

Sermon – 06/04/2008 am

The Church – Christ's Body

Study Text: Ephesians 1:22–23

The human body is most amazing. We are made up of so many different parts, but each part has its particular role to play. Even our little finger has its place, not to mention the thumb or tongue. Yet no part functions independently: the thumb is not much use on its own. When we look beneath the skin we find a complex system of bones and muscles, blood vessels flowing from the heart and nerves attached to the brain.

The apostle Paul saw fit to use the human body to describe the church. There are hints elsewhere in the Bible of this metaphor but only Paul develops it and incorporates it into the doctrine of the church. It had been suggested that this metaphor came from his Damascus road experience. Paul was persecuting the church when Christ appeared to him saying why are you persecuting me.

In 1 Corinthians Paul uses this metaphor of the body to teach unity with diversity that exists in the church. Each Christian has different spiritual gifts but these are from the one Spirit and are to be exercised within the one body, the body of Christ which is the church.

In Ephesians and Colossians the focus of the metaphor is more upon the head of the body. Christ is the head of the body. He has all authority and controls the body. He is also the source of life within the body. We can live without an arm or a leg but we cannot live without a head.

Head and Feet

Our passage from Ephesians comes in the context of the mighty power of God at work in believers (1:19). In describing this power Paul reflects on the resurrection and ascension of Jesus to the right hand of the majesty in heaven. From his throne in heaven Jesus exercises authority over all earthly and heavenly rulers. He is greater than Moses and greater than the angels according to the book of Hebrews.

In exalting Jesus and giving him the name that is above every name, God put *all things under his feet* writes Paul (1:22). Paul was familiar with these words from Psalm 8. He grew up singing the Psalms and continued singing them after his conversion (Ephesians 5:19). In singing Psalm 8 he rejoiced in the Lord our God whose name is most excellent in all the earth. He sang of a man to whom the Lord gave dominion and under whose feet the Lord put all things.

Adam sinned against God thereby forfeiting his exalted place in creation. In Jesus Christ, the perfect man, Paul saw that God was restoring man to his rightful place. He saw the words of Psalm 8 as Messianic, pointing to Jesus and his supreme exaltation following the exercise of God's mighty power in raising him from the dead.

Christ is risen, the firstfruits of those who have died (I Corinthians 15:20f). His resurrection is the assurance that we will also be raised from the dead at Christ's coming. Jesus reigns from

heaven even now, and he must reign till he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death (I Corinthians 15:26). In the end, when Satan is cast into the lake of fire, death will disappear – for the apparent reign of death in the world today is by the power of the devil or Satan.

Jesus was in the beginning with God, and in and through him all things were made – *without him nothing was made* (John 1:3). In Christ all things in heaven and earth continue to exist. God in Christ holds the breath of every human being and indeed everything that has life. Jesus rules over and sustains all creation.

Jesus is head over all things. But the headship of Christ is not apart from the people of God. Jesus has no need of anything from us any more than the Father – he is entirely self sufficient and complete in the holy trinity. Yet God has ordained for him to head over the household of faith, the people belonging to God. God gave Jesus to be head over all things to the church.

Head and Body

This verse is not easy to understand especially the last phrase. We have seen that Christ is made head over all powers and authorities, over all creation. But then we read that he is *head over all to the church* (1:22). Other translations have *for the church*, but that is no great help. What is clear is that the church is the body of Christ and also that the head of the body or the church is Christ (4:15, Colossians 1:18).

Why the sudden focus on the church at this point in the letter? In describing the great power of God, Paul looks to the resurrection and exaltation of Christ to the throne in heaven. Jesus left the glory of heaven to come into this world of sin and death. After his death God raised him from the dead taking him back to his rightful place in heaven (John 17:5). Jesus has been given authority over whatever power or authority exists on earth or in heaven. He has been given authority over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as the Father gives him (John 17:2).

It is in and through the church that God's wisdom, grace, and power are made known to all creation. It is in the church, the church which is the body of Christ, that God is glorified. Jesus brought glory to the Father through his obedience unto death. The grace which he bestows upon those who believe brings further glory to God (1:6). God is glorified not only in his grace and power demonstrated in salvation of the individual, but in the unity of those whom he redeems, unity in the church which is the body of Christ.

The body metaphor makes it very clear that every believer who is united to Christ the head is also part of the body of Christ. Because we are united to Christ, we are also united to one another. We are one in Christ. There is only one body. No one can say they belong to Christ but not to the body of Christ, the church.

The church is pictured as an organism not an organisation. It is a body not a business. It is difficult to keep such a focus in the church. We have been given a form of church government in the Bible which reflects such headship but it is not popular among men. The disciples wanted to have some hierarchy among themselves and so it continues till today in the church. I know some churches that have succumbed to having bishops and archbishops as the head of their church.

Bishops can meet and discuss organisational unity in the church but this is not how unity is achieved. Unity comes from focussing on Christ and his exaltation. Unity comes from humbling ourselves before Christ, the only head of the church. The closer we are drawn to Christ the closer we will be drawn to one another. The disciples dispute about greatness was answered by Jesus with a call to *eat and drink at my table in my kingdom* (Luke 22:30) – not the table of men in man’s kingdom but the table of our Lord in his kingdom.

‘I am the true vine’ said Jesus. A branch cannot bear fruit unless it abides or remains in the vine (John 15:5). This metaphor conveys the same message as the body metaphor adopted by Paul. Christ is the source of life, and it only through connection with him or by abiding in him that we can bear fruit. If you abide in me and my word abides in you, you will ask what you desire and it shall be done for you. By this my Father will be glorified (John 15:7-8). The outcome is the same as that of the church. God is glorified.

Head and Fullness

In the final verse of this chapter Paul is still reaching for words to describe the exaltation of Christ, his headship in the church and the glory of God in the church. Grammatically ‘full’ is an absolute term. When something is full it cannot hold any more. Yet we still use the word in a relative sense, saying fill it up some more. Paul uses this word in its true absolute sense. The church, the body of Christ is filled with the Lord Jesus Christ, with his power and his glory. The Spirit of Christ flows to each and every part of the body bringing life and glory.

It pleased the Father that in him (Christ) all the fullness should dwell (Colossians 1:19). And Christ alone is God’s answer to sin and death. In Christ and Christ alone God is glorified. Through Christ all things were created and in him all things consist. The church in particular is full of Christ for it is his very body. In Christ dwells the fullness of the Godhead bodily and you are complete in him (Colossians 2:9).

What is God’s plan and purpose for creation? That he might bring all things in heaven and on earth under the headship of Christ (1:10). God’s plan and purpose for creation is bound up with the church, with the church of Christ. All creation waits the sons of God to be revealed (Romans 8:19). All the world is waiting for the true church to be revealed – and it will be soon. When Jesus returns those who belong to him will be revealed and will be caught up to the clouds to meet Christ in the air (I Thessalonians 4:17).

Are your eyes enlightened to these great truths? ‘We live too often below the level of our privileges. Like mountain climbers who reach high altitude we find it difficult to breathe in such a rarefied atmosphere. Sadly we are tempted to descend to lower ground where the climbing is more manageable for our spiritual lungs. But if we cease to climb we will never see the glorious realities that wait our vision. No wonder then if we remain shortsighted Christians. May God open our eyes to see!’

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