

Metaphorizing the Reality of the Body of Christ

In Colossians 2, after speaking of the momentous operation of God in the death and resurrection of Christ and before speaking of the application of these accomplishments to the believers to display Christ's headship through the growth of God in the Body of Christ, Paul inserts a word of clarification concerning the believers' experience of the reality of the Body of Christ: "Let no one therefore judge you in eating and in drinking or in respect of a feast or of a new moon or of the Sabbath, which are a shadow of the things to come, but the body is of Christ" (vv. 16-17). Paul's word speaks of the danger of assuming that metaphors, as "shadows," are the reality, rather than merely illustrations of the reality—Christ, who casts the shadows. The saints in Colossae were enamored with shadows, with ordinances related to eating and drinking (Lev. 11:2), to Jewish feasts (23:2), to monthly sacrifices (Num. 28:11), and to the Sabbath (Lev. 23:3), but they were missing the reality that these shadows only illustrate. Christ, as the body of the shadows, is our real food and drink; He is the rich supply of the divine life in the Body of Christ (Col. 2:19). Christ, as the body of the shadows, is our real feast; He is the fellowship of the divine life in the Body of Christ (v. 19). Christ, as the body of the shadows, is our real new beginning; He is the sacrificial beginning in whom the Body of Christ was created and in whom the Body is being made full in the divine life (vv. 10-12). And Christ, as the body of the shadows, is our real rest; He is the fulfillment of God's will and plan to produce the Body of Christ in the divine life (v. 19).

The propensity of believers, like those in Colossae, to mistake a metaphor for the reality and then to value the "shadow" over the "body" that produces the shadow is nowhere more evident than in considerations related to the Body of Christ. Whereas the Bible speaks of the human body as a metaphor of the Body, most theologians and commentators argue that the Body of Christ is the metaphor; that is, they metaphorize the reality and, in so

doing, defraud the believers of their prize, the experience of the all-inclusive Christ as the growing God in the Body of Christ (vv. 18-19).

A metaphor is a figure of speech functioning as an implied comparison in which a word or phrase denoting one kind of object or action is used in place of another to suggest an analogy or likeness between them. In such discussions related to the Body of Christ, the church is

likened to a human body, but this position is proffered to assert that the Body of Christ is not an organic body of any kind. Paul's view of the Body is derived from revelation and experience; it is an inside view of a believer actually living in the Body of Christ. In contrast, a metaphorical understanding of the Body is an outside view, a view that derives from a lack

of revelation and experience of the spiritual essence of the mystical Body.

When the Body of Christ is viewed as a metaphor only, the reality and practicality of the Body of Christ are obscured. The Epistle to the Romans, however, is a complete presentation of the full gospel of God concerning His Son, and it is an outline of the basic truths of the Christian life and the church life. It contains the profound revelation that, in Christ, God became man so that, in Christ, man may become God in life, nature, and expression but not in the Godhead to produce and build up the organic Body of Christ as the corporate expression of Christ, who is the embodiment and expression of the Triune God. God became man so that, in God's complete salvation, sinners may be redeemed, justified, reconciled, regenerated, sanctified, renewed, transformed, conformed, and glorified to become the sons of God, who are the same as God in life and nature, and the members of the Body of Christ. An organic Body is spoken of in Romans, but when the Body is viewed as a metaphor only, the manifestation of this organic reality will be frustrated in our experience.

IT IS REGRETTABLE THAT SO MANY CHRISTIANS TODAY VIEW THE BODY OF CHRIST AS A MERE METAPHOR AND FOR THIS REASON RARELY ENTER INTO A LIVING THAT GOES BEYOND THEIR INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCE AS BELIEVERS.

The manifestation of the Body of Christ fulfills the purpose that was designated for Adam by the Triune God—making Christ corporate in redeemed and regenerated humanity to bear His image and exercise His dominion. God’s desire for a manifestation of His triune being in the flesh is presented in Genesis 1:26, and His accomplishment of this manifestation is extolled in 1 Timothy 3:16. The Body of Christ is the connection between these two verses. First Timothy 3:16 is the proof that God’s speaking in Genesis 1:26 is being fulfilled through the making of a corporate man in His image. In this making process Christ has redeemed and regenerated the humanity of the believers, who were created in His image and likeness. Christ is made corporate through incarnation, human living, death, and resurrection, and He is now manifesting these accomplished realities as the mystery of godliness, the corporate manifestation of the Triune God in the flesh. There is an organic manifestation of the reality of the Body of Christ, but when the Body is viewed as a metaphor only, the role of the Spirit in manifesting the mystery of godliness in our experience is trivialized.

At the heart of the great mystery of godliness is God’s economy, which is His plan to impart Himself in Christ as the Spirit into the believers for the producing of the Body of Christ, the corporate expression of the Triune God. The Spirit is the realization of the resurrected Christ, the embodiment of God. And the Body of Christ is His fullness. Hence, our participation in the Body is inextricably linked to the Spirit’s involvement in the formation, constitution, and building up of the Body of Christ. The Body is initially formed by the believers’ baptism in the Spirit, the Body is gradually constituted by the believers’ drinking of the Spirit, and the Body is ultimately built up by the believers’ ministering the Spirit into one another. The Spirit is for the Body, but when the Body is viewed as a metaphor only, the engagement of the Body of Christ in spiritual functions related to carrying out God’s economy is limited.

One of the crucial functions of the Body of Christ involves the exercise of God’s dominion, and this involves spiritual warfare. According to Ephesians 6, the entire Body of Christ is the corporate warrior of God, and the whole armor of God is for the entire Body of Christ. When we fight the spiritual warfare in the Body and for the Body, we enjoy Christ as the complete armor of God. In the Body we are girded up with the reality of Christ, our conscience is covered by the righteousness of Christ, we enjoy the peace of Christ that was created on the cross, we can withstand temptations, proposals, doubts, questions, lies, attacks, and threats of God’s enemy, we are saved from the worries, anxieties, fears, and other weakening thoughts in our mind, and we can appropriate the killing power of God’s instant living word by praying and reading

God’s Word. The Body is the means that God has chosen to exercise His authority and to express the incorporate nature of His triune being, but when the Body is viewed as a metaphor only, the incorporation of the Body of Christ in the Triune God is denied, and the operation of the Triune God in the Body is stunted.

The Triune God is an incorporation through the mutual indwelling and mutual working together of the three as one. The three of the Divine Trinity never act separately from each other. Further, the believers are not meant to live the Christian life and serve God apart from the operations of the Triune God within them. The church as the Body of Christ is not a quaint metaphor for a simple congregation of people who believe that Jesus is Lord. Rather, it is an organic, corporate entity that comprises the new creation; it is the corporate reality of the new creation in Christ. And what makes it a reality, as opposed to a metaphor, is that in all its aspects the church as the Body of Christ incorporates the operations of the Triune God for its existence and its functions in God’s economy.

The Triune God is an incorporation, and He does everything by way of incorporation. Similarly, He has long intended that redeemed human beings would be included in His incorporation and would do all things by way of incorporation. He has had a corporate reality in mind for humankind since the very beginning in Genesis. Though the fall has frustrated His intention temporarily, through His economy He is recovering His chosen people through regeneration and transformation by His divine life back to His original intention that they would be in His very image. The fullest manifestation of this incorporation is not in the individual Christian lives of His many believers but in the corporate reality of the Body of Christ, the fullness of the One who fills all in all.

It is regrettable that so many Christians today view the Body of Christ as a mere metaphor and for this reason rarely enter into a living that goes beyond their individual experience as believers. Paul’s understanding of the Body of Christ, however, is far from metaphorical. He uses our human bodies as the metaphor for the reality that he not only saw but also lived in. The reality he saw and experienced involves a real operation of the Triune God in and among the New Testament believers. When the believers, who are indwelt by the Triune God in their spirit, live out His operation within, that is, when they incorporate His operation in all that they do, they are all brought into function according to that operation to be the Body and to build up the Body. What Paul has passed on to the saints for all time is a vision of the operation of the Triune God as the reality of the Body and for the growth of the Body. **AFC**

by the Editors