

Whose Body? Which Membership?

BY MICHELLE LEE - BARNEWALL

Although we recognize “the family of God” and “the body of Christ” are important biblical images for the Church, it is not so easy for us to grasp how the Church today should live into them. One reason is that we tend to view our membership from an individualistic mindset.

In his book, *When the Church Was a Family*, pastor and New Testament scholar Joseph Hellerman describes what happened one year when his family went on their annual vacation. Life had been a bit cramped in the 750 square-foot, two-bedroom, one-bathroom cottage in which Joe lived with his wife and two daughters. Since household repairs and remodeling were not among Joe’s talents, the fifty-year-old house had become a bit shabby and worn-down; it still had an electrical system that would not allow them to run more than one appliance at a time.

The congregation that Joe pastored planned for five months to surprise the Hellermans with an extreme home makeover while they were gone. On their return, they discovered a remodeled, rewired, and reorganized house, the work of about twenty people from the church. In his book Joe recounts how moved he was by what they had done for his family. But in many ways, what happened was simply an outgrowth of what he and his church tries to teach and live. As he describes it, “The church is a family. We share our stuff with one another.”¹

Although we recognize “the family of God” and “the body of Christ” are important biblical images for the Church, it is not so easy for us to grasp what it means for the Church to live into them. One reason is that we tend to view things from an American individualistic mindset rather than the collectivist mindset of the culture in which the New Testament was written. Our mindset manifests itself in numerous ways, particularly in our assumption that personal happiness and fulfillment take precedence over the good of any group to which we belong, whether it be our family, congregation, nation, and so on.

Consider how we identify ourselves in casual conversation. When we go to a social gathering where we do not already know the other people, almost invariably the conversation turns to the question “So what do you *do*?” In our culture, we identify ourselves by our jobs and achievements. However, in Scripture people identify themselves by their family lineage. For example, Rebekah introduces herself as “the daughter of Bethuel son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor” (Genesis 24:24). Joshua, who leads the Israelites after Moses, is identified as the “son of Nun” over twenty times. Among Jesus’ apostles, the two James are distinguished as one being the “son of Zebedee” and the other the “son of Alphaeus” (Matthew 10:2). Jesus himself is identified as “the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matthew 1:1) and even “the son of God” (Mark 1:1).

In ancient cultures people found their identity not in what they did, but in their family or other group relationships. What are the implications of this way of viewing ourselves? Among other things, it means that priorities are group-related. Loyalty to the group is more important than individual satisfaction, relational commitment more than autonomy, and corporate benefit more than individual gain.

LIVING AS A MEMBER OF A BODY

In Scripture the body of Christ is one of the most prominent images reflecting this group orientation.² For Paul, the body emphasizes the unity of the members. While we usually associate the figure with the spiritual gifts outlined in 1 Corinthians 12,³ other references to the body do not address gifts at all. In 1 Corinthians 10 and 11, Paul discusses the unity of the body in the context of the Lord’s Supper. He says, “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (10:17). He scolds the Corinthians for their disunity in the Lord’s Supper, urging them to “wait for one another” (11:33) and warns them that partaking “without discerning the body” can lead to God’s judgment (11:29). Although the latter reference to “body” is debated, it is likely a reference to the corporate body as well as Christ’s crucified body.⁴

Since we generally focus on the image as a practical one in which every member has a spiritual “gift” and so a contribution to make to the whole

body, we tend to overlook the important underlying relational assumptions of the image. Significantly, Paul says the body is so intimately tied together that the members should “have the same care for one another” to the extent that “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (1 Corinthians 12:25-26).

Ancient philosophers may provide more insight into the significance of what it means to be a body in this way. When they employ the body as an analogy for a group, they do not just show how various members contribute to the whole, but they also show how members are so closely knit together that they can feel each other’s pains and joys. As the Greek philosopher Sextus Empiricus explains, “in the case of unified bodies there is an affinity – if a finger is cut, the whole body is affected along with it.”⁵ The point of being a body is not simply that there are a variety of interrelated parts, but that each part is affected by what happens to the others.

Another interesting aspect of being a body is captured by the Stoic concept of *oikeiosis*, which one scholar has described as the “recognition and appreciation of something as belonging to one.”⁶ *Oikeiosis* assumes that we will take care of something that belongs to us, but of course we must first recognize what those things are. We naturally take care of ourselves in the same way babies instinctively focus on their own needs. But as we grow and mature, we realize that others “belong” to us and so are part of our sphere of concern, such as when parents care for their children and not just themselves.

Paul recognizes that members of a body must realize that others are in their sphere of concern and so should be cared for because they belong to the same body. Thus, in calling the Christian community a body, he is also saying that believers’ priorities should not be as individuals preoccupied with their own concerns, but as members of an important and defining whole: the one body in Christ. Their concern for one another should be a natural extension of their co-existence in the same body.

The benefit of focusing on our corporate identity is that we more naturally seek to care for those who “belong” to us than when we are simply commanded to help others. A friend illustrated this vividly to

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me when I visited his apartment and he informed me that I did not need to take off my shoes upon entering. The reason, he told me, was that “since this apartment doesn’t belong to me, I don’t really care if it gets dirty.” About a year later, after my friend moved into his newly built condo, he greeted me at the door with a request for me to take off my shoes, explaining that since it belonged to him, he wanted to take care of it. Now that my friend had an important incentive to keep his place clean, his behavior changed.

Such responses come naturally to us. In my class I sometimes play a little trick on an unsuspecting student. I ask someone who really likes their smartphone to take it out and tell the class about it. They usually gush enthusiastically about all of its features and capabilities. I ask if I can see it, and then proceed to walk away with it. The person, of course, is upset that I have taken their phone. I ask another student if he or she cares if I return the phone. I often get a fairly noncommittal answer, such as, “Sure, why not?” or “You probably should,” although the volume of their answer does not nearly match the protest of the student who owns the phone. Invariably when I ask those first students why they care so much about getting the phone back (when the others do not seem to care as much), they reply, “Because it’s MINE.”

In the Church we are commanded to love one another. But is this simply a command, or is it also a reflection of how we should naturally act simply because the other members of the body belong to us? Would our care for one another change if we acted not only because Scripture commands us, but also because we deeply desire to take care of what is a part of us?

LIVING IN THE BODY OF CHRIST

It is no coincidence that immediately after Paul’s discussion of the body of Christ in chapter twelve, he gives his famous account of love (1 Corinthians 13). Elsewhere Paul also connects his discussion of the body of Christ with commands to love (e.g., Romans 12:3-13; Ephesians 4:1-4). One of the purposes of presenting the Church as a body is to show that the result of this corporate identification should be love for one another. Indeed, the use of spiritual gifts in the body is itself an expression of this love since all of them are to be exercised for the purpose of edifying others.⁷

Furthermore, Paul tells the Corinthians not just that they are a body, but that they are “the body of *Christ*” (1 Corinthians 12:27, emphasis added). The body belongs to Christ, and he is the source of the believers’ unity. As Gordon Fee states, “Collectively in their common relationships to Christ through the Spirit, they are his one body.”⁸ One of the most important aspects of our corporate relationship in the Church is that it is not simply with others, but also with Christ. Therefore, when we consider our actions

towards one another, we should consider our union with Christ as well as our solidarity with one another.

An important implication of our unity with Christ can be seen in 1 Corinthians 8 where Paul warns against doing anything that would cause a fellow believer to “stumble.” In this congregation some members erroneously believe it would be sinful for them to eat meat that has been offered to idols. The action itself is acceptable and not harmful, Paul explains, but because some members believe that they would commit idolatry by eating such meat, the other members who do not have the same scruples about the food should refrain from eating since their actions might encourage the “weak” believers to act against their conscience. To wound someone else’s conscience in this way is sin, and in particular, a “sin against Christ” (8:13). An offense against another believer is an offense against Christ.

There is an important lesson here about the consideration we should show to fellow members of the body of Christ. At the Christian college where I teach there have been lively debates about Christian lifestyle: for example, about what types of clothing believers should wear, what types of movies and music they may enjoy, and in what contexts it might be acceptable for them to drink alcohol. These are certainly areas in which we can show proper sensitivity to another’s conscience. Paul is not saying that we should never disagree with fellow believers about these things, or never offend them at all. Rather, Paul is talking about idolatry, or the way in which Christians impact others’ relationships with God. In other words, by

our actions are we causing others to focus more upon God, or are we encouraging them to pursue worldly idols instead? We should look more broadly at the overall tenor of our lives. What message are we conveying by our priorities and through our conversations? Are we encouraging others to seek God first, or do we give a message that jobs, hobbies, or leisure

activities are more important? The point is not simply having correct doctrine, but using the truth to encourage and exhort others. Thus, Paul says, “Let all things be done for building up” (1 Corinthians 14:26).

Because we are members together in the body of Christ we have great hope that we can learn to care for and help one another, but we must admit that developing those relationships can be challenging. Differences in

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personal experience and culture, sensitivities based on prior woundedness, and sinful tendencies are but a part of the things that make developing genuine relationships difficult. Thus, life in the body is for “those courageous Christians who stick it out through the often messy process of interpersonal discord and conflict resolution.”⁹

The Christian community is characterized by a diversity of giftedness,

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ethnicity, gender, social status, and so on (1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11). The body of Christ reminds us that we are to be unified even while we maintain our various distinctions. Our goal is not uniformity, but a connectedness in Christ in which we care for one another, not because we are the same, but because we are similarly in Christ.

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Paul describes how Christ brought together people from two groups – Jews and Gentiles – that had been adversaries (Ephesians 2:11-22). Christ came to “reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility” (2:16). The Jewish Law forbade Jews from eating or intermarrying with Gentiles. As a result, Jews often had contempt for Gentiles, and Gentiles viewed Jews with suspicion and prejudice.¹⁰ However, Paul exhorts them to “lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (4:1-3). Where they were formerly enemies, now they are to care for one another by the “love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (3:19).

In their relationships with one another, believers are to follow Christ’s example. Thus, Paul urges the Philippians to “be of the same mind, having the same love” (Philippians 2:2) by imitating Christ,

who, though he was in the form of God,
did not count equality with God
as something to be exploited,

but emptied himself,
 taking the form of a slave,
 being born in human likeness.
 And being found in human form, he humbled himself
 and became obedient to the point of death—
 even death on a cross.

Philippians 2:6-8

Unity in the Church is achieved not simply by the proper functioning of the gifted members, but when the members love one another as Christ loved them. It calls for an attitude that focuses not on the self, but on the good of others.

The body of Christ, therefore, speaks of more than the functioning of the parts. The unity of believers—bonded together, reconciled, loving one another—is to be the hallmark of the Christian community. Obedience to the “new commandment” that Jesus gave his disciples—“Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another”—is how the world will know we are his disciples (John 13:34-35). This love does not simply mean a superficial “getting along” or a good working relationship, but rather the care, encouragement, and admonishment needed for the growth of the members and the intimate unity of the entire body. As Paul puts it:

But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.

Ephesians 4:15-16

NOTES

1 Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2009) 146-147.

2 For an excellent discussion and application of the image of the family of God, see Hellerman’s *When the Church Was a Family* and also *The Ancient Church as Family* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001).

3 Other passages referring to the body and spiritual manifestations include Romans 12:4-8 and Ephesians 4:4-16.

4 Robert Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community*, revised edition (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994) 59.

5 Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Physicists*, 1.80, translated by Richard Bett (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 20.

6 Gisela Striker, “The Role of *Oikeiosis* in Stoic Ethics,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 1 (1983), 145-167, here citing 143.

7 Thus, Paul says that one should pursue a gift such as prophecy, which edifies others, rather than tongues, which only edifies the tongues-speaker (1 Corinthians 14:1-5). He does not deny the benefit of personal edification, but when the community is gathered

together, the focus is on building up others. Thus, “Let all things be done for building up” (1 Corinthians 14:26).

8 Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987) 617.

9 Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*, 1.

10 Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary, 42 (Dallas, TX: Word, 1990) 142.



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