



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Whose Body? Which Membership?
(*Membership*, pp. 11-18)

Suggested Articles:

📖 Tending Christ's Body
(*Membership*, pp. 73-76)

📖 Rethinking Re-Baptism:
What It Means to Be a Member
(*Membership*, pp. 77-81)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

Institute for Faith and Learning
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97270
Waco, TX 76798-7270
Phone 1-254-710-4805
www.ChristianEthics.ws

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Whose Body? Which Membership?

Although we recognize that “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.

Prayer

O God, who cried over Jerusalem, who knelt to wash dusty, unclean feet, who spit in the dirt when mud was what the blind man needed,
redeem our tears, our unwillingness to kneel, our hands caked with our own mud.

O God, who tells stories,
redeem our obsession with our own stories and our own problems.
Teach us to be a community who cries together, kneels together, gets dirty together, and tells your story together.

Amen.

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Meditation†

The Christian community is an organic unity in which the members are vitally related to each other through participation in a common life. By love they are bound together in a mode of existence which is the antithesis of the individualistic mode of existence that constitutes the “world.” Only in this mode do they exist as the creator intended humanity to exist....

Jerome Murphy-O'Connor

Reflection

The Apostle Paul stresses the *unity* of members in the body of Christ—when there are tensions about the diversity of their gifts and roles (1 Corinthians 12; cf. Romans 12:3-8 and Ephesians 4:11-16), or disagreements among them about the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 10 and 11). Notice the basic relational assumption of the image: 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).

Michelle Lee-Barnewall traces some implications of viewing our discipleship in this way, as members of one *body* and as members of *Christ's* body.

- ▶ *Living as a member of a body.* The Greek philosopher Sextus Empiricus wrote, “in the case of unified bodies there is an affinity— if a finger is cut, the whole body is affected along with it.” Each body part is affected by what happens to the others. The Stoics had a term, *oikeiosis*, to describe how the parts of the body belong to one another. Likewise, “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,” Lee-Barnewall explains. She



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Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, is Senior Scholar in The Institute for Faith and Learning at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

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wonders, “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 Christ's body.* In the Church we are “not simply [joined] with others, but also with Christ,” Lee-Barnewall notes. “Therefore, when we consider our actions towards one another, we should consider our union with Christ as well as our solidarity with one another.” Paul mentions this when he objects to sexual sin (1 Corinthians 6:15-20). Also, when he warns against wounding the conscience of “weak” fellow believers and causing them to “stumble” into idolatry, he says this would be a “sin against Christ” (8:13).
- ▶ *Growing up into Christ, who is the Head.* Union with Christ through his body gives us “great hope that we can learn to care for and help one another, but we must admit that developing those relationships can be challenging,” writes Lee-Barnewall. Admittedly, we gravitate to those who are like us; this can make the differences among members – in giftedness, ethnicity, gender, social status, personal woundedness, sinful tendencies, and so on – into sources of tension. “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,” she continues. “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.”

Study Questions

1. How, according to Paul, are members in the body of Christ related to one another? Consider how this image points to both the diversity and the unity among members.
2. How does the Stoic concept of *oikeiosis* help us interpret Paul’s view of membership in the body of Christ?
3. Why is it important (for the body’s functioning) that we are members of the body of *Christ*? In other words, what is the practical significance of Jesus Christ being the head of the body which is the Church?
4. “How we tend to each other (or not) as members of the same body, the Body of Christ, is *personal to Jesus Christ*,” Amy Everett writes. How does she trace this theme in Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances to Peter by the Sea of Tiberias and to Saul/Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19)?
5. Christians agree that baptism is essential to becoming a member of the body of Christ. According to Jim Somerville, what is at stake between Christians who practice adult believer’s baptism and those who practice infant baptism and adult confirmation? Why does he urge congregations not to practice “re-baptism” of believers?

Departing Hymn: “United by God’s Grace”

† Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *Keys to First Corinthians: Revisiting the Major Issues* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 206-207.

Whose Body? Which Membership?

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand the Pauline image of the Church as the body of Christ.
2. To consider what it means to be a member of one *body*, and a member of *Christ's* body.
3. To discuss the issue of rebaptism in relation to church membership.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Membership (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

Begin with an Observation

To appreciate our distance from early Christian thinking about membership, Michelle Lee-Barnewall invites us to “consider how we identify ourselves in casual conversation.” She explains, “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.” (*Membership*, 12)

The early Christians embraced this group orientation when they described themselves as members of “the family of God” and “the body of Christ.” In this study, Lee-Barnewall challenges us to live into this understanding of membership today.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the unison prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

Christians understand that their moral lives are deeply informed by their membership in the body of Christ. This perspective is out of sync with contemporary individualism. In this study guide we explore the scriptural roots of this view in the writings of Paul. “Among other things, [the Pauline view] means that priorities are group-related,” Michelle Lee-Barnewall explains. “Loyalty to the group is more important than individual satisfaction, relational commitment more than autonomy, and corporate benefit more than individual gain.”

Study Questions

1. Paul usually employs the image of “the body of Christ” to emphasize the *unity* of members of the Church, Michelle Lee-Barnewall notes. Thus, members belong to one another (Romans 12:5; Ephesians 4:25), are members of one body (Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 12:12, 20; Ephesians 4:4), and they care for one another (1 Corinthians 12:25).
He also uses the image to encourage members to appreciate the *diversity* of one another’s gifts (Romans 12:6-7; 1 Corinthians 12:27-31) and ethnicities (1 Corinthians 12:12-13; Ephesians 3:5-6; cf. Galatians 3:26-28).
2. Lee-Barnewall cites the definition of *oikeiosis* as “recognition and appreciation of something as belonging to one.” The Stoic notion is that we will care for those things and people that “belong” to us. Something like this relation holds among members of the body of Christ (Romans 12:5; Ephesians 4:25). Thus, Paul writes, “members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (1 Corinthians 12:25-26).
3. Lee-Barnewall emphasizes two points of practical significance in regard to our being members of the body of *Christ*. First, Christ directs and empowers the actions of the obedient body members, and this gives us “hope that we can learn to care for and help one another.” Second, Christ models the sort of love that we are called to have toward one another.
4. As Peter answers Jesus three times “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you,” Jesus commands him, “Then feed/tend my sheep” (John 21:15-17). Amy Everett notes, “Jesus teaches Peter that if he loves him, then Peter will take care of the brothers and sisters with whom he shares this fellowship.” As Saul is on his way to persecute Christians in Damascus, he hears a voice from heaven say, “I am Jesus, *whom you are persecuting*” (Acts 9:5). Everett says, “Saul was not just conspiring against a band of misguided Jews, but against Jesus the Christ, now exalted in heaven, and yet present with and within his disciples.” Both stories comport well with the Pauline teaching that we are mutually interdependent members of Christ’s body.
5. Believer’s baptism is usually “by *immersion* (mode) *after* a profession of faith (sequence),” Jim Somerville notes. Other modes of baptism are sprinkling or pouring water over the head, and the baptism of infants occurs before the member’s profession of faith. As his Baptist congregation debated ending the practice of re-baptizing believers who had not been immersed after their profession of faith, he writes, “I began to think about a “continuum” of grace in which we recognize that even before a child is born – and before she has done one thing right or wrong – God loves her and wants her for his own. At some point – maybe around the age of twelve or thirteen – that child may be able to apprehend God’s grace, and accept it for the gift that it is. But these two things are simply the two ends of a single continuum, and while some Christians focus on the *giving* of grace through infant baptism, others focus on the *receiving* of grace through believer’s baptism.”

Departing Hymn

“United by God’s Grace” can be found on pp. 46-47 of *Membership*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.