

# The Body of Jesus

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Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*<sup>2</sup>

## READ EPHESIANS 1:15-23

### The Body of Christ

Paul has heard good things reported about the Ephesian church. They are well-known for their faith in Jesus and their love for other Christians (v. 15). Paul is thankful for this church and the good they are doing in Ephesus, so he prays for them all the time (v. 16). His description of his prayers as ceaseless reminds us not only of his healthy prayer life but also that he is in prison where he would have little else to do but pray, hour after hour.

Specifically, Paul prayed that God would give these Christians the “spirit of wisdom and revelation” that would result in “enlightened” eyes (v. 17-18). He wants God to help them know more about Jesus and about the hard choices they would have to make as Christians. He wants them to be able to see the world from the perspective of a heart filled with Jesus. That in fact is the key to understanding this prayer – Christian life is an extension of the life of Jesus.

With a Jesus-filled heart, they would be able to know three things (v. 18-19).

First, they would know more about the hope that God has given his people. This is the hope that every Christian learns to have that God will make things right, even though they look so wrong right now.

Second, they would know about the “riches of his glorious inheritance.” When you become a Christian, you receive great blessings, but they are not obvious to everyone. God does not write you a check. Instead, God gives you a wealth of blessings that you must learn to see, like peace, joy, love, and truth.

Third, they would know about the great power of God. Every Christian believes that God is powerful, but as we grow, we learn more about what God can do. We grow in Christ, and Christ grows within us. We might even say that we grow into Christ. We learn that the God who raised Jesus from the dead can do more than we could ever imagine.

The life-filling power of Jesus shows us more about God than we could ever know without him. The resurrection of Jesus shows us that God has power over life and death. The ascension of Jesus, when Jesus was lifted up into Heaven, shows us that God has power over all other would-be rival powers (v. 21). God is able to lift us up and allow us to share in his own glory like he has done with Jesus because we are in Jesus.

The metaphor here is of the human body. The powers of this world are beneath the feet of Jesus, but where then is the church? We are lifted up, as we are attached to the head (v. 22). We are his body, and where he goes, we go.

The church is made up of the people who believe and follow Jesus. When Paul says that it is Jesus’ body, he means

that it is part of him, “the fullness of him who fills all in all” (v. 23). I am often stunned by what a strange phrase that is. Paul says the church is the fullness of the one who fills us fully.

## **The Church as Extension of Christ**

What does it mean to be the body of Christ? Church historian and scholar Everett Ferguson takes this to mean the same as when Paul says we are “in Christ.” The idea of being a body is about location – though spiritual location rather than geographical. “The church is where Christ is, where he is preached and confessed, where he is working and obeyed. Christ is the creating and sustaining force of the church. ... The church is a people, nothing more or less, but a particular kind of people – the saved or redeemed people, the people of God in Christ.” Like the body and the head, Christ and his church are inseparably attached.

Both Ephesians and Colossians repeat this theme of the body of Christ, but they do so with differing points of emphasis. In Colossians 1:24, Paul says he is willing to suffer “for the sake of his body, that is, the church.” Christ and his preeminent glory are the key. Because Paul honors Christ, he will suffer for the church.

In Ephesians, the sentence is reversed. Christ is head “to the church, which is his body.” Throughout this letter, the church itself is emphasized and identified. In chapter four, the fact that there is “one body” is leadoff for the list of “ones” in the Christian faith, followed later by “one Lord” (4:4-6). It is in this one body that all people may be reconciled to God through the cross (2:16). Both Jew and

Gentile were equal “members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (3:6). All that God has done is for the building up of the body, which is growing day by day into the “the stature of the fullness of Christ” (4:12-16).

What might be learned from this metaphor?

First, we may say that we are dependent on Christ, fully and completely. He is the life-giving head and the source of all the activity of the body. A church full of Christ is filled and overflowing. A church empty of Christ is barren and dying. He and he alone is our life.

Second, we may also say that the continued work of Jesus in our world is in some sense dependent upon us. We are his hands, so what we do is done in the name of Jesus. We are his mouth, so we are able to speak in Jesus' name. We are his feet, so we can go to help those that Jesus must help. As Christ's body, we are how people come to meet Jesus today.

Third, as Ferguson mentions, this means that the church “as the body of Christ ... is more than the sum of its human parts.” If the church is merely us, flawed and failing humans, then the church is no more than any other human organization. But if the church is also Christ, then even as we fail, he remains. We cannot live without him, but he does not require us in the same way. In every church, you will find human failures, but that is not all that you will see. If it is the body of Christ, then there is a component of that church that remains enthroned in heaven, unstained by the shortcomings of humans here below. The church is ever trying to live up to the headship of Christ, “from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped ... makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (4:16).

This is also why Christians must insist that there is no salvation outside of Christ and by implication, there is no salvation outside of his church. Both of those statements are controversial for various reasons, but they are necessary conclusions of the body analogy.

We do not say that all must come to Christ because our Christian way of living is better than your Hindu or Muslim way of living in and of itself. The issue is that Christ is the life-giving head. It is not being narrow-minded to say a body will not live without its head. It is simply a fact of human anatomy. Likewise, there is no life without Jesus Christ. As Peter once responded, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God” (John 6:68-69).

In the same way, we do not say that the church is essential to Christianity because we want better attendance on Sundays. I do of course want better attendance on Sundays, but that isn’t the point either. The church simply is that which is in Christ. Whatever your thoughts on organized religion or your skepticism toward local churches in your area, the inescapable truth is that Christ is in his body. We might rephrase Peter’s question to say, “Lord, to whom shall we belong? You give life to your body!”

This is not to say that somehow the church is a rival to Christ. We are not to choose between two propositions: either Jesus saves or the church saves. The answer is much simpler. Jesus saves, and the church is saved. We are his body. We are his people. The church matters through no fault of its own. The church matters because he matters. He is the head of this body, or else it is nothing more than a corpse.

## Who Am I?

I am an extension of the life and identity of Jesus Christ. His purpose is my life's goal. His virtues are my life's work.

Because Christ has died, I die as well. Because he is raised, I am raised to new life (Romans 6:4). "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life that I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

Because he is ascended, I hope to share in his glory when he returns. As part of the family of God, I share in the identity of the Son of God in his glory. I am a child, and therefore an heir – "heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with in him in order that we may also be glorified with him" (Romans 8:17).

The church is the body of Christ, and each member of that church is a participant in that life (1 Corinthians 12:27). Every gift and every calling is a life-giving opportunity to share in what Jesus today is doing in the world. The diversity of our gifts and passions work together as the organs in the body to accomplish more together in Christ than any person could do alone. "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:12).

I am not defined by my class, my race, my gender, or my status. I am defined by my savior. "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:27-28).

## Discussion Questions

1. While it is not common for people to be fully identified in Christ, it is very common for people to be strongly identified and loyal to public personalities in our culture. In what ways do you find yourself identifying with a person other than Christ to give your life its meaning and definition?
2. If the church cannot live without Christ, how do you see that practically in your church? In other words, what in practical terms distinguishes the church from the everyday operations of some other organization made up of well-intended people?
3. You may have heard it said, “Christ saves people, not churches.” Is this a true statement? Untrue? Partially true? Unclear?