

Chapter Nine

“An Intellectually Honest Reexamination of the Body of Christ Metaphor”

“THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST: ITS BODY METAPHOR”

The Church of Jesus Christ is a real thing. Being the Church of Jesus Christ it must also be an important thing. It was brought into existence by the Lord Jesus Christ, established during His earthly ministry, and originally constituted by Him with His apostles.¹ In Ephesians 5.25, the Apostle Paul informed his readers that Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for it. On the Day of Pentecost, some days following the first Church business meeting during which the replacement for Judas Iscariot was selected in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy,² John the Baptist’s prediction of the baptism of the Holy Spirit was fulfilled, and that same day 3,000 souls were saved and added to the Church.³

In the minds of Jewish Christians, the mystery surrounding the Church of Jesus Christ had only to do with its composition, “That the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel,” Ephesians 3.6. The Apostle Paul’s identification of the Church of Jesus Christ as a body, specifically the body of Christ, is an illustration of his use of metaphor as a means to explain more clearly the nature and operation of the Church.

About metaphors, it has been written, “A metaphor is the shortest, most compact of these comparisons; in it, the likeness is implied rather than stated explicitly. Typically, the writer asserts that one thing is another (in some respect) or suggests that it acts like or has some of the qualities of

¹ Matthew 10.1-4; 1 Corinthians 12.28

² Acts 1.15-26; Psalm 69.25; 109.8

³ Matthew 3.11; Acts 2.1-4, 41, 47

something else.”⁴ Thus, a metaphor is a literary device by which one thing is described using the reader’s familiarity with another quite dissimilar thing.

We have already studied and discovered that the Church of Jesus Christ is an assembly and that its characteristics include both locality and visibility. Therefore, when the Apostle Paul’s Spirit-inspired epistles identify the Church as the body of Christ, he is not stretching the limits of our imagination by simultaneously changing the basic nature of the Church of Jesus Christ. Our understanding of bodies precludes them being simultaneously disassembled as well as invisible so that an invisible church is somewhat like an invisible body. That is not the comparison he is making. Both a Church and a body are visible, and the way they are alike lies not in any inability to see them. The way they are alike is how both function.

Before I plunge too deeply into this matter, some background concerning the tremendous disparity that exists as to what the body of Christ is understood to be and to mean in Christendom is necessary.

When those of Roman Catholic persuasion find references to the body of Christ in the New Testament, they project their theological bias onto the passages so that it reinforces their predisposition that the Pope is the vicar of Christ on earth, and the Roman Catholic Church is the sole dispenser of God’s grace through the seven sacraments of the Church. They take the body of Christ to mean that the resurrected and exalted Savior expresses Himself through the Roman Catholic Church in precisely the same way He expressed Himself through His physical body of flesh and blood before His ascension to glory. Thus, it is held by the Roman Catholic Church that one’s relationship with Christ is one’s relationship with the Roman Catholic Church, and one’s obedience to the dictates of the Roman Catholic Church is one’s obedience to Christ. By definition, Roman Catholic theology demands that, since Christ is sinless, His Church (the Roman Catholic Church, that is, the body of Christ as they see it) is also by definition sinless even when sins are committed!

That is a tough sell to someone who reads the Bible and takes note in the New Testament of the sins in the Jerusalem Church, in the Corinthian Church, and most of the seven Churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3. In

⁴ Porter Gale Perrin, *Writer’s Guide And Index To English*, (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1942), page 235.

the Roman Catholic Church's view of the Church as the body of Christ, the Church is "the extension of the incarnation."⁵

When those of evangelical persuasion (including many Baptists) encounter the phrase "the body of Christ," they conclude that "The church is the body of Christ analogically or meta- phorically but *not by strict equation*."⁶ On this approach to the phrase "the body of Christ," I see no conflict with Scripture. The problem lies with the evangelical community's view of the Church as being both universal and invisible, which is in part the result of completely misinterpreting the baptism of the Holy Spirit as phenomena that are never shown in Scripture to occur without signs or apart from groups receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Never in God's Word is an individual baptized with the Holy Spirit without signs alarming the senses, yet Protestants maintain such happens to every sinner who trusts Christ, thereby making the new convert a member of the fictional invisible universal church.

No one who embraces the Protestant view of the Church of Jesus Christ being an invisible universal body of all believers in Jesus Christ seems willing to explain something. Why is the Spirit baptism they claim is the experience of every believer never witnessed by anyone? On the Day of Pentecost, thousands were witness to the baptism of the Holy Spirit. As well, why do they not explain why the baptism of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost was experienced by the 120 who were already baptized Christians but was not experienced by the 3,000 who subsequently became baptized Christians?

Rather than deal with pertinent questions and serious objections to their faulty view of the nature of the Church, those who insist that the Church is the invisible universal body of Christ tend to react in three predictable ways to the assertion that the Church of Jesus Christ, the body of Christ, is a visible assembly of born again and Scripturally baptized believers in Jesus Christ brought together in a Church relationship to worship and

⁵ Earl D. Radmacher, *What The Church Is All About: A Biblical And Historical Study*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978, reprinted from 1972 Western Conservative Theology Seminary edition originally titled *The Nature Of The Church*), pages 223-233.

⁶ *Ibid.*, page 233.

serve God. What are those three ways they disingenuously deal with that I am convinced is the Biblical position?

First, they completely ignore the existence of an alternate explanation of the passages that deal with the Church of Jesus Christ, the body of Christ. Most Christians will simply accept what they are taught by persuasive teachers, who seem to build a logical and airtight case for whatever view they espouse. And I admit to being one of those who seek to build a logical and airtight case for the position that I believe to be true to God's Word.

All the more reason, then, for teachers and preachers to themselves be open to an honest consideration of other views that do not dishonor God while providing a simpler approach to understanding the text. Most people initially imagine that you should be able to see an assembly. As well, most think that references made to a body will naturally be references made to something that can be seen. Finally, most people would think that if John the Baptist so much as said the baptism of the Holy Spirit would be a sign, and in the book of Acts it was a sign, then it should still be a sign if it is still occurring. Incredibly, such considerations are never addressed to most congregations.

Next, those holding the majority view engage in ridicule, supposing that when someone does not agree with the majority view, there is something wrong with him. An example of such ridicule in one book on the nature of the Church of Jesus Christ is the late John Thornbury's use of such words as fatuous, ridiculous, and absurd in his attempt to shame those who hold a different view than his own of what the Bible reveals about the nature of the Church of Jesus Christ, the body of Christ.⁷ Is that kind of response to an honestly held different understanding called for?

Finally, they insist that the view that maintains the Church of Jesus Christ is a local and visible assembly, and that the body of Christ is a metaphor that supports that visible local Church only position, is an interpretation of recent origin and is, therefore, unworthy of consideration. However, is the belief that the Church of Jesus Christ is a local assembly of immersed Christians and not an invisible universal aggregate of all believers

⁷ John Thornbury, *The Doctrine Of The Church: A Baptist View*, (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1972), page 109.

a new understanding of what the Bible teaches? Allow me to answer with two pertinent pieces of evidence:

Evidence Exhibit #1: The very first entry in the very first volume of the ten-volume set titled *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (a collection of ancient Christian writings) is titled “St. Clement. Epistle to the Corinthians.”⁸ It constitutes one of the earliest, possibly the very first, surviving Christian correspondence after the completion of the New Testament. It was written around A.D. 96 from the Church at Rome to the Church in Corinth, and historical evidence suggests that it came from the leader of the Roman Church named Clement.⁹ Amazingly, the ancient letter supports the understanding that the New Testament writers did not impose a new significance upon the word *ekklesia* and transform it into a universal entity. The letter supports the view that Christ’s Church is a visible assembly, that the body of Christ did not refer to all believers but a particular assembly, and that the Church should not be seen as synonymous with the family of God.¹⁰ Thus, the notion that the Church of Jesus Christ is a designation of a particular congregation and that the body of Christ is not an invisible universal entity comprised of all believers is not new, but traceable to the first century and quite possibly while the last of Christ’s apostles were still alive.

⁸ *Ante-Nicene Fathers, The Writings Of The Fathers Down To A.D. 325, Volume 1*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., revised edition), pages 5-21.

⁹ <http://thross7.googlepages.com/Clement.pdf>, page 2

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pages 5-6

Evidence Exhibit #2: *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* contains an entry titled Schleithem Confession, the first known Anabaptist confession. Drawn up at a conference at Schleithem, Switzerland, on February 24, 1527, it was known as the “Brotherly Union” and summarized certain tenets of the Swiss and South German Anabaptists, who were under attack from orthodox Protestantism. The confession achieved wide recognition after the trial and execution of an Anabaptist leader, Michael Sattler, by the civil authorities at Rottenburg on May 20, 1527. His antagonists drew up nine articles in their attempt to refute the Schleithem Confession and demonstrate that “Anabaptism was immoral and treasonable.”¹¹ That should be of no surprise. Protestants were just as bloodthirsty in their opposition to our Baptist forebears as the Roman Catholics have typically been. Turning to the Schleithem Confession itself, references within it to the body and the congregation make it clear that an invisible universal concept of the Church was not their understanding of the Church of Jesus Christ or the body of Christ.¹²

Thus, two instances have been uncovered in which beliefs regarding the nature of the Church of Jesus Christ not being universal and invisible were held, once in the first century and once in the 16th century. This does not at this moment establish that the Church of Jesus Christ is visible and not invisible or that it is particular rather than universal. It is acknowledged those two documents are not Scripture and should carry no weight whatsoever when seeking to establish a Scriptural truth. They are useful, however, to establish that some people held to the visible and local Church

¹¹ <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1582085/Schleithem-Confession> - 2/1/2018

¹² http://www.anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/index.php/Schleithem_Confession_%28source%29 - 2/1/2018

position in days gone by, thereby refuting the dismissive notion of those who disagree with us that our understanding is questionable or even objectionable because it is new. It is not new.

Now we can examine the New Testament itself, hopefully without prejudice, to learn about the Church of Jesus Christ by seeking to understand one of the metaphors the Apostle Paul made use of: the Church of God as the body of Christ.

The Greek word for body is σῶμα, and its use in connection with the body of Christ is listed in the following passages by Earl Radmacher in his book *What The Church Is All About: A Biblical And Historical Study*:

Romans 12.5: “So we, *being* many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.”

First Corinthians 10.16-17: ¹⁶ The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?

¹⁷ For we *being* many are one bread, *and* one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread.

First Corinthians 12.12-27: ¹² For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also *is* Christ.

¹³ For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether *we be* Jews or Gentiles, whether *we be* bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.

¹⁴ For the body is not one member, but many.

- 15 If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body?
- 16 And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body?
- 17 If the whole body *were* an eye, where *were* the hearing? If the whole *were* hearing, where *were* the smelling?
- 18 But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him.
- 19 And if they were all one member, where *were* the body?
- 20 But now *are they* many members, yet but one body.
- 21 And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.
- 22 Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary:
- 23 And those *members* of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely *parts* have more abundant comeliness.
- 24 For our comely *parts* have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that *part* which lacked:
- 25 That there should be no schism in the body; but *that* the members should have the same care one for another.

26 And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it.

27 Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.

Ephesians 1.22c-23: “... to the church, Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all.”

Ephesians 2.16: “And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby.”

Ephesians 4.4, 12, 16: 4 *There is* one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling.

12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:

16 From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.

Ephesians 5.23, 30: 23 For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body.

30 For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones.

Colossians 1.18, 24: 18 And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all *things* he might have the preeminence.

24 Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church.

Colossians 2.19: "And not holding the Head, from which all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God."

Colossians 3.15: "And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful."

Then, of course, there are the seven letters found in Revelation chapters two and three. I show only the beginning of each letter before asking two questions:

Rev 2.1: Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write;

7 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches;

8 And unto the angel of the church in Smyrna write;

11 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches;

12 And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write;

17 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches;

18 And unto the angel of the church in Thyatira write;

29 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.

Rev 3.1: And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write;

6 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.

7 And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write;

13 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.

14 And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write;

22 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.

First question: If the body of Christ is universal and invisible, why were the seven letters from the glorified Savior addressed to the angels of the seven Churches and not to the universal invisible body of Christ?

Second question: If the body of Christ is comprised of all Christians, why did our Lord urge upon the Churches (plural) careful hearing of what the Spirit said to them?

These letters are not addressed to the church, and the church is not urged to attend to what the Spirit said to the church because the Spirit did not address His remarks to the church because there is no invisible universal body of Christ; there are only Churches, each of them being the body of Christ.

Though a verse-by-verse analysis of this Church of Jesus Christ is the body of Christ metaphor is beyond the scope of this book,¹³ consider these observations as supporting the proper interpretation of the body metaphor as a comparison between the Church of Jesus Christ and a human (and therefore, visible) body:

First, PAUL'S FULLEST DESCRIPTION OF THE BODY IS A HUMAN BODY

Most who read First Corinthians 12.12-27 conclude that Paul's metaphor is used to describe the Church of Jesus Christ to the Corinthian congregation as a human body. After all, in his description of the body, he called attention to its various members, the foot, the hand, the ear, the eye, and alludes to the nose by mentioning the sense of smell. He conveyed the sense that the Church of Jesus Christ functions in a fashion similar to a human body in this passage, and in no way conveys any idea of disassociation or invisibility.

¹³ An excellent treatment of the topic by Charles Hunt, *The Body Of Christ – Metaphor Not Myth*, is available at ClassicalBaptist.Press.

Why make mention of visible body parts if his purpose is to describe something invisible? Then he concluded the passage by writing, “Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.” That is, the Corinthian congregation is the body of Christ, and each is a member in particular. The same could be said of the Church in Philippi, the Church in Thessalonica, and the Church in Ephesus. A Church is the body of Christ, and in each Church, members are members in particular.

To wrongly insist that the body of Christ is an invisible universal body demands three things: *First*, the fact that the Church of Jesus Christ has already been clearly shown to be a local and visible assembly of baptized believers has to be ignored. *Second*, other uses of the body metaphor by the Apostle Paul in other epistles have to be substantially different than the body metaphor used in First Corinthians chapter 12, where the body metaphor is that of a human body, therefore, a visible body. *Third*, it must be established that the metaphor Paul used is substantially different than is reasonably and normally understood by most people. The whole point of a metaphor, you see, is to provide a better understanding to people of one thing, using another thing that they are, presumably, familiar with. But who is familiar with a body that cannot be seen? Therefore, I submit to you that the body metaphor Paul makes use of demands that as the body is visible, so must the Church of Jesus Christ it is compared also to be visible.

Next, PAUL'S REFERENCES TO ONE BODY ARE REFERENCES TO ONE KIND, NOT ONE IN NUMBER

The phrase “one body” is found in five verses in the Greek New Testament: Romans 12.5, First Corinthians 6.16, 10.17, 12.13, and Ephesians 4.4. Four of the verses have to do with the body of Christ according to Earl Radmacher.¹⁴ Of interest to me at this point is First Corinthians 6.16:

“What? know ye not that he which is joined to an harlot is one body? for two, saith he, shall be one flesh.”

When referring to the sin of fornication, the Apostle Paul uses the phrase translated “one body” to refer to two sinning individuals engaging in

¹⁴ Radmacher, page 223.

an activity that results in a single, visible entity as a result of their sinful actions. Except for the sinfulness, of course, that is exactly the way Paul uses the phrase in the four other verses that have reference to the “one body” in connection with the Church of Jesus Christ.

When two people come together to sin, they do not become a part of a single invisible universal body comprised of all fornicators. The “one body” of fornicators is easily understood. The “one body” that is the Church of Jesus Christ should also as easily be understood.

Finally, PAUL VERY CLEARLY SHOWS THAT THE CHURCH IS THE BODY, AND THE BODY IS THE CHURCH

- First Corinthians 10.16-17:
- 16 The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?
 - 17 For we *being* many are one bread, *and* one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread.

Even though Paul uses the editorial “we” in verse 17, recognize that in this passage he addressed the matter of the Corinthian congregation celebrating the Lord’s Supper. When congregations do that are they not gathered? Are they not visible? Can this ordinance be rightly termed “the communion of the blood of Christ” when it is administered to individuals who are at home or to patients in hospitals? No. It is by definition the gathering of the congregation, meaning locality and visibility are intrinsic to the communion service.

- First Corinthians 12.13: “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether *we be* Jews or Gentiles, whether *we be* bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.”

Did Paul here throw everything else he had written away to indicate the body of Christ is an invisible universal body or did he point out that each

congregation is one body of Christ, and that many members of a congregation comprise one body, as Christ is one?

Ephesians 1.22c-23: “... to the church, Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all.”

If the Church of Jesus Christ is a visible and particular assembly, which has been established, then so is the body of Christ, since the Church and the body are the same thing.

Ephesians 2.16: “And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby.”

Is Paul here referring to one invisible universal body, or did he point out that God’s plan is for both Jewish believers and Gentile believers to be members of the same local Church, the enmity between the two having been slain by Christ’s sacrifice on the cross?

Ephesians 4.4: “*There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling.*”

Only one body, as in an invisible universal body of Christ, or did Paul remain consistent here by reminding his readers that their Church is an example of one kind of body? Paul remained consistent.

Ephesians 4.12: “For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.”

What is the setting in which apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers in Paul’s day functioned to do what is described in this verse? They were not ministers-at-large. Everywhere Paul went he established Churches. The body of Christ referred to in this verse is a Church.

Ephesians 4.16: “From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.”

Is a universal and invisible body spread out over the whole earth properly described as “fitly joined together and compacted”? No. What is fitly joined and compacted is a physical, visible body.

Ephesians 5.23: “For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body.”

So, a husband is visible, a wife is visible, the Savior in heaven is visible (even if we cannot presently see Him, He possesses a glorious physical body), but the body of Christ cannot be seen? This is nonsense. How does the wife compare to the body if she is visible, but the body is not?

Colossians 1.18, 24: ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all *things* he might have the preeminence.

²⁴ Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body’s sake, which is the church.

“The body, the church” is an example of a grammatical technique called apposition, showing the body and the Church to be identical.¹⁵ Thus, if the Church is visible, which it must be to deal with sinning members in its midst, Matthew 18.15-20, then the body that is the Church is visible.

Paul employed a metaphor to help his readers in Corinth to more fully understand the way a Church of Jesus Christ ought to function. He chose as his metaphor the body, and, if First Corinthians 12 is any clue, he specifically chose the metaphor of a human body. A metaphor is a literary device that seizes upon the familiarity a reader has with something (in this case it is the human body) to teach us about that which the human body is compared to, the Church of Jesus Christ. There is no reason Paul would first change the metaphor and then make use of it. Thus, he did not first take the metaphor of

¹⁵ Albert H. Marckwardt & Frederic G. Cassidy, *Scribner Handbook Of English, Fourth Edition*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1967), page 256.

the human body and then make it invisible and disassociated before using it to teach the Corinthian congregation about the Church of Jesus Christ. That would be utterly confusing to them, as confusing as those who think the body of Christ is an invisible universal body clearly show themselves to be.

Why have I spent an entire chapter establishing that Paul's use of the body metaphor requires that both the body (since it is a human body he uses for comparison) and the Church of Jesus Christ are visible? Because almost the entirety of evangelical Christianity is confused about this matter. After all, how can there be real unity among *all* professing Christians apart from doctrinal compromise? Real unity can only truly be found in a local congregation. Remember where evangelical Christianity came from. By and large, it came from the Protestant Reformation.

One of the serious errors within the Protestant Reformation was their entanglement with government and failure to see that the Word of God teaches the absolute separation of Churches and the state. As the Roman Catholic Church embraced the notion of a universal visible church, that being themselves, the Protestants also embraced the notion of a universal invisible church. Both were wrong. In reality, each congregation of born-again, Scripturally immersed believers in Jesus Christ is a Church of Jesus Christ. Each congregation is the body of Christ.

Why then the body metaphor? To show the Corinthian Church members that as wonderfully interconnected and cooperative as the human body is in growing and properly functioning, so each congregation of Christians should see themselves as being capable, by God's grace, of living and moving under the direction of their head, Jesus Christ, while at the same time each of us depending on the others in the congregation as eyes depend upon feet, as mouths depend upon hands, etc.

Therefore, let us do away with this isolationist and individualist notion that our interdependence as Christians and cooperation under the headship of Christ is optional. It is not optional. It is vital to our ongoing health and welfare as Christians. And what about Christians who are not members of Churches, not part of the various bodies of Christ? I do not think you find such a thing in the New Testament. If I am wrong, please point it out to me.