

## **The Body of Christ - A Glorious Reality** *By David Sheats*

*"Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually"* (I Corinthians 12:27).

This statement by the apostle Paul has tremendous implications to us when we begin to consider it seriously before the Lord. The truth of this statement is taught throughout the New Testament in many different ways, and has a direct bearing upon our whole lives. To many people, salvation is knowing the forgiveness of sins, heaven as my final home, and a certain religious form that I go through until my life on earth is done.

While it is true that Christ forgives sins when we repent, and that to be with God for eternity is the blessed hope of every believer, these thoughts fall way short of the center of God's mind for the believer. We want to consider God's thought in the body of Christ, with a prayerful desire that the revelation of God's purpose may expand in our hearts and give us direction in our life in God.

### **In the Body by the Spirit**

The first thing we must see clearly is that we are placed in the body of Christ by the Spirit. *"For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free--and have all been made to drink into one Spirit"* (I Corinthians 12:13). This strikes at the heart of the idea that we can "join" the body of Christ. Only God can join us to what He is doing, and He does this by bringing us into His life. This is a spiritual transaction with God, whereby He comes to abide within each member as He promised. *"If anyone loves me, he will keep my word; and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him"* (John 14:23). This transaction is a birth into God, and brings us into connection with the Head, which is Christ. We can now call Christ Lord, because we are in a place in which we can be controlled by the Spirit. *"...No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit"* (I Cor. 12:3).

The body of Christ is what it is because Jesus is Lord of every member, and every member is responding to the direction of the Head. Without that connection, there is no body. This must be spiritual reality, not just a mental assent. *"But why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not do the things which I say?"* (Luke 6:46) This gives us a beginning definition of the body of Christ: those that do the will of God. If we are not those who can say we are doing the will of God, obeying the Head, we cannot say that we are part of His body. We may be a part of some religious organization, but the body of Christ is the body of which Christ is the Head, and that means control in reality.

Some may try to separate this birth into the body of Christ from salvation, but a careful and honest search of the Word of God will not allow these to be separated. Salvation is not something we receive apart from God but in union with God, by coming under His authority. We are saved by His life (Romans 5:10). He is our salvation in every way. He saves us, not by telling us how to live, but by becoming our life. We are brought into His life by repentance and faith. *"For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God"* (Romans 8:14). Every other aspect of the body of Christ is based on the fact that each member is in connection

with the Head by the Spirit and is being led by the Spirit. Let each member know for certain that he is alive to God and attached to the Head by the Spirit. This is our beginning place in God.

### **The Body of Christ, An Expression of God's Nature**

When we think of a body, we think of that which gives expression to the life within. Man was created in the image of God. More than that, man was created by God to contain His life. Adam did not choose life, but rather chose to be self-sufficient; thus he led the whole human race down the path to destruction. Mankind as a whole is not interested in God. Men do not want to be dependent upon anyone else. When we come to Christ, God deals with that independent spirit. A man who has been dealt with by God has a submissive spirit. He knows in reality, "Apart from Him I can do nothing."

In addition to this, when a man comes to the Lord, the whole purpose of his life is altered. We are not saved so we can live our lives for our purposes, but now for the purpose of God, *"who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began"* (II Timothy 1:9). God's purpose is found in Christ. He is summing up all things in Christ. When Jesus came to this earth, He said, *"He who has seen Me has seen the Father"* (John 14:9). Christ was a full expression of God manifested, or revealed, in human form. Everything God is that could be revealed through human form, Christ was in grace and truth (John 1:14, Hebrews 1:3). God's heart is to reveal Himself to men. God is love, and that love moves in care and concern. God so loved that He gave Jesus Christ. He moved through Christ to show His very nature of love. He did not stand afar off, but humbled Himself for our sake, that we might be brought near to God. *"A body You have prepared for Me...to do Your will, O God."* Christ revealed God through His body.

Now, God has not changed in His purpose. He is still revealing His love and nature through a body. But that body takes on a different form. Instead of the one solitary body that Jesus had, it is now a many-membered body made up of those who are in Christ Jesus. This is not a lesser purpose, but an even fuller purpose. *"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to my Father"* (John 14:12). *"And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be Head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all"* (Ephesians 1:23). God is still summing up all things in Christ, and still revealing Himself through the body of Christ.

Where is that body? It is the company of those who have been baptized into Christ and have been made to drink of one Spirit. It is those who know Christ as the Head of the body. Every purpose of God is being fulfilled in Christ. Our calling is into that purpose. No wonder we are exhorted to *"walk worthy of the calling with which you were called"* (Ephesians 4:1). How much greater calling could we desire than to be a full manifestation of God Himself? What responsibility this brings to us, to properly represent God to a needy world. What a great price was paid that we may enter into this fellowship!

May the Lord open our eyes to see this calling for what it is and give ourselves to it without

reservation.

### **God's Nature Expressed in Oneness**

*"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4). "There is...one God" (Ephesians 4:6). "That they all may be one, as you, Father, are in me, and I in you; that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that you sent me" (John 17:21).* Many men say that they want the world to believe in Jesus, but here we find one of the essential elements in the expression of believers which God wants to speak to men of Himself--the oneness of the testimony. God is love, and love unites us as one. In fact, love is the binding element in the body of Christ (Colossians 3:14).

Oneness is defined for us in the Godhead, *"...that they may be one just as we are one" (John 17:22).* The only kind of oneness that will witness effectively of God is a testimony of oneness that is true to God's nature. Anything less than this will not speak of God, and thus will be ineffective in touching others' lives. If believers are to function as the body of Christ in reality, the first testimony they must have is that of oneness.

This oneness is only possible if we have partaken of one life by the Spirit. We do not express oneness by trying to be one, but because we *are* one. We can only express what is true. Many try to express oneness, but are unable to because they have not been made one by the Spirit. God does not want us to pretend. Rather, He wants us to partake of Him, so that we can express His nature. Apart from Him we can do nothing. This forms the essential element by which we accept one another. We are not one because we all believe alike or think alike, or on any natural basis such as language, race, etc. The one test in the body of Christ is life from above. The body of Christ is alive with His life, and that life is what makes us one. As we mature, we will come to a unity of the faith, but we are not any more one in maturity than when we first began. The expression of that oneness may be more mature, but the reality is not in the expression but in the reality of life.

Oneness is expressed locally. The only grounds for division in the body of Christ are distance or sin. Apart from these, our part is to express the oneness that God has made and to *"be careful to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"* (Ephesians 4:3). That is a place of full obedience. If we recognize another member of Christ in our locality, then we have a responsibility before God to endeavor to express that oneness. This is shown at the Lord's table, by partaking of the one cup and one loaf, and by our attitude toward each member of the household of God. If Christ has accepted a member, then we must also. Anything less is sin, dividing where God has not divided. The contrary is also true. If Christ has brought a division because of sin, we must be careful to keep that division. To not do so allows for a polluted testimony and an impure expression of God. God cannot dwell where there is sin. Our place as members is to know the mind of Christ, discern by the Spirit where Christ has drawn the line, and keep the same line.

It is important to note that while each believer is one with every other true believer in the world, God has never called us to express that oneness on a continuing basis past the locality in

which we live. In other words, the universal government of the church is Christ by the Spirit, and the Head of each gathering is Christ directly. Organization beyond this point goes beyond the plan of God. If a member travels, the oneness will be recognized in another locality, and members in that locality are to receive their fellow member on the same basis, which is life in Christ. Any attempt to bring organizational oneness beyond the locality or on any other basis such as creed, form of worship, etc. is a direct contradiction to the nature of God and His plan, and cannot know the blessings of God.

### **The Church, the Body of Christ in Reality**

When we think of the body of Christ, we think of a reality in expression. When Paul addressed the Corinthians, he used the example of the physical body to illustrate the spiritual body. The purpose of it all is *"that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another"* (1 Corinthians 12:25). The whole thrust of Paul's instruction is that no member is independent of any other member. The Lord has designed that the body, as a whole, should express Christ. For this to take place, it is obvious that the members must be dwelling together. Care and ministry of one member to another cannot take place if there is no contact. The concept of a mystical body that is one in God's eyes but has no practical expression of oneness on earth is totally foreign to God's purpose. The whole purpose of the body is to express something, and that expression is real! It is not possible to speak of a body functioning and expressing something where the members are not together.

There is a concept in the minds of many, that members of the body of Christ in a locality can love each other, see each other once in a while, shake hands, but separate themselves in different gatherings. Such a concept is a total contradiction to the nature of God's love which binds all together, breaks down every natural barrier, and gives forth a testimony of God Himself dwelling in the midst of His people. On the Day of Pentecost, the believers were of "one heart and one soul." The church began with a pure expression of oneness, and it has never changed. The body of Christ is one. God's love never fails, and love binds together as one.

We would think it foolish if a couple were married, said they loved each other, and then moved into separate houses. Yet the same foolish thinking is allowed when believers say they are one, say they love God and each other, and yet that love does not bring them together in worship, fellowship, partaking of one cup and one loaf, and giving forth a testimony of one household to the world around.

No wonder the unbelievers do not want God! They do not see anything different in the expression given by people who claim the name of the Lord. When God is in our lives, He makes a difference. The true love of God is not in words only, but in deeds. Honestly facing what we know to be the character of God would bring many to realize that the love of God is absent from many gatherings. How much better to face the truth now while there is time to do something about it, than to go on fooling ourselves until the judgment day when all is revealed and the final verdict is given by God. What loss there will be on that day!

### **The Expression of God Through Every Member**

*"Speaking the truth in love, we may grow up in all things into Him who is the Head, Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies; according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love" (Ephesians 4:15,16).* In the body, the central truth revealed is that every member contributes a part. No part is unimportant. To see this revelation brings responsibility upon each member, and that responsibility can only be fulfilled by an ability from God. A body that has only an eye or an ear is not a body. There is no place in the body for passive members. Every member is called to function according to the grace given by God. *"But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift" (Ephesians 4:7).*

What is the place of functioning for each member? The first place is to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3). If there is a schism or division, the grace of God cannot flow from one member to another. It requires spiritual vision for each member to see the other as a member of Christ. We know no man according to the flesh--that is, in a natural connection. Likes or dislikes have no part in our thinking. This takes obedience to Christ, the Head of every member. If we allow personal opinions of another member to enter our thinking, our expression toward that member will be hindered, and the unity of the Spirit will be affected. Only the mind and attitude of Christ are allowed to be expressed through each member. This means that each member must be hearing God and receiving direction from the Head. The hand may not touch the foot unless directed by the Head. Although this is easy to see in the natural body, it must be equally true in the spiritual body.

Proper attitudes are a central part of maintaining this unity of the Spirit. Consider the far-reaching effects of these attitudes: *"with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love."* This is the attitude of Christ, and this is the attitude to be expressed through each member. Remember, we are called to express Christ in reality, not just in theory. The body of Christ is real. *"And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it, or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it" (I Corinthians 12:26).* What a beautiful expression of Christ, when the body is knit together in love, and the compassion, care and concern of Christ are flowing unhindered through each member. The presence of God is manifest through each member, and the whole is greater than any part. Paul said that we would comprehend the love of God *together* (Ephesians 3:18).

Words proceed from the heart. If our hearts are knit together in love, then the words that proceed from our mouths will be such as minister grace to the hearers. *"Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification; that it may impart grace to the hearers" (Ephesians 4:29).* *"If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body" (James 3:2).* How important our words are! They should be words that flow from heaven and impart grace. They should be words that speak correctly of God and His nature. They should be directed by the Holy Spirit to minister to needs and bring light. Words either build up or tear down. All members are responsible to come under the discipline of the Holy Spirit and keep themselves in the love of God, so that the words that come will edify and build up.

These attitudes and expressions of Christ will flow more fully if we truly see ourselves as "members of one another." If we only see ourselves, then the love of God has not yet touched our hearts. Sin separated man from God and made him self-centered. There is none of that spirit in God. The love of God filling our hearts turns our attention away from ourselves and includes others. That was God's heart when He gave Christ, and it is still His heart. It will be the heart of each member that knows the life of God filling his or her heart. Expressions of independence and selfishness vanish in the presence of God. Obedience to what God has shown us in these areas brings a further seeing and a fuller expression. Expression is something that must mature, and it matures as we keep ourselves in His love and obey the direction of the Spirit. In this place, God is revealed, God is glorified, and His will is done on earth in the body of Christ as truly as it was done in Jesus, two thousand years ago.

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### **The Body of Christ, God's Perfect Design**

When we realize that the body of Christ was designed by God to express His life, it should not surprise us to realize that the design is absolutely perfect. A perfect God could never design anything less than a perfect way to express a perfect life. If we would come to grips with that truth and let it order our lives, it would remove a great deal of the confusion that we see today in the religious world. Some have even gone so far as to say that the church has failed. How could the church, under the direction of the Head, fail in what God purposed to do? God has never failed at anything--how could He? It is only man that fails, when he removes himself from God's authority. But the church is not men's doing. It is God's creation in Christ Jesus; therefore it cannot fail.

Jesus said that He would build His church, and the gates of hell would not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18). The church, which is the body of Christ, has not failed and will not fail. When men say that the church has failed, they are looking at something other than the church of Jesus Christ. They are looking at what man has done, and truly what man builds does fail. It cannot express God, because only what is done by God can express His life.

If we do not see this truth clearly by revelation, we will try to improve upon God's design instead of going back to God and asking Him to reveal it to us. This is exactly what many have tried to do. They have looked at what they thought was the body of Christ (it wasn't), concluded that the church had failed (it hadn't), and then designed their own plan to do God's work (which will fail). What a terrible thing to do. How foolish can we be in our thinking? Let God wash all of these lowly concepts out of our minds, that we may see the body of Christ as God has designed it. This will then give us a proper basis to labor in what God is doing. God's plan in Jesus Christ is victorious. The only question is whether we will be a part of what God is doing.

If we read I Corinthians 12 through 14 very carefully, we will see that God has put each member in the body *as it pleased Him*. Again, this is God's design, not men's. Our place is not to question God's design or improve upon it, but to know it by revelation and move in it in faith. God knows

exactly what it will take to touch the heart of man; after all, God created man. He also knows exactly what it will take to wash away the effects of sin and bring each member to a place of full maturity. He knows how to build a house to contain His glory. He knows exactly what gifts to give each man, who to give them to, and what they are designed to do. If another gift were needed, or would be better, He would have given it. If something were not needed, He would not have given it. No part is unimportant and no part is lacking. His plan is perfect.

Consider a natural illustration. A builder goes to build a house. He takes with him a hammer, saw, and square. Each tool is for a purpose. If he tries to put in a nail with a saw or cut a board with a hammer, he will be a fool. Is God less than man? Notice the gifts given in the church. They are all given by God, and each has a purpose. All are for edification and building up. All are under the control of the Holy Spirit. All are necessary, and when one is needed, another will not suffice. What has man done with this? He has said that pastors are all that are needed, and that in fact only one pastor is needed. Both statements are wrong. Pastors are only one of the gifts, and they are always given in plurality to keep Christ as Head of the body. We cannot bypass any part of God's design in the body and expect God's results.

Consider the organizations of men that attempt to do the work which only God can do within His plan. They create organizations with presidents, directors and committees. Where do we see these in the church? What gifts are these? When we create these organizations, then we are free to define qualifications and functions without reference to God. Elders must meet God's qualifications, but directors of men's organizations only need men's appointment or election. Why do we think we can get God's results in this way? If God thought directors were necessary, why didn't God give them? Israel also thought they needed a king, but God didn't think so. He told them what would happen if He gave them one, but the people said to give them a king anyway so they could be like everybody else. Is this not the spirit of so many religious men today? The religious organizations are patterned after the world, instead of God's design. They get results, but only temporal results. The numbers look good at times, but the spiritual fruit is absent, because God is absent.

Even when we come to the church, man brings in his own ideas. Let this truth sink deeply into our hearts: we cannot improve on God's design. The design of the human body apart from the effects of sin is perfect, and the body of Christ is no less perfect in its design. When sin enters into the church, it must be purged so that the expression of Christ may remain pure. If it is not, God leaves, and the only thing left is an empty, lifeless form. These forms are what many call churches. The reason that they do not express the love and oneness of God is that God is not there, and without God, His nature cannot be expressed.

### **The High Calling of God in Christ Jesus**

The calling of God in Christ Jesus is higher and more demanding than any other calling on the face of the earth. No other calling requires the blood of Jesus Christ with which we have been bought back to God for His purposes. No other occupation requires the purity of heart that only God can give. No other purpose requires the foundation which has been laid in Christ Jesus. No earthly results can compare to the eternal fruit that comes from union with Christ and His body.

No earthly discipline can compare with the discipline of the Holy Spirit. No other purpose can even be compared with God's purposes which are being worked out in Christ Jesus.

Oh, that our eyes could be opened to see as God sees! They can be, if we will come to Jesus and let Him apply the eye salve to the eyes of our hearts. We cannot get the eye salve from any other place, however, and that means coming to the end of what we think we can do for God. Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build. Will we humble ourselves before almighty God, that He may lift us up in His time?

What a wonderful calling God has brought us into! We have been called to express His life, God Himself. Let us heed the admonition of Paul: *"I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to have a walk worthy of the calling with which you were called"* (Ephesians 4:1). Let us pray to the Lord that He will expand our revelation of this calling, that it may take on a greater meaning and control our lives. May the reality of this truth, "You are the body of Christ," grip our hearts to the point that we give ourselves completely to this calling and see God glorified, with a pure manifestation of His love expressed to mankind.

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