in no way confined to his body. But it is by means of his body that he has an earthly existence. The word of God is proclaimed and the sacraments are celebrated within the gathered body. But the body does not cease to exist when worship has ended. The body continues to function in the world, as each of its members assumes his or her vocation (i.e., his or her calling to faith and discipleship) in daily life.

The authors of Colossians and Ephesians bring out more clearly than Paul the

²⁶The view is that of Robinson, *The Body*, 49.

significance and role of the body of Christ in the world. In these two letters Christ is designated as the “head” of the body (Col 1:18; 2:19; Eph 1:22; 4:15). Whereas in Paul’s letters Christ is the body into which believers are baptized, here Christ is portrayed as exalted above the body itself, superior to and governing it. Moreover, in both letters Christ is portrayed as being exalted above all things in the cosmos (Col 2:10; Eph 1:20-21). Since that is so, Christ rules over the world from heaven (Col 3:1; Eph 1:22). The body of Christ is a “holy” and “chosen” people (Col 1:22; 3:12; Eph 1:2).

From the perspective of these two letters, Christ is made known in and to the world through his church on earth alone. Apart from the church he remains hidden in heaven above. In Colossians the readers are exhorted to set their minds on things above, where Christ dwells, and then to relate to outsiders with wisdom and other virtues (3:2; 4:5-6). In Ephesians the church is the medium by which the wisdom of God is made known (3:10). Christians have been recreated in Christ for good works in the world (2:10). In both letters it is by means of the church, his body of believers on earth, that Christ engages the world.

The image of the church as “the body of Christ” is often looked upon with suspicion. It is an image that can be, and has been, employed in triumphalist ways, so that excessive claims are made about the church. An example of that is the claim that the church is a prolongation of the incarnation of the Logos into history this side of Easter. One must rightly object to such a view, for it precludes the otherness and freedom of Christ over against the church.²⁷

Nevertheless, “the body of Christ” has a secure grounding in the New Testament as an image for the church. It is a powerful and dynamic image when used in exhortations there, and it is a rich image for ecclesiology, particularly in regard to ecumenical thought, parish ministry, and social engagement. ⊕

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²⁷See the discussion by Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 72-73.