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CHRISTIAN FOUNDATIONS

THE BODY OF CHRIST
A NEW TESTAMENT IMAGE OF THE CHURCH

by

ALAN COLE

HODDER AND STOUGHTON

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that all who profess and call themselves be led into the way of truth, and hold the of spirit, in the bond of peace, and in life' (Prayer for all Conditions of men).

So unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon build my church; and the gates of hell shall (Mt. 16: 18).

and said unto them, Destroy this temple, evil I will raise it ... But he spake of the (Jn. 2: 19-21).

and added to the church daily such as should (Acts 2: 47). therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, which he hath purchased with his blood; all things under his feet, and gave him to the church, which is his body, (Eph. 1: 22f.).

But I speak concerning the Church' (Eph. 5: 31-32). Therefore it should be realized that this metaphor of the Body is but one of many metaphors used in the New Testament to help us grasp the concept of the Church. That in itself means that it is no exclusive or exhaustive picture: otherwise there would scarcely have been need for the hundred and more other images which are also used to give meaning to this same concept. True, 'the Body' is far more than a passing illustration; it might even be described

as a dominant concept, especially in Paul; and this means that it must be weighed carefully. But there are other 'dominating images' in the pages of the New Testament: God's spiritual temple, the bride of Christ, the flock of God, the household of God, to choose a few, are scarcely less pervasive; and he would be a bold theologian who would attempt to decide which is the most important amongst them.

Perhaps it is not unfair to say that a continual danger for the Church of God (even, perhaps indeed especially, in days when it is biblically minded) is to pursue one biblical metaphor to the neglect of the others with which the Bible balances it. Theological distortions easily follow, as the metaphor is pushed further than the direct New Testament evidence warrants. Presumably, each metaphor is designed to illustrate certain aspects of the truth, and those aspects alone: hence we may not assume that the particular word chosen can be used in all its possible meanings, and shades of meanings, to convey further theological revelations above and beyond actual biblical statements. Such extrapolations can only lead at best to analogical thinking (which is usually dangerous), and at worst to emotional thinking (which is always pernicious). The biblical exegesis of the Middle Ages, for example, is full of instances of both; we can see the error here, but it is part of the blindness native to fallen man that we do not see the corresponding error in ourselves.

We shall take it, then, that every biblical metaphor has its 'strong points', or 'area of validity'. We shall take this latter to be the area of meaning to which attention is specifically called in the New Testament, and the 'strong points' to be those which are actually invoked there for conveying theological truth. We shall take it, as a corollary of the above, that every such metaphor has also its 'weak points', or areas where its application would be invalid, and would lead us at best to a distortion of truth, and at worst into error. These latter we take to be the areas where Scripture is silent, the points where Scripture makes no attempt to press the metaphor home, logical though such application might seem to be in our eyes.

The complexity of the problem of handling biblical metaphors is increased by the fact that every age has its favourite metaphors (all, of course, drawn from the common biblical 'pool') which it develops almost to the exclusion of other aspects of revelation, and -- more serious -- upon which it bases its theology. Further, the particular metaphors which are the favourites of any one age are usually dictated by the circumstances and felt needs of the Church in that age, although sometimes it is difficult to decide which came first, the ecclesiastical hen or the theological egg. For example, did the widespread occurrence of celibacy in the medieval Church account for the fondness of using the image 'the Bride of Christ' for the church? Or did the continual use of this image itself encourage the already widespread monastic ideal? These, however, are questions either for the Church historian or for the psychologist, and they need not detain us now.

The impulse to seek metaphors that speak to present need is, of course, very natural, and not in any sense wrong; it merely reflects the facts that, on the one hand, metaphors bring home to us the emotive power of the thoughts which they embody, and, on the other, that, in our need, the Spirit leads us to those aspects of God's Word that are, in the here and now, relevant to that need, without in any way impugning the nature and character of other aspects, or denying them an equal place in God's revelation. We can see this in the New Testament epistles, where Paul in wrestling with practical problems turns to metaphorical aspects of truth which had theological bearing on the immediate situation -- compare the successive use of the 'building', 'body', and 'bride' metaphors in Ephesians, for instance (compare Eph. 2: 10ff., 4: 4-16, 5: 22-33). 4

All this is but a warning not to allow our theological thinking to be dominated by that which is popular or taken for granted in our own age: it may be true, but it will certainly not be the whole truth. As a late English theologian
used to say, for every new book that we read, we should read two old books, to correct our perspective. We shall always remain children of our age — if we did not, we should neither be able to understand it (let alone live in it) nor to reach it with the Gospel — but if we are only children of our age, the timeless Gospel that we bring will be mangled and truncated, tailored and cut down to fit the wishes and whims of the time. If we are not constantly questioning the assumptions of our age, including current fashions of thought in the Church itself, our understanding of God’s truth will certainly be lopsided, and perhaps corrupted altogether. Thoughtful churchmen of all schools of thought will agree with this in broad outline, although they may not all agree with us as to its bearing on the matter in hand.

'THE BODY': A DOMINANT METAPHOR

Nothing, certainly, is more plain than that the concept of the Church as the Body of Christ dominates our Christian thinking about the Church today, almost to the exclusion of other symbols. The greater part of our current ecclesiology is based upon it. Can we doubt, now, that our choice of this metaphor is dictated by the theological and sociological climate of our time — specifically, by the concern for Christian community that has grown up in face of modern secularism, Communism, and the world-wide break-up of long-established social units? This is not to say that the use of the metaphor is wrong (for it is clearly biblical, and equally clearly dominant), but it is to remind ourselves that the metaphor may well get out of proportion unless it is complemented.

Nor again is this to deny that it is the Holy Spirit who has directed the mind of the Church to this particular metaphor in this particular age; for that would be to deny the reality of His promised work of bringing all things to our remembrance, standing by us as our Advocate in hours of need (Jn. 14: 26, Mt. 10: 19f.). If it be true that one of the great discoveries of our age has been the rediscovery of the Church, and if the Ecumenical Movement has been one of the great facts of our times, he would be a bold man who would deny that these developments have been of the Holy Spirit, and yet equally he would be a rash man who fancied that we fallible men have either heard or interpreted all that the Spirit has to say. Indeed, we may hold fast to the evident fact that here is truth revealed from God’s Word by the Spirit to and for our age, and yet conclude that at certain points we have failed to understand it properly, and, in our enthusiasm for one aspect of truth, ignored a dozen more. Therefore we may accept the Ecumenical Movement gladly as being of the Spirit, and yet be very critical of certain manifestations of it, as being shallow, unbiblical, and therefore ultimately opposed to the very Spirit who is behind it; for God cannot deny Himself, and principles that are plain in Scripture must still apply today.

On the other side, lest we be accused by those who disagree with the very basis of this movement, let us make it clear at once that we are not saying that whatever exists in the Church is necessarily of God and the work of the Holy Spirit. History and our own experience have taught us otherwise, and we cannot deny such plain evidence. But likewise we cannot deny plain evidence when a movement like this is associated with a display of characteristically Christian qualities — the fruits of the Spirit, to use New Testament language. The great test that the Lord gave was, ‘By their fruits ye shall know them’ (Mt. 7: 20), and to ignore the evidence of this test can come near to the sin against the Spirit (compare Mt. 12: 31–33 and 22–24).

But acceptance of a truth does not bind us to every detail of current belief or practice connected with it, still less does it forbid us to say gently that the modern emphasis on this truth that the Church is Christ’s Body is recurrently one-sided, nor to say lop-sided, leading often to exclusive absorption in what is, after all, only one aspect of the Christian faith and message. Thus, putting the matter
bluntly, it is observable some men are so earnest for reunion that they forget about evangelism. But such was not Paul's way, nor does it accord with the mind of the primitive Church. If it be retorted that they were not faced with our problems, that is of course true; nevertheless, to judge from what is contained in Scripture, we have no reason to assume that their answer would at this point have been the same as ours.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ORIGINS AND USE OF THIS METAPHOR

Let us now turn to the biblical evidence for the term 'Body', and its history and development in Scripture itself. Here, one of the most extensive studies has been that of J. A. T. Robinson, *Body: A Study in Pauline Theology* (London, 1938). Not all his conclusions are acceptable, and theology is dependent on that of Lionel T. Church, a scholar and writer, *The Common Life in the Prim. Church* (London, 1942). Nevertheless, his linguistic work has been valuable, though James Barr has justly warned logical world in recent years not to identify theology.* One is tempted to add a further aspect of the matter can await a later stage. Consider how far it is legitimate to speak of 'the extension of the Incarnation'.†

THE OLD TESTAMENT

Unlike many of the other images used for the pages of the New Testament (Temple, Flock for instance) that of the Body seems at first glance an exact Old Testament analogue. Perhaps in outward form, it is to be found in some of the Book of Daniel where a body, or even a kingdom, can represent a kingdom (see, for instance, 2:34). The absence of the Body-idea from the Old Testament is not surprising, in view of the fact that...

* See his book *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, T.B.C.—B 17
† Another useful survey of the older type is K. Church (London, 1952)