

Study 5. The Body of Christ

Becoming a Disciple Series

Warm-up Question: What is your most memorable experience of working with a group of people for a common cause or job? What made it special?

One does not get far in learning to be a disciple without relating to others in the church. We are all at different levels in our faith walk. Some are young in the Lord and need feeding the basics milk of the Word of God (Hebrews 5:12-13), while others need solid food (Hebrews 5:14), so they can grow to the point where they can feed others. The church must help believers mature, for only adult sheep reproduce. It is a law of reproduction that one can only reproduce others when one reaches a stage of maturity to be able to care for the one born. Even Jesus took three years of training His disciples before He left them to carry on His work. Every church needs mature Christians to care for the young.

Young Christians still acting out of relational or emotional hurts need much mercy and patience. It is essential not to allow the enemy to come between mature believers and those still young in the faith that need the milk of the Word to grow. Satan loves to create division in the Body of Christ and destroy the church's testimony. Wherever God is at work, there will likely also be a fair amount of "mess." This disorder should not surprise us.

In the early days of the sixties and early seventies of the Jesus movement in California, many long-haired hippies were drawn by the Holy Spirit into churches in a time of revival, but many refused to sit in pews. They wanted to sit on the floor and listen and worship. These actions irritated some of the older elders and deacons in many churches to the point where they wanted these young newcomers thrown out of the churches for not behaving 'properly.' What is more important? Clean empty church buildings or those full of passionate, hungry, open-hearted young Christians? Some of those young people, viewed as unkempt and non-conformists by the older generation of their day, are strong church leaders today. To be disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, we must be wet clay to the Spirit that He might mold us and shape us to bring others into the Body of Christ.

What is the Body of Christ?

¹²Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form **one body**, so it is with Christ. ¹³For **we were all** baptized by one Spirit so as to form **one body**—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and **we were all** given the one Spirit to drink (1 Corinthians 12:12-13).

I have been living in the United States since 2000 (I am originally from England). Since then, I have noticed Americans tend to live in a somewhat isolated and self-reliant way. Perhaps it has just been my experience as an Englishman, growing up in my faith in the House Church Movement in the late '70s and '80s. English Christians seem to link arms more easily with others due to the culture in which they are brought up. For the most part, Europeans seem more community-oriented, which may be out of need. Americans are used to a more independent way of life, which also affects church community life. In my early years as a young Christian in England, I regularly experienced help in my daily life from my brothers and sisters in Christ. I had help in fixing my

car; people shared their gardening tools; we loaned eggs or flour from our next-door neighbors to make pancakes for breakfast, etc. Of course, it can also make a difference whether you live in a rural area or a city, but generally speaking, most American Christians would not think of asking their neighbors for help unless in a crisis. I suspect my experience is influenced by the fact that most of my time in America has been spent in a church of around 5000 believers, but I have also noticed a similar mindset in smaller churches I have taught and served.

The New Testament holds up a different set of values to us as believers; it says that believers are family—the family of God, “**Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor” (1 Peter 2:17)**. This love that Peter mentions is not to be in word only but in deed. Love is not a noun but an action word, a verb. Peter is not seeking to drum up emotions in those he is writing; he is instructing them to work out among themselves the reality that they are a family of believers in a relationship together because of what Christ has done. Believing the truth of a crucified Savior paying the penalty of our sin for us by His blood is that something beautiful happens at the core of our lives. Christ takes up residence in the temple of our hearts, and the Spirit baptizes us into the spiritual body of Christ.

What does it mean to be baptized into the Body of Christ? The Greek word *baptizō* means to dip, dye, immerse, plunge or submerge. The word *baptized* “carries the double connotation of ‘being initiated into’ and being ‘overwhelmed by.’” For example, contemporary secular Greek sources spoke of a submerged ship being 'baptized.' That ship was not merely 'initiated into' water but thoroughly 'overwhelmed' by water. Indeed, we can go on to say that it was 'made to drink of' the water, i.e., the water was inside the ship as well as the vessel being underneath the water. Paul seems to be saying both that Christians are in the Holy Spirit and that the Holy Spirit is in Christians, parallel to our being in Christ and Christ being in us."¹

⁴For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others (Romans 12:4-5).

Just as a body has many parts, many members, so we that belong to Christ are part of this spiritual body of Christ. It is an organic unit. No matter how different we are, whether Jew or Gentile, slave or free, we have all been given the same Spirit to drink. Paul, the apostle, says that all those who belong to Christ, have been baptized by the Spirit into *the* spiritual Body of Christ when we believed (1 Corinthians 12:13). We can't see this invisible body, but there is an organic unity we each have with other believers in Christ. He is the Vine, and we are the branches (John 15). The Spirit of God has made us one, with many churches united into one spiritual organism, the Body of Christ, composed of all believers worldwide. There won't be a distinction among believers at the church's rapture; we will all go together simultaneously when Christ comes for His Church.

Although we are all different, we are one body. Some churches emphasize various doctrines just as there are many facets of a diamond, but there is only one Body of Christ. If you believe in Christ, you and I are spiritually connected in some mysterious way. With that union, there is often an awareness of other people's needs that are known only through the Spirit. Some would call it an inner consciousness. Others would say that it is a spiritual gift—perhaps a word or message of

¹ The Message of 1 Corinthians: *Life in the Local Church* (Downers Grove, Ill. Intervarsity Press, 1965), p.211.

knowledge that the Spirit gives (1 Corinthians 12:8). The more a person acts upon those revelatory pictures the Spirit gives, the more precise the images, dreams, and visions become.

Have you ever had the experience of knowing something about another person you weren't told about in the usual way? Maybe God revealed it to you through intuition or a dream or vision? It could be a close relationship, a friend, or a stranger. Did you act on that knowledge or impulse?

Many Parts but One Body

¹⁴Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. ¹⁵Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁶And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. ¹⁹If they were all one part, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many parts, but one body. ²¹The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” ²²On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, ²⁴while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, ²⁵so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other (1 Corinthians 12:14-25).

How big was the Corinthian church when Paul wrote the letter we call 1 Corinthians? We have no way of knowing, but whatever the size, they were still able to build close relationships and even eat a meal together as part of their corporate meeting (1 Corinthians 11:17-22). The apostle Paul, the writer of 1 Corinthians, has a picture in his mind that he describes. He sees them as a corporate body of Christ, representing the Lord Jesus to their city. He describes each of them as needing one another, with no one more valuable than another. In his mind’s eye, he recalls certain weaker ones, but then he writes that they, too, are indispensable. He doesn't name names but thinks of specific individuals as parts of the body that shouldn't have upfront visibility concerning people outside the church. He calls them "parts that are unpresentable," saying they should be treated with special modesty. His concern is focused on ensuring that each person is valued, especially those who have come to the church from a problematic background, are beaten down, and lack self-esteem. We should give greater honor and respect to those individuals and build them up in love by each person caring for one another. Paul is thoughtful in saying that if we belong to Christ, we all have a part in the work of the church to care for one another and build one another up—this is not the work of a paid specialist—this is the work of the church, to watch and shepherd one another.

What do you think is behind Paul’s thought when he says that God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as He wanted them to be? (verses 18-19).

Paul was writing from the city of Ephesus, situated in the Southwest corner of what is now the country of Turkey. Corinth was a highly populated port city not far from Athens, Greece. His

concern was that Satan should not have the opportunity to cause division among them. He says, “so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other” (1 Corinthians 12:25). One of the strategies of Satan is to cause division among a body of believers and separate the corporate expression of the life of Jesus in their midst. In the previous chapter (11), he reprimands them for what was happening during the meal they ate together as part of their meeting.

This meal wasn't just a piece of bread dipped into a glass of grape juice; this was a proper meal that believers shared as part of their meeting. It was called the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:20, and in Jude 1:12, it was called the "love feast." In America, we would call it a potluck dinner. Communion was part of this meal where they would break bread together, celebrate, and remember all that the Lord has done for us. The apostle tells them off because some with more money were eating the best of the food and even getting drunk before the poorer ones got there (1 Corinthians 11:21). Paul saw that they needed to understand that the corporate expression of the life of Christ within their body was damaged by their lack of care and concern for their brothers and sisters in Christ. The Lord was judging this attitude among them—yet they did not realize it. Paul was clear in his words:

²⁷So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. ²⁹For those who eat and drink **without discerning the body of Christ** eat and drink judgment on themselves. ³⁰That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. ³¹But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment. ³²Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world. ³³**So then**, my brothers and sisters, **when you gather to eat, you should all eat together**. ³⁴Anyone who is hungry should eat something at home, **so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment** (1 Corinthians 11:27-34).

It is vital for us to see that we have not been saved to be on our own. This world's spirit seeks to keep us alone and separate from the Body of Christ. There is no power when there is a divisive spirit among us. We must be careful when discussing others in the Body of Christ. If they are believers in Christ, then we are one with them, and they with us. There is a worldwide corporate body of believers and the local expression of the Body of Christ working together to reveal the Lord Jesus to our cities and towns.

The Ligaments of the Body

Every one of us has a part to play in building up our brothers and sisters in Christ, but what does Paul mean when he talks about supporting ligaments?

¹⁵Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶From him the whole body, **joined** and held together by every **supporting ligament**, **grows and builds itself up** in love, as **each part does its work** (Ephesians 4:15-16).

How is the whole body joined and held together? How does it grow and build itself?

In the Book of Ephesians, Paul again uses the body analogy. We will grow as disciples to maturity as we are connected to the Lord Jesus and allow His life to flow through the corporate Body of Christ. There are those in our midst that God uses to bring structure and connection with one another. He calls them ligaments (v. 16). What is a ligament? Ligaments connect bones to other bones to form a joint. There is no structure or connection to the body without ligaments. Paul is probably referring to those whom God gives responsibility and gifting as leaders:

¹¹So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹²**to equip his people for works of service**, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³until **we all reach unity** in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and **become mature**, attaining to the **whole measure** of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13).

God is involved, even today, in gifting and using specific individuals as servants to equip the body for its corporate task of ministry to the area where the local church is based. Often in today's church, these individuals are expected to do the work of the ministry, but that is not what the Word of God says. As equippers and trainers, they are to do the work of the ministry, but more than that, they are to model behavior to train and equip others. All the Body of Christ is to be involved in the work of the ministry by serving and building up the church, as well as serving outside the church, their friends, relatives, and acquaintances.

Do you know what part you are given in the analogy of a body? Can a person's role in the Body of Christ change?

Rewards Shared Among the Body of Christ

I believe that, as a local body, when we get home to be with the Lord and celebrate with one another, there will be corporate rewards we will share.

⁴⁰“Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. ⁴²And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward” (Matthew 10:40-42).

All those who enter into the corporate expression of the life of Christ that we enjoy, and every fruitful work that happens because of this expression, do not think that only the front person shall enjoy the reward. When it comes time to reward His servants, our Lord will reward us individually, but there will also be corporate rewards. The man that leads a great evangelist to the Lord, don't you think he will enjoy some of the fruits of the evangelist's labor? Even if our part was as small as giving a drink of water to those who labor to gain the lost, we enter into the fruits of their labor due to being part of the Body of Christ with them. We might not be an eye or a hand—the seen parts of the Body, but each of us has our role in being the expression of the local Body of Christ,

as we each do our part.

King David exhibited the heart of God and showed forth this principle of equal rewards after a terrible trial happened to him and the six hundred men with him. David and his men returned to their village, Ziklag, where they lived safely from King Saul, only to find that an Amalekite raiding party had attacked their town and kidnapped all their families, the animals, and everything else that they had. David set off in hot pursuit of the raiding party, but because of the distance involved and the heavyweights they were carrying, a third of the men grew too tired to carry on. Two hundred of the men stopped at a point on the way, the Besor Valley, and all their heavy gear was left with them while four hundred men carried on pursuing the raiding party:

¹⁸David recovered everything the Amalekites had taken, including his two wives. ¹⁹Nothing was missing: young or old, boy or girl, plunder or anything else they had taken. David brought everything back. ²⁰He took all the flocks and herds, and his men drove them ahead of the other livestock, saying, “This is David’s plunder.” ²¹Then David came to the two hundred men who had been too exhausted to follow him and who were left behind at the Besor Valley. They came out to meet David and the men with him. As David and his men approached, he asked them how they were. ²²But all the evil men and troublemakers among David’s followers said, “Because they did not go out with us, we will not share with them the plunder we recovered. However, each man may take his wife and children and go.” ²³David replied, “No, my brothers, you must not do that with what the LORD has given us. He has protected us and delivered into our hands the raiding party that came against us. ²⁴Who will listen to what you say? The share of the man who stayed with the supplies is to be the same as that of him who went down to the battle. All will share alike.” ²⁵David made this a statute and ordinance for Israel from that day to this (1 Samuel 30:18-25).

After restoring every man to his family, David shared the loot found in the Amalekite camp equally. It wasn't just those engaged in the battle that shared in the spoils of war; they shared all the good things equally with those who stayed behind in support. This same principle will be done, I believe, by the Son of David, the Lord Jesus Christ. As the local Body of Christ, all we do together to reach out to those around us and draw them in will share in the harvest at the end of the age. ⁹For it is written in the Law of Moses: “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.” Is it about oxen that God is concerned? ¹⁰Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because whoever plows and threshes should be able to do so in the hope **of sharing in the harvest** (1 Corinthians 9:9-10).

What a glorious day that will be!

Prayer: Father, thank you for calling me to be a part of the family of God, the Body of Christ. Please equip and train me to be all I can be and do my part in building the Body. Amen!

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