

# Is the Church An Essential Element of the Gospel? An Answer from Christology Applied!

by Preston Graham Jr.

Can we have Christ as Head without Christ's Body?  
A Response in Christology *applied!*

If you are half the cynic that I am, you may now be thinking, "So I'm asked to trust the perspective of a pastor whose very livelihood is dependent upon the institutional church"? Fair Enough! But here is the thing: I wasn't always so invested in the organized church.

For about twelve years after becoming a Christian as a freshman in college, and well into my early years as a campus minister, if ever I did attend a church, and it recited the Apostles' Creed as to include that curious phrase "I believe in the one holy Catholic church," I would defiantly tighten my lips and remain silent every time. During that period, I would have readily agreed with the perspective of recent titles like Herbert Hoefler's Churchless Christianity, Frank Viola and George Barna's Pagan Christianity: Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices (e.g. "organized" church as an expression of paganism!), and so forth. All these books understand "church" to mean something along the lines of a spontaneous community of Christian believers in fellowship together with Christ, which, granted, includes something like a rendezvous at Koffee or fellowship in a small group Bible study.

I would have readily applauded the perspective popularized by William P Young's The Shack when his fictitious Jesus explains that the church is not an "institution" or "a man-made system [but] people and their lives, a living breathing community of all those who love me, not buildings and programs." In short, "it's all about relationships and simply sharing life." And then, as to send shock waves through every pastor and church person that ever devoted time and resources to an institutional church, Young's Jesus asserts: "I don't create institutions-never have, never will...that's an occupation for those who want to play God."

I was there myself. We all know and lament that sometimes, for good reasons, many have given up on the organized church. Church hypocrisy, self-righteous moralism, and worst of all, irrelevance all makes for a cynical perspective. That being said - and again for the sake of full disclosure - I now consider myself part of an emerging group of people who consider all this unorganization thinking to be "old school" or even the "new traditional". I would trace the unorganized religion trend back to at least the mid-to-late 19th century (c.f. Nathan Hatch's The Democratization of American Christianity or George Marsden's The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience: A case Study of Thought and Theology in Nineteenth-Century America). These studies suggest that the the defining characteristics of the unorganization movement might be less informed by a careful reading of Christian scriptures and more an uncritical reflection of post-enlightenment Americana itself that these studies document (individualism, subjectivism, egalitarianism, etc).

To then my point, it is my contention here that many of the problems of the church that engender disillusionment are less about the church being too "organized" or "institutional" and more a problem of it not being organized/institutional *enough!* How so you ask? I want to suggest that it all begins with a Biblical analysis of Christology applied!

To begin, that we would all desire that "Christ might have the supremacy in everything." So then would it surprise you to know that the context for this is Paul's teaching about Christ as "the head of the body, the church?" (Colossians 1:18). And again, would that we all would desire "the fullness of him who fills all in all." But then would it startle us if the point Paul is making is that this "fullness that fills all in all" located in "the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all (Ephesians 1:22-23 ESV)?

What both these passages demonstrate is Christology applied. That is, how we can't really, in concrete and fleshed out ways have Christ as our head if we don't have Christ fleshed out in/with/through his body, the church! Stated more crassly, would any of us desire either a decapitated Christ or a decorporated Christ? Can a person have Christ as "head" without being a member of Christ's "body"? We'll return to these questions soon enough. But first, we should briefly review the fundamentals of an orthodox Christology.

The ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in the mid-400s sought to depict the mystery of Christ's divinity in relation to his humanity. The council stated that Christ's two natures are at once "distinct but never separate". One of the passages that informed this creed was John's introduction of Christ in John 1:14: "The Word (Christ's Divinity) became flesh (Christ's humanity) and made his dwelling among us (The Greek word for this is literally "tabernacled among us)" Moving forward then, John's gospel will carefully craft Christology into the theme of Christ as our temple. For instance, in just the second chapter, we hear Jesus say things like, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (John 2:19-20). The real climax for John's gospel was not the death nor resurrection of Christ, but the ascension, when Jesus was taken up to heaven.

Did you know that almost a third of John's gospel (starting in John 14) focuses on Christ preparing the disciples for his ascension ministry as related to our present age? About this ministry, Christ will tell his disciples they will do "greater works... because I am going to the Father" (John 14:12). And later, when Mary clings to Christ's resurrected body, Christ gently rebukes her, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended [...] go to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father'" (John 20:17).

John was writing to Jewish Christians who were suffering under growing persecution and feeling "homeless" with the destruction of the temple in AD 70. John's message to them was clear: you are not without the temple. Christ is still with you-not abstractly as an idea but actually as your temple. This temple that Christ was speaking about is not a temple built by hands but rather one mediated in, with, and through believers through spiritual union with Christ by the Holy Spirit. Notice carefully, Christ continues "As the father has sent me, so I send you [plural]" (John 20:21). How did the Father send Christ? That is, as God sent Christ as temple (John 1:14) so now Christ's sent the apostles who would be charged with founding the church built with Christ as the cornerstone. This church would again be an expression of "the word (divine) became flesh (human) such as to dwell (tabernacle)" among us today! This, then, is the beginning of an orthodox Christology applied, and how we are to experience the fullness of Christ who fills all in all.

Back to our original passages concerning the church as Christ's body. We should notice again carefully how Paul works out his Christology applied then to the necessity of the church. That is, he will make the case that the human community of the church is at once distinct from Christ as the divine head, but enlivened by the Holy Spirit, is now the very mediatory "flesh (or body) of Christ" on earth! That is, the church /is/ the mediatory body of Christ, the temple of God. An ancient theologian-pastor of the 5th century said about this passage:

*The Word was made flesh, and tabernacled among us; to that flesh is joined the church, and there is made the total Christ, head and body.* (St. Augustine, On the Epistle of John).

Paul develops this idea in just the next chapter of Ephesians wherein he describes the church as the "household" of God, "a holy temple in the Lord" and even "a dwelling" in which God lives (Ephesians 2:19-22). He makes the same point in I Corinthians 3: "Don't you know," he asks, "that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your [plural] midst?"(3:16). It is easy to miss in this NIV translation, as English lacks a plural form of "you". But in the Greek, Paul repeatedly admonishes a

plurality of people: a group - that is, a church. As noted by Richard Hayes, "To read this last sentence [in Corinthians 3] as though it spoke of the Spirit dwelling in the body of the individual Christian would be to miss the force of Paul's audacious metaphor: the apostolically founded community takes the place of the Jerusalem temple as the place where the glory of God resides" (*Ecclesiology and Ethics in I Corinthians*).

Now, the only thing left is to define this "church" as more than a spontaneous gathering of Christians, but as a community that is carefully organized as by Christ's own design regarding both faith and practice. And just think about it for a moment! Has there ever been a time in redemptive history when "doing what is right in your own eyes" was considered virtuous? Worship, in and of itself was either a good thing or a bad thing, depending on who you worship and according to what elements such as to honor or dishonor the God you worship! We could notice for instance the "fill all in all" kind of event that happened in the Old Testament (Ex. 40) as the context for Paul's teaching in Ephesians 1:22-23. And especially, then, as now, this filling of the temple was very much related to a carefully designed temple.

To this point, Paul describes the church as a community "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord (Ephesians 2:20-21). In other words, there is an architectural "design" for the church: the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ as cornerstone. The foundation will include such things as warnings about neglecting to assemble together (cf. Hebrews 10:25) and even instructions about what day to assemble (the first day of the week to celebrate the Christ's resurrection and Sabbath fulfilled: cf. Revelation 1:10, Acts 20:7). It will tell us what we are to do when we meet together. For example, the standard four elements of worship in Acts 2:42 include: (1) devotion to the apostles' teaching, (2) fellowship, (3) the breaking of bread (as related to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper), and (4) prayers (both sung and spoken). Sounds like organization.

Likewise, Paul exhorts Timothy-a first generation pastor-church planter-to "follow the pattern of sound words that you have heard from me" (II Timothy 13, RSV). Accordingly, Timothy might know how "people ought to conduct themselves in God's household", which is the "church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth" (I Timothy 3:14-15). And would it surprise us that Paul's instructions to Timothy covered such topics as appointing leaders and ordination (I Timothy 3), worship (I Timothy 2), and doctrine (I Timothy 1), all of which was worked out in an assembled context?

What, then, is the major characteristics of apostolic design with Christ as the cornerstone? A general study of the apostolic foundation would reveal at least these five major characteristics of a "Total Christ" Church:

(1) *A Gospel (Grace) Centered Church*: (cf. Ephesians 2:1-10): The Church designed by Christ is set free from the fear of condemnation or rejection both from God and one another because of the transformative grace of the gospel. Christian assurance comes from Christ and his moral performance. Subsequently, we love and do good works-because we have first been loved (I John 4:19).

(2) *Missional Church* (cf. John 20:21, Matthew 28, Romans 1:16-7, 15:20): The church designed by Christ will see itself as existing for the sake of God's glory in Christ in every culture and place, as per the great commission (Matthew 8:16). But more even than this, the church, by just being "total Christ" as by his design in/withthrough the organized church IS missional by her very nature. Evangelism and conversion, then, become more participational and not just proclamational. Let the church /be/ the church-and that itself will be evangelistic.

(3) *The Faith Confessing Church* (cf. I Timothy 3:15, Colossians 3:16, Acts 17:2, 20:27.): The confessional church is the church that takes seriously the faith-formation process through expositional and Christ centered preaching, and careful study of God's word, wanting to read it communally (with the church of every age) rather than just individualistically. We seek to understand what the Bible principally teaches through the use of ancient creeds and confessions knowing that this will help us get beyond our own cultural and temporal contexts even. a The confessional church will see to do this in gospel grace such that while people do not need to agree with the faith consensus of the church in order to become a believer

(membership is as wide as the gospel is wide) the church will itself adopt a theological consensus (creed/confession) as the basis of its faith and practice and at least try to act as if it believes it. Or to put it differently, our unity is a unity of faith, even if we are all in process of owning that faith together. The good news about a confessional church is that that other, secondary things that tend to divide our world outside the church is left at the door of the church in terms of our Christian unity in Christ. The Church designed by Christ is not united and defined by a shared political, socio-cultural or economic status, but by sharing in a confession of faith together. Expository preaching and theological study done communally with the church will define the Faith Confessing Church. In short, faith formation with the aid is considered the friend of the Confessional church.

(4) *The Sacramental Church* (cf. Acts 2:37, Hebrews 12:22, I Corinthians 11): The Church designed by Christ will see itself as joining with the church of heaven into a festal gathering of Christ's presence for the ultimate glory of God among the nations. God is in, with, and through Christ's sacramental advent by the Holy Spirit to become the very temple-church of God. A sacrament church understands the sacraments as being more than a sign, but also a seal wherein there is ordinarily a spiritual cause and effect relation between the sign itself (water, bread/wine) and the things signified (engrafting into Christ-Baptism, Persevering and renewing- Lord's Supper). Baptism then becomes a means of grace that enters us into the very mediated presence of God in the church unto salvation. (A Converting Ordinance). Weekly participation in the Lord's Supper becomes a means of grace that renews and perseveres us in our faith in confirmation of God's grace by faith alone. (A renewing ordinance). Therefore A sacramental spirituality sees church as less something we go to on Sunday as a passive consumer and more a community in Christ that we join as to be "members of the household of faith" (Eph. 2:19ff) with Christ as our High Priest

(5) *The Shepherding Church* (cf. I Peter 5, Hebrews 13:7,13, I Timothy 3): The Church designed by Christ will take grace-centered shepherding to express the doctrine of grace in a way that is accountable to and regulated by the apostolic foundation itself. Shepherd elders and pastors are themselves under the authority of the church, to be carefully tested and approved by the church with respect to being in succession to the apostles regarding their way of life and teaching (e.g. ordination). The shepherding church believes and practices both shepherding government and shepherding mercy within the gospel context of truth AND grace. That is, there is a kind of communion that is concerned for both the inward and outward things pertaining to the Christian life. Such a church will want a kind of ministry strategy that allows its members to have regular access to both shepherd elders and shepherd pastors (two different calling, albeit overlapping). People at CPC are visited at least one time per year by an elder, and have access to the pastor on a needs basis for instance.

In conclusion, the church that stands upon the designing foundation of the apostles with Christ as the cornerstone, is in fact necessary since the church is the very temple-presence of Christ today under His ascension ministry, We can't have Christ as our head without belonging and participating in the carefully "organized" or "fleshed out" body of Christ. The church as such is essential in so far as experiencing "total Christ" or "the fullness of him who fills all in all." And to be sure, this is not a new idea The church, by design, is Christology applied and such that in the words of yet another ancient pastor when comparing the church to a mother:

"For from her womb we are born, by her milk we are nourished, by her spirit we are animated [...] Whoever is separated from the Church [...] is separated from the promises to the Church; nor can he who forsakes the Church of Christ attain to the rewards of Christ [...] He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother..." (Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage (AD 250)).