

This afternoon we will consider another image for Christ followers. This one is captured in a single verse. “You are the body of Christ, and individually members of it.” I Cor. 12:27

As followers of Christ, we believe our identity is a gift God gives to us and not something that we are responsible for constructing. We are what God has made us. In this sentence from first Corinthians, we learn that God has made us members of the body of Christ. Together we are going to dig into the meaning of this image, to see what we can discover about how we are meant to understand ourselves as followers of Jesus. When we do, we will find definite guidance in three relational spheres.

This image will teach us:

1. The relationship we are meant to have all together with Christ
2. The *nature* of the relationships we are meant to have with one another
- 3 . The relationship we are meant to have as a church with the world around us

Before we examine this single statement in detail, I want to take time on context. Because this one sentence comes from within a chapter, of a letter, addressed to a particular community of people. And the whole letter, inspired by God himself, comes through the mind of Paul, who has a very definite way of operating in his writing. We are going to start with him.

Here’s how Paul operates: He takes his big theological convictions, and applies them to small everyday life situations. The first part of his statement: “You are the body of Christ,” expresses one of his big theological convictions. The second part of his statement: “and individually members of it” is his application of his big idea to a very particular situation.

Let’s start with the big theological conviction, and examine how he puts it to work in the particular situation after that.

“You are the body of Christ.”

This is one of Paul’s big theological convictions. At first glance, it may seem he is using a simple metaphor to teach the importance of working together. The image of a body for a group of people was a common image in ancient literature. Philosophers used it to urge people to get along. If you all work together, you achieve more. Some of you work in offices with a poster that has “team” in big letters. “Together Everyone Achieves More.” This may be true, *but this practical wisdom is not what is beneath Paul’s statement.*

Here, Paul is speaking out of a particular understanding of human existence, which is very foreign to most of us, who tend to think of life in individual terms. I have my life, you have yours. Any connection between us is incidental to our true being. If we choose to spend time together, then we are connected because we have decided to be. But if not, then we are not in any way connected.

This is our default way of thinking about identity, especially in the individualistic culture of the West in which most of us have grown up. *This is not how Paul understands human existence.*

Humanity as a “corporate” phenomenon

Paul’s understanding of human existence is “corporate” in the Latin sense of that word, where *corpus* means body. Paul’s big theological idea asserts that whatever we

happen to feel, we are connected to one another in a deep and basic way. None of us exists apart from a fundamental connection with others. All the way down, at the most foundational level of being itself, we are connected.

Put like this, the idea may sound familiar. People have spoken of humanity as fundamentally connected from a physiological perspective. “We all come from the same physical stuff.” The same idea has been advanced from a psychological perspective. Carl Jung had some remarkable ideas about the interconnection of all people in mind. But for Paul, *this reality of human being in solidarity with others is not physiological, or psychological. It is a Spiritual reality.*

Spiritually, and that means truly, each individual exists within a corporate reality, to which he or she is connected fundamentally; to which she is united. That’s a word Paul uses a lot. Each of us exists *united to a corporate reality, on a cosmic scale.*

For Paul, *there are only two corporate realities to which human beings can be united. We exist connected to one of two different “bodies.”*

One, he calls the body of death.

The other, we can call the body of life.

There is a clear description of the difference in Paul’s letter to the Romans, in chapters 5-8. In the middle of his great exposition of the gospel Paul speaks personally about an inner conflict. He doesn’t give precise details, but he shares about his personal struggles in language that many of us can relate to. “I don’t understand my own actions. I do not do what I want. But I do the very thing I hate. I can will what is right but I cannot do it. I do not do the good that I want, but the thing that I do not want to do, is what I do.” (See Romans 7:14ff)

Have you ever experienced such a conflict? Do you know what Paul feels like from the inside? Paul expresses his own challenge with doing the good that he wants to do, and avoiding the bad that he wants to avoid, by speaking of a law, a power at work within his personal body, that has him trapped. He sees himself in this pattern, and thinks it is wretched.

And then, he asks a question, in which he indicates that he sees his struggle not only as an internal conflict for him, but as the consequence of his participation, or existence in a greater body. He asks **“Who will rescue me from this body of death?”** (Romans 7:24)

The internal conflict, which traps a man in patterns of destructive behavior, is the result of existence in solidarity with the “body of death”- one of the two bodies in which humanity exists. Life in solidarity with the body of death will always be like this. In Romans 5, Paul refers to this body of death as being “in Adam”; the original man who turns away from God. Life united to him will always be like this; always be an endless struggle.

*But there is an alternative body, to which we can be united, with which we can live in solidarity; to which we can be connected; a body which is not a body of death, but a body of life. **That body is the body of Christ.***

In Romans 5 Paul describes the difference between life in the two different bodies. In Adam all die; in Christ all shall be made alive. In Adam death rules; in Christ all shall reign in Life. In Adam all sin; in Christ all receive the gift of New Life. In Adam sin rules; in Christ grace rules. In Adam our bodies are instruments of wickedness; in Christ our bodies are instruments of righteousness. In Adam the law of sin and death

enslave men; in Christ the law of the Spirit sets men free. In Adam all will experience a living death; in Christ all will experience a dying life.

Life for every person will always be a life in one or the other body.

How do you go from one body to the other?

We are delivered from the body of death to the body of life by the body of Christ, literally. By his act of self-offering for all, he has effectively delivered all humanity from one to the other. In faith, by the grace of God in Christ, we are invited to *live* in the new being. Christ has opened up the way to a new being, through his flesh. We are all free, and invited to live *in* him.

How do we? Only believe, and accept his invitation to new life; entrust yourself to him, and then, in him you have new life. This is faith. Entrusting yourself to Jesus. When you do, you live in solidarity with him, so that it may be said of *you with other Christians, that **you are the body of Christ.***

Here is Paul's big theological idea. And now, we will look at how he puts it into service, in a particular situation.