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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

Paul's Use of the Analogy of the Body of Christ—

With Special Reference to 1 Corinthians 12

by Brian Daines

Mr. Daines, a graduate in Sociology and Biblical Studies of the University of Sheffield, looks afresh at Paul's presentation of the church as the body of Christ and concludes that this is one of a number of analogies and one that should not be pressed beyond the limits within which Paul uses it.

THE subject of the church as the Body of Christ in Pauline theology is one which has received a great deal of attention and has produced a wide divergence in views¹. As a consequence, this essay cannot hope either to summarize the work done in this area or to enter into detailed debate with the various positions that have been adopted. We shall approach the problem from the perspectives of how Paul uses the Body of Christ as an analogy and whether more than an analogy is implied. In doing this our emphasis will be on understanding Paul's use of the Body of Christ concept in the context of his letters and against the background of the situation of the churches to which he was writing. As the analogy is worked out most fully in 1 Corinthians 12, this provides a suitable focus for discussion.

As Ruef notes², the two main poles around which the debate about the Body of Christ concept in Paul has taken place are, on the one hand, that it is a key, if not the key, in Paul's theology³, and, on the other, that it is not a key term but one of four terms which Paul uses to describe the unity of the church⁴. Nelson puts it thus: "According to the nature of one's interpretation of the New Testament language and theology, the Body of Christ is either a very suggestive, though often limited and misleading, metaphor, or else it is the name of a supernatural entity, possessing both human and divine nature, which is related to Christ in a way which may be called

1 For a summary of material on the subject see: Jewett, R., *Paul's Anthropological Terms* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), pp. 201-304.

2 Ruef, J., *Paul's First Letter to Corinth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 129.

3 For example see: Newbigin, L., *The Household of God* (London: SCM, 1953), pp. 60-86.

4 See Cerfaux, L., *The Church in the Theology of St. Paul* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1959), pp. 239-43.

'mystical' or 'mysterious' ".⁵ Against this background we shall now move to consider Paul's usage of the term in his letters.

1 Corinthians 12.

Best⁶ suggests that at first reading verses 12-17 of this chapter seem to indicate that the church is really the Body of Christ and not just like his Body but proposes three objections to this understanding. First, throughout the Old and New Testaments metaphors are used in a very vivid and concrete way without more than a metaphor being implied. For example in Jeremiah 50: 6 or Isaiah 5: 7 no one seriously believes that we are meant to understand more than a metaphor. This principle applies also in the New Testament, for example in John 10: 7 and Revelation 1: 20. Secondly, within the writing of Paul, the description of the church as the Body of Christ involves two pictures. In 1 Corinthians 12: 21 the head is an ordinary member of the body whereas in Colossians 1: 18 and 2: 19 the head is Christ. This is an important point to which we shall have cause to return later. Finally, phrases like "Body of Christ" and "in Christ" are to be related to the idea of corporate personality of Christ and believers and therefore some elements in Paul's usage which at first sight seem mystical or metaphysical need not be so.

Best concludes: "Thus we feel justified in describing the church as the Body of Christ in a metaphorical sense. Regarded from one point of view it is the Body of Christ; from other points of view it is not. Such a solution implies that we cannot extend the conception just as we please. We have no right to speculate with it and draw from it conclusions which are not in Paul and then father them on Paul; if we are to be faithful to Paul we must look at it from the same point of view as he does and use it for the same purpose as he does. This does not mean that all extensions are wrong, but we cannot claim Paul's support for them no matter how natural they may seem to us."⁷

In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul introduces the idea of the church as the Body of Christ in the context of a discussion of spiritual gifts. It seems likely that he was speaking out against a situation where those with a spiritual gift (probably speaking in tongues) were claiming superiority to other believers, and those without such a gift were feeling superfluous because of its absence⁸. The introduction of the analogy at this point is a means to an end—a description of a

⁵ Nelson, J. R., *The Realm of Redemption* (London: Epworth Press, 6th edit., 1963), p. 101.

⁶ Best, E., *One Body in Christ* (London: SPCK, 1955), pp. 98-100.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁸ Cf. Gale, G. M., *The Use of Analogy in the Letters of Paul* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), p. 116, and Best, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

proper view of the working of the gifts of the Spirit in the church⁹ and not the proposal of a valid description of the structure of the church as such. The point needed to be made in a concrete way and the body analogy achieves this by showing first that diversity is necessary in the body, and then that the members of the body are interdependent and interrelated.

Gale¹⁰ locates several elements in the analogy which evidence the influence of the situation on its use. Among these are:

- (i) The inclusion of v. 13 after the initial analogical statement in v. 12 shows that something other than the picture of the human body occupied the central position in Paul's mind. This was an explanation of how this unity in diversity came into being.
- (ii) Reflection on the physical body would not suggest even the possibility that one member or another might not "belong to the body" (vv. 15, 16.).
- (iii) The idea of discord is not a possibility within the physical body (v. 25).
- (iv) Members of the physical body cannot "have the same care for one another" (v. 25), nor strictly speaking can they "suffer together" or "rejoice together" (v. 26).

All this indicates that Paul has introduced the analogy for a polemical purpose. The fact that the questions posed in vv. 15-17 are so ludicrous with reference to the physical body is part of the effectiveness of the analogy as well as an indication that Paul was not providing a rational, carefully thought-out model to account for the phenomenon of the church. Although members of the physical body are personified, there is no completely worked out allegory. Neither is there any attempt to represent different parts of the body as different people or sections of the church community at Corinth¹¹. Paul develops the analogy only to the point (and in the directions) that he needs in order to further his arguments concerning spiritual gifts. The analogy is therefore subordinate to his main purpose.

Other References in 1 Corinthians.

In 1 Cor. 6: 15 the term "Body of Christ" is not used but there is the idea that "your bodies are members of Christ". Paul uses this as part of an argument that, if we are united with Christ, then this is incompatible with union with a prostitute. It is not possible here to discuss all the issues raised by 1 Cor. 10: 16, 17¹². The reference in

⁹ Cf. Ruef, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

¹⁰ Gale, *op. cit.*, pp. 121-4.

¹¹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 125.

¹² See Best, *op. cit.*, pp. 87-91, 106-111, who discusses some of the problems associated with these verses.

v. 16 is probably to be understood in its physical aspect in parallel to the reference to the blood of Christ¹³. At least Paul is using the term "Body of Christ" in a different way from when he develops the analogy in chapter 12. Again in v. 17 the term is not used in full, but there is the notion that "we who are many are one body". In this verse Paul is expressing the unity of Christians by referring to the fact that all share the same loaf at the Lord's Supper, and this loaf represents Christ's physical body. The immediate context is an explanation by the apostle that unity must express itself in love in respect for other's scruples¹⁴.

This discussion of references outside chapter 12 in 1 Corinthians has shown that Paul uses "Body of Christ" or aspects of a body metaphor as steps in his main argument and they are best understood as carrying just a metaphorical sense. His use of the analogy is very limited and it does not receive development in the same way as in chapter 12.

Romans

Paul uses the analogy of the body in Romans 12 in the context of an exhortation to the believers at Rome to serve one another¹⁵. The main points that he draws out are that the members of the body do not have the same function and, though individual, belong to each other¹⁶. Here again Paul's use of the analogy is as a contribution to his main argument. It is significant here that the term "Body of Christ" is not used although the analogy is developed in a similar way to that found in 1 Corinthians 12.

Colossians.

The use of the analogy in Colossians represents a different line of development in response to a different situation. In Col. 1: 18 it is used in the context of a Christological hymn proclaiming Christ as head of all things and it is natural for Paul to point to Christ as the head of the church. He does this by calling him "the head of the body", thereby indicating a relationship of authority as well as of inseparability¹⁷. In Col. 2: 18 Paul introduces the analogy again to show the members of the church at Colossae their unity with Christ and with each other, which needed to be affirmed in the light of the gnostic heresy present in the church. Presumably to have developed the analogy along the same lines as in 1 Corinthians 12 would have

¹³ Cf. Barrett, C. K., *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: A. & C. Black, 1968), p. 233.

¹⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 234-5.

¹⁵ Cf. Barrett, C. K., *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (London: A. & C. Black, 1962), p. 236.

¹⁶ The similarity of the context here to that in 1 Corinthians 12 is pointed out by Best, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

¹⁷ Cf. Moule, C. F. D., *The Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon* (Cambridge: University Press, 1957), p. 68.

been equally appropriate for this purpose, but having used the idea of Christ as the head in chapter 1, it would be natural for him to be consistent, as well as to emphasize a point already made. The use of the term "body" in Col. 3: 15 would seem to be metaphorical, though overtones of the ideas implied in Col. 1: 18 and 2: 18 should not be excluded from our understanding of this verse.

Therefore, in this letter, Paul develops the idea of the church as the Body of Christ in a different way to that found in the letter to the Corinthians, but still to only a very limited degree. His purpose in using it is to portray Christ as head of the Church and to assure the believers at Colossae of their unity with Christ and with each other. This need not be seen as a change or development in Paul's doctrine of the church, but rather should be viewed as the use of a previously applied analogy worked out in a different way for a different situation. Once more his use of the analogy can be seen to be subordinate to the main lines of argument in the letter¹⁸.

Ephesians.

The first thing to be noted in connection with the letter to Ephesus is that, whereas in the letters we have already looked at the term "body" is used not only of the church but also in other ways, in Ephesians it is employed exclusively in connection with the church¹⁹. Both Eph. 2: 16 and 4: 4 use the term "body" and not "Body of Christ". The former reference appears to be a metaphorical use in connection with the unity of the church as achieved through the cross²⁰. The latter is a similar usage designed to show the unity of the Spirit as already present as a gift in the church²¹.

The employment by the writer of "Body of Christ" in Eph. 4: 12 is in the context of the building up and unity of the church and the analogy is developed in verses 15 and 16. The use of the analogy in connection with Christ's gifts to the church is a parallel to 1 Corinthians 12 and the idea of Christ as the head has an affinity with the thought of Colossians. The confusion of metaphors in verse 12 may be due to *oikodomē* having ceased to suggest its primary meaning to the apostle²², but an alternative understanding is that the idea of "Body of Christ" has taken on more than a metaphorical or analogical role.

18 A similar point is made by: Simpson, E. K., & Bruce, F. F., *Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1957), p. 204.

19 This is pointed out by Furnish, V. P., *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* (London: Collins, 1972), p. 838.

20 This interpretation is discussed by Abbot, T. K., *The Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1897), p. 66.

21 See Furnish, *loc. cit.*, p. 841 and Abbott, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

22 Abbott, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

The final passage containing the Body of Christ analogy is Eph. 5: 21-33. The context here is teaching concerning how members of the church should be subject to one another. The writer begins by using Christ's relationship with the church to show what the wife's relationship to her husband should be. As this theme is developed, he appears to become taken up with the subject of the church and as we read on it is not clear what his basic subject is and what are metaphors and analogies. The omission of verses 23 to 33 in no way affects the logic of the writer's argument concerning subjection to one another and a good case can be made out for seeing this digression as having the church as its primary subject.

The reference to "a great mystery" (v. 29) should not be taken as meaning a mysterious thing or saying, but has the sense; "This doctrine of revelation is an important or profound one"²³. The first mention of "body" in this section (v. 23) seems to be introduced as a commonplace, perhaps suggested by the use of the idea of Christ as the head of the church²⁴.

The use of the concept of Body of Christ in Ephesians, whilst showing similarities to 1 Corinthians and Colossians, represents a departure from that found in the other epistles which we have considered. The overall impression created is that "Body of Christ" is used as more than an analogy or metaphor, although still only in a limited sense. It is associated with the unity of the church, subjection to one another, and the church being filled with the fulness of Christ. The use of the concept is less tied to the needs of the context in Ephesians and this is particularly evident in chapter 5. It should be noted, though, that the uses of "Body of Christ" in this letter provide no *carte blanche* for the development of the analogy and in connection with this it is important to note that the analogical elements in Ephesians are not worked out to the extent that they are in 1 Corinthians 12.

Discussion.

Our examination of these letters has shown the use of the analogy of the Body of Christ to be limited, both in scope and application. Except for Ephesians, whose authorship is disputed, the Pauline letters use the Body of Christ just as an analogy or metaphor in the same way as the seed ground or building which Paul also employs to describe the church²⁵. The analogy is developed in different directions according to the context, and the nature and extent of the development is governed by the point that Paul is wishing to make. There is a reasonable case for arguing that in Ephesians the Body of

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

²⁴ Cf. Eph. 1: 22, 23; 4: 15, 16.

²⁵ This is the view of Cerfaux, *op. cit.*, pp. 239-43.

Christ concept is used as more than an analogy and less dependence on context is shown. It would be an exaggeration to see it as a mystical or metaphysical concept, though, and Eph. 5: 32 should not be interpreted in accordance with such a view. The most that can be said is that the thought in Ephesians is further in this direction than that of the other letters which we have examined. It is significant that 1 Corinthians 12 contains not only the furthest development of analogical elements, but also the most evidence that "Body of Christ" is being used in only an analogical sense.

The Question of Extension.

We now turn to examine the possibility, raised for example by Best²⁶, that not all extensions of the body analogy beyond what is found in the New Testament are necessarily wrong. In this context four ways of extending the Body of Christ analogy will be considered. The concept is often extended to the point where being "in Christ" becomes equated with belonging to the visible church organization and the logical concomitant of this is to see the rite of baptism as the means by which individuals are incorporated into the Body.

However, Paul would not allow that any external act could result in itself in a person being "in Christ"²⁷. For example to the Galatians he says: "Now I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you" (5: 2)²⁸. Whiteley emphasizes that Paul's teaching on baptism must always be viewed in close conjunction with his teaching on faith in Christ and that he "does not regard baptism as something which acts mechanically"²⁹. Therefore an extension of the Body of Christ analogy in this way brings us into conflict with Paul's view of baptism and ultimately with his principle of justification by faith.

An alternative direction in which the concept can be extended is towards an authoritarian view of the church organization, on the basis of its use in Ephesians 5 in the context of believers being subject to one another. Dillistone makes a comment relevant to this view: "It cannot, in fact, be too strongly emphasized that any organism theory whether in Church or State, interpreted literally and biologically, must result finally in the terrible extremes of modern totalitarianism."³⁰ Paul's letters as a whole witness to a concern,

²⁶ Best, op. cit., p. 100.

²⁷ This point is substantiated by: Dunn, J. D. G., *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (London: SCM, 1970), Part III.

²⁸ See also Romans 4.

²⁹ Whiteley, D. E. H., *The Theology of St. Paul* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1964), p. 172.

³⁰ Dillistone, F. W., "How is the Church Christ's Body?" *Theology Today* 2 (1948), p. 60.

while not denying his status and authority as an apostle, to win over his readers by argument and appeal rather than to foster a view of church authority with totalitarian elements.

A very similar use of the Body of Christ concept can lead to a static view of the functioning of the church where anything opposed to the *status quo* is seen as detrimental to the purposes of Christ for the church because it disturbs the organismic functioning of the community. Again Paul would not have been in sympathy with this as he recognized that there was a time for conflict³¹, even among apostles, when a vital issue was at stake. "But when Cephas came to Antioch I opposed him to his face" (Gal. 2: 11).³²

Alternatively, the Body of Christ analogy can be applied to all believers in the sense of implying a mystic union of those who are in Christ. Although the idea of the unity of all believers is found in the New Testament³³, it does not seem very meaningful to use the Body of Christ analogy to represent this unity because it finds no practical outworking in terms of interdependence and division of function (1 Cor. 12: 12-31), serving each other (Rom. 12: 3-8), and accepting each other (Col. 2: 16-19). "Body of Christ" is used in the New Testament essentially to make practical points and to turn it into a mystical concept relating to the aggregate of individual believers rather than to congregations is to turn it into something completely different.

This exploration of possible extensions of the body analogy shows the dangers associated with such an exercise. In all four cases the result has been to produce ideas which are out of harmony with other aspects of Pauline or New Testament theology. It therefore seems wise not to extend the Body of Christ analogy beyond what we have seen is a very limited usage in the New Testament.

Sheffield

³¹ Galatians and 1 Corinthians, for example, show Paul in verbal conflict with groups of believers.

³² See also Acts 15: 36-40 for an account of Paul and Barnabas in conflict.

³³ Eg. John 17: 20 f.