

Outline of a study prepared for the
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The conception of the Church as the Body of Christ within the context
of the different ways in which the New Testament speaks of Christ, the
Spirit, and the Church

A Prospector's Survey and Some Sample Borings

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(A) What are the different ways in which the New Testament speaks of the Church?

In all there are more than 80 terms, which may be roughly grouped into 20 categories:

1. God's laos...Kingdom of God, of Christ...kings...sons of, heirs of the Kingdom...holy nation...chosen race
2. Israel...the 12 tribes...the circumcision...sons of Abraham
3. The Dispersion...exiles...strangers...pilgrims...colony of heaven...ambassadors
4. The New Jerusalem...heavenly, free Jerusalem...the Holy City...Mt. Zion
5. God's naos...temple of the Holy Spirit, of Christ...spiritual house...royal priesthood...living sacrifice...aroma...first-fruits
6. The Name of God, Christ, Holy Spirit...names in Book of Life...Nazarenes...Christians
7. God's household, family...sons of, heirs of God...brothers, sisters, mother of Christ...the woman clothed with the sun
8. God's flock...sheep and shepherds...lambs...pasture...fold...Passover
9. Slaves of God, of Christ...servants...stewards...ministers...friends...freedmen
10. Christ's disciples...followers...witnesses...confessors...those sent by him
11. The Way...access to God...sect...way of salvation, etc...coming from and going to God
12. The Saints...the sanctified...Holy Ones...the Justified...the Righteous Ones
13. The Believers and the believing...Faithful Ones...those born of faith
14. The Elect...the Called...the Chosen
15. Fellowship in God, in Christ, in the Spirit...in work...in warfare...in victory...in inheritance
16. God's planting...field, plantation...olive tree...Tree of Life...Branches of the Vine
17. Christ's Bride...Friends of the Bridegroom...Wedding Feast
18. Miscellaneous Analogies: salt...leaven...building...light...lampstands...pillar of the truth...sons of the Day
19. The Church and churches: (to designate congregations located in particular towns and provinces, to describe the whole people of God)
20. The One new humanity...the New Creation...In Christ...the Body of Righteousness, Life...the Fullness of God's Glory...the Body of Christ

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Note 1. It is quite impossible in such a list to indicate the fluidity of thought, the exuberance of imagination, and the profuse mixing of metaphors, to be found

everywhere in the New Testament.

Note 2. There would be a far more extensive list if we paid due attention to the verbs and prepositions as well as to the nouns and adjectives. Biblical syntax was far more verbal and prepositional than ours, partly because of the dramatic and the relational character of the thought.

Note 3. There is no image in the New Testament which does not, in context, bespeak a deep, abiding oneness, wholeness, singleness in that reality which we call the Church.

Note 4. In the use of every image, the person and work of Christ is assumed to be central and determinative for the life of the Church.

Note 5. Each major image offers, in context, an example of the paradox of the sinlessness (or better, holiness) and the sin of the company of saints.

Note 6. Each major image reflects a way of thinking which spontaneously combines metaphorical language with a clear ontological-eschatological reference.

Note 7. The profusion of vocabulary indicates the dangers implicit in selecting any one term (e.g. the Church, the Body of Christ) as a fixed starting point or as the pivot of all thought. Perhaps the point most adequate for bearing the weight as a fulcrum would be the ubiquitous activity of Christ, so long as this fulcrum does not exclude the simultaneous activity of the Father and the Spirit.

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(B) What are the passages which conceive the Church as the Body of Christ?

1. Direct, explicit, pivotal references (any study must include the entire context)

- Rom. 12:4 We though many are one body in Christ and individually members
one of another
- I Cor. 6:15 Your bodies are members of Christ
- I Cor. 10:16,17 The bread...a partnership in the body of Christ
- I Cor. 12:12-27 By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body
- I Cor. 15:35-44 sown a physical body...raised a spiritual body
- II Cor. 4:10-12 carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life
of Jesus
- Eph. 1:15-23 the fulness of him who fills all in all
- Eph. 2:13-22 that he might reconcile us both to God in one body
- Eph. 4:4 one body, one Spirit
- Eph. 4:11-16 from whom the whole body upbuilds itself in love
- Eph. 5:21-32 Christ is the head of the Church his body
- Col. 1:15-20 He is the head of the body, the Church
- Col. 1:24 Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body
- Col. 2:9-19 putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ
- Col. 3:15 the peace of Christ, to which you were called in one body

2. Indirect, implicit, radial references

- Mk 14:22 par. This is my body
- Jn 2:21 The temple of his body
- Rom. 8:9-11 If the spirit of Christ dwells in you
- Rom. 7:4 You have died to the Law through the body of Christ
- I Cor. 11:23-32 not discerning the body
- Gal. 6:17 I bear on my body the marks of Jesus
- Phil. 1:20 Christ will be honored in my body
- Phil. 3:21 He will change our lowly body to be like his
- Heb. 10:5,10 We have been sanctified through the body
- Heb. 13:3,11,12 You also are in the body
- I Pet. 2:24 He bore our sins in his body

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* Note 1. Passages which explicitly connect Church and body are confined to Pauline letters, and to five of them. This factor should warn us not to rely wholly on this one description of the Church. No fewer than 15 of the other 'ways' (cf. A) are used in the New Testament more frequently, more typically, more widely than body.

Note 2. The concept of body is used by Paul to serve many different motives and functions. It has multiple and changing associations and nuances which keep shifting from one passage to another, and even within the same passage.

* Note 3. In Paul's usage, there are many cognate and virtually synonymous expressions: in Christ, Christ in you; the fullness of God; the glory of God; united to the Lord; living and dying to the Lord; the body of righteousness and life; the one new man; the image of Christ; the new creation; one Spirit; the building of which Christ is cornerstone.

Note 4. These passages require that we never think body without thinking simultaneously of these cognate concepts. The changing configurations of ideas center not in the concept body but in the person of Christ and the work of the Spirit. No fewer than 20 of the other 'ways' of describing the Church intrude into the Pauline discussions of body.

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(C) What are some of the significant explicit connections between the conception of the Church as body and other ways of describing the Church?

1. The correlation between the body of Christ and the new creation, the last Adam, the image of Christ into which all who belong to him are being changed. (I Cor. 12:13, 15:45-49; Eph. 2:15, 4:13; Phil. 3:21; Col. 1:15,18,20,27)
2. As representative and inclusive of the new humanity, the body is the realm of reconciliation of the two human societies and histories - Jew and Gentile. Here aliens receive a joint citizenship in the one commonwealth of Israel. Members of Christ's body are heirs of the one Kingdom. (I Cor. 6:10,15; 15:50; Eph. 2:12,19; Phil. 3:20; Col. 1:20)
3. As the head of the body Christ is also the head of all principalities and powers. His name is above every name. He is creator-redeemer of all things. His body is the realm of reconciliation of all principalities and powers and of all human societies whose divided loyalties are dependent on those warring powers. His body is the pleroma of God who fills all in all. The one new humanity is representative and inclusive of the whole new creation: Where is God's peace, glory, Spirit, fullness, image - there is Christ's body. (Col. 1-2; Eph. 1)
4. These synonyms to body indicate important antonyms:
Solidarity in the last Adam vs. solidarity in the first Adam;
The life-giving spirit vs. the living body;
The heavenly body vs. the earthly body;
The new man vs. the old man;
The body of righteousness and peace vs. the body of sin and estrangement;
The body of this life vs. the body of this death.
(I Cor. 15; Rom. 5-8; Col. 2-3; Rom. 12; II Cor. 4)
5. The body is a building with its cornerstone, being knit together and built up by love. It is the temple of God, the people of God among whom He dwells and where every person has immediate access to him. 'Your bodies', 'the congregation', 'the one body' - where the Spirit dwells, there is the one temple of God. (I Cor. 6:15-19; Eph. 2)
6. The body of Christ is variously linked to
(a) the body of flesh which is inclusive and representative of all flesh (sinful, mortal Adam).

- (b) the crucified body, which bore our sins, through which we are sanctified, through which we die (e.g. to the Law), the marks of which we bear, the afflictions of which we complete, which is broken for many, and in which we are made one.
 - (c) his risen and glorified body, whose life is manifested in our mortal bodies, into whose image of glory we are being transformed, in likeness to which our bodies will be changed, whose life-giving Spirit now is at work overcoming the powers of sin and death.
7. The body of Christ is the bride of Christ. This indicates both the intimacy and permanence of union and the recognition of priority and authority of the husband (head). The union of two makes one body but does not eliminate the hazards of adultery. (Eph. 5; I Cor. 6:15-19)

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Note 1. What unites all of these together is the event of the dying-and-rising of Christ with which is bound in closest solidarity the dying-and-rising of those who belong to him. This event is variously described as the circumcision of Christ, the baptism of Christ, the reconciliation of all enmities, the taking captive of all captivity.

Note 2. In all of the above, body is a way of expressing the reality of integrity, mutuality, interdependence, koinonia, separateness in solidarity, the bond of the Spirit's indwelling, the power of the Spirit's movement, the shared embodiment of one vocation and one hope.

Note 3. All of these images in their contexts point to a reality which is ontologically and eschatologically ultimate, and yet one which is embodied in temporal and historical action, in personal and communal experience.

Note 4. Both of the sacraments, together with the total life of the chosen people, are directly and essentially related to the body.

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(D) What meanings which are marginal to the concept of the body of Christ are central in other ways by which the New Testament speaks of the Church? (Here we list only a few sample analogies, using passages where the body-image does not appear and speaking only of the total impact of the images as images.)

1. Many terms are more evocative of the historical involvement of the Church in the life and history of Israel: the people, the Kingdom, the Holy City, the sons of Abraham, etc. These terms protect the sense in which the messianic community was the mother of the Messiah. The story of God's people may have advantages historiographically over the story of the body. One tells more naturally in story fashion how God saved his people than how Christ saved his body.
2. Theologically, other terms express more fully the theocentric and the pneumatological character of the Church: God's Kingdom...the Temple of the Spirit...God's flock...God's household, sons, slaves...the Name of the Triune God...God's city...the olive tree...saints, sanctified, holy ones, justified ones...light...the Day.
3. Sociologically speaking, other terms may be more rich and viable in meaning than the term body. They provide clearer clues to the similarity of the Church to other communities as well as to the contrasts, e.g. the people of God vs. tribes and tongues and nations and peoples...the people vs. no people...aliens vs. citizens...the chosen race, a holy nation...fellowship...the Kingdom of God vs. the kingdom of Satan...the household of God vs. other families...the Name vs. other names...the city...salt...leaven...light.
4. Eschatologically speaking, other visions may have a wider and more satisfying cluster of associations than is centered in the term body, cp.

Rev. 21,22 and Eph. 2,4. The Holy City...the adoption and sonship...pilgrims and strangers...the Tree of Life.

5. Liturgically, many of the motifs of Christian worship may be more fully articulated in other ways of speaking and seeing and hearing. The Triune Name...the Door...the Way to God...the Flock and the Lamb...First-fruits...the Tree...the Vine...the Temple, priesthood, sacrifice, aroma...saints, sanctified, holy ones...koinonia...light...darkness and the Day.
6. Soteriologically, some of the other ways have varying values which are not fully evoked by the image of the body, e.g. the deliverance of a people from darkness into light...the tabernacle which accompanies the pilgrims in the wilderness...the way of salvation...new names for old...aliens-friends...fellowship...heirs and sons...sheep lost and found...those who are sanctified, justified, glorified...believers, born of faith...the called and the chosen...light.
7. Ethically, there are more effective ways of expressing: - the Church's duties in the world; the Church's mission to the world; the shape and the dimension of each person's decisions; the need for urgent progress; the imitatio Christi; the ethical quality of the congregation's koinonia. These ways are often neglected in the use of the body-image. The way...brothers of Christ and in Christ...aliens and ambassadors...pilgrims...heirs...koinonia...slaves and freemen...faithful ones...witnesses, stewards, friends...salt...leaven...light...disciples, followers, confessors...saints, holy ones, justified ones.
8. Psychologically, the direct personal encounter of each believer and each congregation with the personal Lord may be more clearly expressed and evoked by terms other than the body, e.g. Jesus the first-born of many brothers...the Way...the Name...slaves, servants, ministers, stewards, friends...disciples, followers, witnesses...ambassadors...citizens...believers, the faithful ones...the called and the chosen...fellow-workers, fellow-soldiers.
9. Pedagogically, there are other ways, perhaps less awkward than the body, for describing a reality which is perfect in its oneness and yet which grows toward wholeness, maturity, and perfectness. In this realm the biological allegory must stress the knitting together of bone and sinew. Other analogies may be more able to cope with the protean forms and manners of growth. God's people...the Way...sons and brothers...the tree...the vine...the building...light.
10. Other metaphors more immediately evoke the thought of men and nations yet to be included within the Church, communities still unevangelized, brothers still unborn. These may therefore be more dynamic and pregnant for missionary activity. God's people...the Holy City...first-fruits...the Name...Mt. Zion...the Way...family...embassy and colony...God's flock...the called and chosen...fellow-workers, fellow-soldiers...God's field...leaven...salt...light.

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(E) What are the ways in which these other images illumine the concept of the Church as the body of Christ?

The answer to this question must await further elaboration of the preceding sections. Suffice it to say that the study thus far strengthens the conviction that we cannot understand the full meaning of any image without an intimate acquaintance with

1. The living Scriptures and traditions of Israel.
2. The person and work of Jesus the Christ.
3. The total experience, personal and corporate, of the New Testament church.

4. All the other images - the nouns, the verbs, the prepositions, in fact, the inner logic and syntax - of early Christian thinking. All of this thinking springs from and points to the mysterious reality of the new humanity and the redeemed society.

We need to 'think' all of these things before we say 'body' and also before we say 'church'.
