

# The Body of Christ

from *Life in His Body* by Gary Inrig

The Church of Jesus Christ is not an institution, but an organism, a living body of believers. The implications of this simple fact are enormous, but they have been largely obscured by modern Christendom, with its great emphasis on building, structures, programs, agencies and formal meeting. Thus, many Christians see the church as a building occasionally inhabited by people. To others, it is an event which takes place on a Sunday morning for one or two hours, and then ceases until the following week.

In contrast to concepts of the church as an institution or an organization, there is the New Testament description of the church as an organism, as a living body of believers bound together in a shared life. If we are believers in the Lord Jesus, it is not so much that we *attend* church as that we *are* the church.

This emphasis is found in the language the Holy Spirit led believers to use in describing themselves. . . . the word used is *ekklēsia*, a word which means “assembly,” “congregation,” “gathering of people.” In the New Testament it describes the gathering of citizens in Ephesus (Acts 19:32, 39, 41), as well as the congregation of Israel in the desert (Acts 7:38). However, it is most commonly used in a specifically Christian sense to describe the people of God in the world. Interestingly, it never occurs in the New Testament to describe a building or a gathering place, or an ecclesiastical organization. God’s church is composed of people, not of wood and cement.

Simple as that concept sounds, it takes a long time for many people to grasp it. People persist in describing the church as a physical building to sit in, or an institution to join, or a meeting to attend. Nothing is more distressing than to see people who come Sunday after Sunday at 11 a.m. They are Christians. They have trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ. But they only “go to church.” I’m not upset because they don’t come to all the services, but because they have never understood what the church of Jesus Christ is all about. They are standing on the sidelines as passive observers, while others are experiencing what life in the body of Christ means.

There are two ways in which *ekklēsia* describes the people of God in the New Testament. In a sense quite removed from the usual meaning of an assembled group of people, the biblical writers use the word to describe the universal church which is composed of all believers in the Lord Jesus Christ from the day of Pentecost to the Rapture. In a striking way, we are thus reminded of the unity of God’s children in the Assembly of Christians. This Church will not physically gather until we are all in the presence of our Savior, but we nevertheless are one in Him. This Assembly is formed by the Holy Spirit for, as Paul reminds us, “By one Spirit were we all baptized into one body, and have all been made to drink of one Spirit” (I Cor. 12:13).

The most common use of *ekklēsia*, however, is to describe a local church or assembly or congregation or body of believers in the Lord Jesus. It is at the level of the local church that the great realities of God’s purposes in Jesus Christ receive visible expression in the world. It should be obvious that Scripture makes no dichotomy between the universal church and the local church. What is true of the Assembly is to be true of an assembly.

With this in mind, we are ready to see the great principles of life in the Body of Christ, the *ekklēsia*, as the Holy Spirit describes them. Paul often presents the truth of the *ekklēsia* through its analogy with the human body, a symbolism easily apprehended by human beings of any age or culture. In Romans

12:4, 5, we have a condensed version of Paul's words in I Corinthians 12:12-27 and Ephesians 4:1-16:

“For just as we have many members in one body, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ and individually members one of another.”

## The Healthy Body

There are three important truths about life in the Body given here by the Holy Spirit, truths of the universal church and also of the local church, as it conforms to the will of God. In fact, no healthy church can function without all three of these characteristics.

The first truth of the Body is its *unity*. There is only one Body of Christ, and only one Head of the Body. The unity of Christ's Church is not a unity of organization or denomination. It is not a uniformity of thought and life-style. It is not a union of a world-embracing ecumenical church. Rather, it is a unity produced by the Holy Spirit, who draws every genuine believer in Christ into His Body and establishes his place there. Therefore, it is a unity of a *common life*, given to us by faith in the Lord Jesus.

The unity of Christ's Church is a reality which transcends all of the barriers and divisions caused by men. But it must be emphasized that only those who trust in the Lord Jesus Christ alone for salvation are part of the Body of Christ. It is quite possible for a man to be a member of a local church or a denomination, and not to be part of the Church, the Body of Christ. But when a man or woman trusts in Christ, he becomes one with all other believers and shares the seven-fold unity of the Spirit (Eph. 4:4-6) and bears the responsibility of being “diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3).

The fact of the Body's unity holds great importance for the local church. Disunity and division in a congregation are a direct denial of the work of the Spirit, and must be resolutely rejected. It was precisely the evident love and unity of early Christians which prompted observers to exclaim “Look, how they love one another.” “These Christians!” said Celsus, an early foe of the gospel, “they love one another even before they are acquainted.”

One of the most significant introductions I have ever received came when a student was introducing me to speak at our city's university. He told how he had visited our assembly as a young Christian, knowing only one or two people in the congregation. But before he left that morning, he had been invited to three or four homes to share a meal. Never before had he realized so strongly what it meant to be part of the family of God as when total strangers welcomed him as a brother in Christ. What made that introduction even more meaningful to me was that several other students came up afterwards and said that they had had the same experience. This quality of demonstrated unity in Christ should always be true in the church. But we are not simply to share meals, we are to *share life* in Jesus Christ.

A second fact of life in the Body is *diversity*. While believers are “one in the Spirit” they are not all the same, for “If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?” This point will be emphasized in the following chapter on spiritual gifts, but it needs to be underscored here. The Lord Jesus, the risen Head of the Church, has given each believer a distinctive gift or gifts. We are not all the same, for which we may thank God, and the beautiful variety which exists in an assembly is divinely intended “for the common good” (I Cor. 12:7).

A recognition of this Spirit-given diversity will give us a proper perspective on spiritual gifts. A man who has significant public gifts must remember that those gifts were sovereignly bestowed by the Holy Spirit and afford no basis for pride. Someone whose gift may seem less significant must remember that, just as every part of the physical body is essential to its proper functioning, so also every gift and every believer is vital and necessary.

A third and closely related aspect of “body life” is *interdependence*. This obviously derives from the concepts of unity and diversity, and thus “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’; or again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you,’ (I Cor. 12:21) because we are “individually members one of another” (Rom. 12:5). To put it in plain words, *we need each other* as believers. Because no single believer possesses all of the spiritual gifts, and because another believer has been divinely gifted in an area of our need, our lives are bound together in a connected web of mutual ministry.

This interdependence is beautifully illustrated in a story related by Donald Grey Barnhouse.<sup>1</sup> Several years ago, two students graduated from the Chicago-Kent College of Law. The highest ranking student in the class was a blind man named Overton, and when he received his honor, he insisted that half the credit should go to his friend, Kasprzyzak. They had met one another in school when the armless Mr. Kasprzyzak had guided the blind Mr. Overton down a flight of stairs. This acquaintance ripened into friendship and a beautiful example of interdependence. The blind man carried the books which the armless man read aloud in their common study, and thus the individual deficiency of each was compensated for by the other. After their graduation, they planned to practice law together.

In a very similar way, since no believer is complete by himself, each is to minister from his ability to the needs of others. And this process is, of course, reciprocal. What is involved is the living experience of fellowship in the local body of believers. The New Testament word for fellowship is *koinōnia*, and its basic idea is that of close relationship and sharing, of participation in a common life. Such a fellowship cannot be produced by sociological study or simple application of principles of group dynamics. It is, in fact, “the fellowship of the Holy Spirit” (II Cor. 13:14).

Fellowship of this kind brings believers together with a sense of common need. We are to minister to one another, as a family. Such a fellowship knows what it is to “bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). There is the experience of a shared life in such a way that, “if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it” (I Cor. 12:26).

## The Functioning Body

This concept of “body life” has several very important implications:

1. There must be great emphasis in the local church on the discovery and exercise of spiritual gifts by every believer. There is no room for misguided concepts of humility nor for exaggerated ideas of self-importance. It is in this context that Paul exhorts every Christian “not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith” (Rom. 12:3).

2. There must be the recognition that “body life” is not carried on in the church meeting alone, but that it is the sharing of a common life in Christ. Such a life cannot be squeezed into a Sunday service alone.

3. It must be clearly stated that “body life” involves the participation of every believer. Any notions of a division between “ministers” and “ministries” must be

abandoned, if we are to capture the biblical concept of *koinōnia*. We will have our ministry, our function, our responsibility in the Body, and that ministry cannot be transferred to any paid church staff worker. To suppose that there are “ministers” and “laymen” is to run the very serious risk of relegating to the role of spectators the vast majority of Christians and, furthermore, it is to burden the “ministers” with an impossible load. Such a concept, in fact, distorts and hampers the very nature of body life.

4. There must be commitment to the fostering of genuine fellowship in the local church. This will mean structural rebuilding to bring more opportunity for a mutual ministry into what have been highly structured church settings. It will mean biblical exposition on the nature and practice of Christian love. It will mean discernment and training of believers in the matter of gifts. It will mean that individual Christians must take the risk and venture beyond the traditional patterns of church life to discover genuine *koinōnia*. And it ought to be said that such fellowship, if it is genuinely Spirit-given, will transcend human barriers such as the generation gap, racial variations and economic differences. Christian fellowship is not Christian “clubbiness,” but a deep, demanding and loving sharing of life in our Lord Jesus.

5. As a minimum, the biblical church meeting must be reestablished in the local church. This meeting, with its opportunity for a free and open exercise of spiritual gifts, of prayer and of worship, and its focus upon the Lord Jesus was, perhaps more than anything else, the greatest source of genuine fellowship in the apostolic church. It can be practiced just as truly today. It is true that some Christians will not appreciate such a meeting, because they cannot sit by as idle spectators. But such resistance must not be allowed to hinder what is necessary.

6. Gifts which do not involve public speaking must not be valued any less than “utterance” gifts. Spurgeon said it succinctly: “Where the whole is mouth, the result is vacuum.”

The truth is that the Body of Christ is designed to teach us that we need one another and that we must care for one another. To the world we must show ourselves one in Christ, united in love and a shared life. Such a unity is not uniformity or conformity. It is rather a Spirit-given sense of our mutual needs and the recognition that our diversity is both God-given and essential to maturity and health. “Unity, diversity, interdependence.” This is not to be just the motto of the local congregation, but its experience under God.

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Words Fitly Spoken*, p. 155.