



*To Know Christ . . .
and to Make Him Known*

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The Body Ephesians 4:1-16

It's a phenomenon that still astounds us! A tiny baby is born, who if everything goes right, will grow to become a teenager, then an adult, and hopefully live for 80 to 100 years. Throughout that lifetime, there'll be amazing changes in size, understanding, and a host of other ways. Yet everything that will cause that child to grow is already there—in potential.

As children grow, boys want to become men. Girls want to be “mature.” Teens and young adults want the freedoms that go with adulthood, but often not the responsibilities. Yet in an ironic twist, many adults, rather than going on to maturity, spend their lives trying to recapture youth! They want to feel young, look young, act young—indeed, they wish they could *be* young again! Somehow, we don't seem to appreciate how God has designed things, how we start as infants and grow to maturity!

Images of the church

Over the past several weeks, we've been looking together at Paul's letter to the Ephesians. As he talks about God's great eternal purpose in Christ and how God is working out that purpose through His church, Paul offers several images of the church of Jesus Christ to help his readers experience and understand more deeply what it means to be God's people, to be His church. In the second chapter, Paul declared that the church is God's holy temple that God is building and has already moved into, even before He has completed it.

Here in our text Paul offers another image, another picture to help his readers experience and understand what it means to be Christ's church—the body.

Of all things, the human body! Why in the world this image? Why not a tree that has deep roots and spreads its branches toward the heavens? Why not a mighty stream that has its source in God and flows through history to the destiny God has laid out for it? Why not an army that's fighting the powers of evil and darkness? Of all the images Paul could have chosen, why in the world did he choose the human body?

Actually, this was not an unusual image in the ancient world, especially when people were talking about some kind of group. While the ancients didn't know much about the intricacies of the human body compared to today's medical science, they were well aware that it was an amazing creation. So they often used it as an image to describe how individual members of a group in politics or a society should cooperate for the common good.

When we read Paul's letters, we see that this actually seems to be his *favorite* image of the church. He used it in Romans, 1 Corinthians, Colossians, and again here in Ephesians. But just what is Paul trying to say when he describes the church as the body of Christ?

To be the body of Christ

This text is the first of five “walk” sayings in the ethical instructions section of the letter that describe for the Ephesians (and for us) how those redeemed by God’s grace and brought together as one body are to live as His people. (The NIV translates the word as **live**.¹) This is a transitional passage as Paul moves from the body of the letter, which in this case is very doctrinal and theological, to the ethical instruction section. As a transitional passage, this first ethical section also brims with theology about the Lord’s church and its relationship to Him.

So what is Paul saying with this body image? What is the reality about the church that he wanted them to experience and come to understand?

Paul begins this section by appealing to his readers to *walk worthy of their calling*. He bolsters this appeal by stressing the *oneness* of the Christian faith and life. He emphasizes seven “ones”: **one body** (the church), **one Spirit** (the Holy Spirit), just as believers are called **to one hope** (resurrection and eternity with Christ as God’s kingdom triumphs), **one Lord** (Jesus), **one faith** (trusting Jesus as Lord and Savior), and **one baptism** (the common outward mark identifying believers as belonging to Jesus). Finally, there is **one God and Father of all, who is over all, through all, and in all**. In other words, *everything* about the Christian faith has the character of *unity* or *oneness* about it; in fact, God’s ultimate eternal purpose is to unite all things **under one head**, Jesus Christ (1:10)!

So to begin with, Paul wants them to experience the *unity* of the church. The body is *one* in Christ. For Paul, unity is not something we create. It’s something Christ has given His church, which we recognize and live out and protect by, as someone has aptly put it, practicing it fearlessly. It’s what Jesus prayed for in John 17 the night before His crucifixion and death. As we have seen earlier, in Ephesians 2 and 3, Paul stressed so powerfully that through Christ’s death and resurrection, God has created out of a broken, divided humanity one new humanity, in which both Jewish and Gentile believers are now all members of God’s family. Here, he goes even farther, to focus on living out that unity in relationships within the church. With such an intense focus on oneness, is it any wonder that Paul appeals to the Ephesians to **make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace**—the peace Christ brought us through His death and resurrection?!

Living and growing as the body of Christ

Maybe Paul is on to something here when he says the church is Christ’s body. After all, you can’t divide a body and maintain its wholeness and full ability and viability. Nor can a body be healthy if it never grows any. The tiny infant we cradle so tenderly in our arms has to *grow* in order to become an adult! If he or she doesn’t, something is *terribly* wrong.

Now Christ has made provision for the growth of His body toward maturity. Speaking of Christ’s coming down to earth and ascending to heaven, Paul restates Psalm 68:18, which talks about God’s ascending His throne, leading a host of captives, receiving gifts from people, even those who rebelled against Him. This is a picture of an ancient warrior ruler returning from battle, leading his captives. But Paul says here that Christ *gave* gifts to people—and the gifts were His ministers (apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers). He gave them so that they might equip or **prepare** the saints **for works of service** (the word was used for the idea of mending or repairing something, like a net, or even of setting a broken bone), **so that the body of Christ may be built up** (4:12). When ministers, like supporting ligaments that connect and support the different parts of the body, equip the members, and **each part does its work properly** in the

role for which it was placed in the body, a marvelous thing happens—the body grows up into the Head, Christ Himself, and **builds itself up in love** (4:16).

In other words, individually and corporately, we grow toward becoming all Christ intends for us to be. It's not just the ministers, or just the members; it's each one doing his or her part in the body that brings this growth. Many people today are into the physical fitness craze, especially bodybuilding. Paul was concerned about bodybuilding too—building up the body of Christ!

Do you see it? *God has made the church one body in Christ, and provides everything it needs to grow toward maturity.*

It all comes from him. *He* saves us by His grace, *He* places us in the body, *He* gives us the unity, *He* gives the gifts. But the growth comes from Him as *we*, the members of the body, respond in *faithful obedience* and fulfill what He calls us to be and do!

To be part of the church is to be part of a unified body where what *every single member* does is important and contributes to its growth toward maturity. That's walking in a manner worthy of our calling! That's the body of Christ functioning as it's meant to function. The members are diverse, not identical. But each member is important. *Every member has a vital role* to play in the one body.

Now all this is lived out in different ways that are unique to the particular setting of each local expression of the body of Christ, because each local congregation is the church in miniature, the body of Christ in microcosm. For some congregations, it might mean focusing on a particular ministry or mission. For others, it might mean dealing with issues that have crippled the congregation's effectiveness. For still others, it may mean launching out in faith, following Christ into areas of ministry and mission where they've never been before.

For us here at Temple Baptist Church, I frankly don't know *all* that it means. But I believe to the core of my soul that if we truly seek God with all our hearts, He will show it to us in His time and way. If we really want to know Him, if we really desire to do His will, He will reveal Himself to us, lead us in His way, and accomplish His will in, among, and through us, both individually and corporately as His church. As the Lord said to the exiles in Babylon through the prophet Jeremiah, we will find Him when we seek Him with all our hearts, and He will accomplish the plans He has for us (Jeremiah 29:11-13).

As He does, it becomes ever more incumbent upon us for *each one* to fill our role in the body, to do our part in the work of the body, so that it might truly function properly. When this takes place, the church becomes healthy, and that health shows. The church grows toward maturity, and that maturity shows and brings glory to Christ, the head of the church.

But sometimes something goes wrong. So often, throughout history, the church hasn't lived as Christ intends.

Sometimes a local expression of Christ's body doesn't grow toward maturity, or the unity Christ died and rose again to bring is abandoned, or even fought against! I've seen it so many times. Congregations get to a certain level, but don't grow on to maturity. They never develop the kinds of outward focus and intentional ministry and mission to which Christ calls them. Something goes wrong. Some part of the body doesn't function correctly, and that compromises the health, vitality, and effectiveness of the entire body.

I don't know which is sadder—to see a person whose body, because of disorder or disease, never develops, no matter how long the person lives, or to see the person who has been healthy and vibrant and productive waste away because some part of their body has ceased to function properly.

He was a bi-vocational Baptist minister, preaching and serving as pastor of small churches for many years alongside farming or several other occupations. He never had the opportunity for formal education, but he studied the few books he had diligently, especially his Bible and his *Matthew Henry's Commentary*. Strong as an ox, and seemingly healthy as a horse, he worked long, hard hours for many years, tending both his farm and whatever flock the Lord had placed in his care at the time.

Then, in his mid-60s, it started. First, he would forget where he had put something, then where he was in his sermon, then where he was, period. Something had gone wrong. Some part or parts weren't working right in his body. The doctors called it "hardening of the arteries." It looked like what we now call Alzheimer's disease.

Eventually, this mountain of a man, both physically and spiritually, was reduced to an unconscious shell. It was so hard to see my grandfather, once a beloved and respected pastor, a big strong man, in the end curled up like a little infant, knowing and saying nothing at all—just there—wasting away, his flesh literally breaking down with putrid sores. So strong a body, so vibrant a person, so wasted away . . .

Members of the Temple Baptist Church, this *must not* happen to us, to this church, to our church, *the Lord's church*, this local expression of the body of Christ!

And at this time and this place in history, in a very real sense, whether it does is in *our* hands!

†MEG

¹ Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION® (1984 edition).