

St. Paul: Saturday Session Eighteen: Mystical Body of Christ

Extensions of Paul's Message of Christ Jesus

Paul proclaims the marvelous Mystical Body in this fine phrase: ***For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.*** Romans 12:4-5. [All quotes are from the American Standard Version.] Jesus' eyewitnesses were so impressed by Love Himself that their memories overwhelmed them. Their remembrances of Him alive clouded His resurrection. See: Mark 16:14; Luke 24:6; Luke 24:34; Luke 24:35. The Holy Spirit's shifted their views from Christ Incarnate to Christ Resurrected. It took Pentecost to achieve this shift. But Paul had no experience of pre-resurrected Jesus. Christ appeared to him after rising, after achieving the unity with His followers that is the Mystical Body. Therefore Paul's experience is the Mystical Body from the start. Jesus appeared to Paul as Head of the Mystical Body. This is why the Jerusalem Biblical Commentary (JBC) affirms that Paul seldom refers to Christ in His earthly existence. All Paul knew was Christ risen into glory. Paul knew "these climactic events of Jesus' career, rather than ... His ministry, personality, or even His message", p 1386. Even when Paul alludes to what he learned from eyewitnesses, he refers to "the Lord", *Kyrios*, or Christ transcendent by resurrection into glory. You can see this in Paul's quotes of Jesus: 1 Thes 4:2; 15; 5:2; 13; 15; 1 Cor 7:10-11; 25; 9:14; 11:23-25; 13:2; Rom 12:14; 17; 13:7; 14:13-14; 16:19.

Quite simply, Paul meets Christ as risen Lord, beyond His earthly existence, into the Mystical Body. All is one for Paul. Jesus' apostles experienced Christ partially. Only later, with great effort, did they unify their fragmentary experiences into One. The Holy Spirit had to inspire this Unity at Pentecost, Acts 2:3-4. It took the apostles over three years to integrate their experiences. Even then one could say that Paul had to instruct Peter, Gal 2:11. His instruction encourages us, because it shows members of Christ's Body strengthening each other. Eyewitnesses proclaimed the *kerigma*, or basic truths of Christ-life to Paul, first in Damascus, later in Arabia, and then in Jerusalem. Paul delighted in their instruction. But no doubt it was vague compared to the clarity of Paul's first experience of Christ as the Mystical Body Lord. This *Kyrios* instructed Paul in this Mystical Body, and sent Paul to expand this Mystical Body throughout space and time. Thank the Lord, he accomplished that task quite well.

Mystical Body Inspires Paul's Mission

As we noted in previous sessions, Paul's Torah (law) training prepared him to recognize the Messiah. Paul saw how Jesus fulfilled the law, bringing it to climax in the New Law of Love. Paul's Hellenistic education enabled him to relate well to gentiles, and thus communicate Christ effectively throughout Mediterranean civilization. As JBC, p 1387 notes, "Other NT writers could claim a Jewish background and Hellenistic contacts, but none of them have Paul's profundity in understanding the Christ-event, except possibly John." Paul's profundity proceeds from his Mystical Body experience. Faith-life animated Paul in Christ. This Christ-life was not obscured by theories. Instead, he accepted Jesus entirely, so Jesus lived in his heart. ***For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.*** Phl 1:21. See also Gal 2:20. These, and many of your favorite quotes, show Christ-flame, or Love, flowing from Paul to all he met. May it flow unimpeded from us all.

Paul shows this Christ-flame operating in many famous statements. One of my favorites is: ***However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.*** Rom 8:9-11. During your personal review of Paul, you no doubt dwelt in this wonder: that Christ absorbs you into His spirit. You experienced escaping the flesh into the spirit because God's Spirit dwells in you. The Holy Spirit, Who is the Spirit of Christ, dwells in the Mystical Body. Everyone who belongs to Jesus accepts His redemptive sacrifice. If we turn our sins over to Jesus, He removes sins, or death, from us. Christ's righteousness washes our sins away, enlivening His Spirit in us. As usual, Paul sees the whole whole-ly, and proceeds immediately to the resurrected Christ, Who resurrects us also. As we unpack what Paul said, we notice that he gives glory to each Trinitarian Person. Glory to: God the Father, Who creates; God the Son, Who redeems; and God the Holy Spirit, Who cares for us now. Because Jesus rose, and ascended into heaven, He sent His Spirit to us, Jn 16:5-14. Both Paul and John see supreme unity in God's many acts to save us.

Everything God did, from creation through redemption toward the end-days, is right there in Paul's vision. Because Christ inspired him, he oozes and spurts Jesus. So flames flash forth from Love Himself. JBC develops this theme from p 1388 to p 1402. It takes that many pages to show the various dimensions of Paul's vision. The technical name for this integrated sight is Christocentric soteriology. This means redemption-study centered on Christ. God's acts are so rich in meaning and value that no human can express everything. What God did surpasses our comprehension. In the Mystical Body of Christ there are too many meanings and values. Paul's theology must be centered in Christ because of his Damascus experience of Jesus. Christ appeared risen and living in the people Paul persecuted. This is the Trinity's One Being, acting through Three Persons. The Word of God, Jesus Christ, incarnates so He can teach us. Because salvation history is one in Christ, and Christ inspired Paul, all is united. Jesus is Revelation in the Flesh. He is the Single Message of the Single God. He teaches us that God is One in Being, but Three in Persons. Jesus reveals the Trinity in Unity. Christ's words express His life. His life is complete revelation, enhanced by His words. The Trinity is Incarnate in Him. First His life ex-

presses Trinity then His words: ***Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father***, Jn 14:9. The Trinity accomplishes our redemption, dying with Jesus on the cross. Then the Trinity, lives Christ-life in time through His Mystical Body. In the 2000 years since Christ rose from the dead, His Body is visible in His members. We make His Mystical Body tangible today, and others will keep it going.

Every cell of Christ's body proclaims Paul's message. 1 Cor 1:22-25 is his clarion call: ***For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*** Unity shines through these words. Paul re-focuses us. He shifts us away from signs and wisdom, that imitators of Moses and Plato seek. Instead, Christ on the cross expresses God Who is Love. Jews stumble over this scandal, which is foolish to Gentiles. So they reject Christ. But we accept Christ's salvation, and enter His Mystical Body. Whether we were Jews or Greeks before, we become Christ after. Christ worked greater signs than Moses and all the prophets put together. He is the power of God. Christ is wiser than all Greek philosophers together. He is the wisdom of God. Stretching language, we could say that Christ is Power/Wisdom. Jesus teaches us this Power/Wisdom by redeeming us all, washing away all human sins in His blood, flowing from the cross. There is no greater act than Infinity repaying our infinite debt to Infinity. The greatest miracle ever done is Mercy Himself on the cross redeeming us from Justice Himself.

Justice and Mercy meet when God pays our sin-debt. Only Infinity could blend Justice with Mercy to take our sins away. He didn't cancel the debt, He paid it. This act shows that Infinite Love loves us infinitely. Small minds can't encompass this Large Act. But if we accept this Magnanimous Act, we glimpse Infinite Love becoming Lord by dying on the cross. This glimpse urges us to dwell on, and in, this infinite act of love. Paul impels us to join with our Head, Christ, and to pulse with His life in the Mystical Body. Then we grow in Christ. Paul summarizes this excellently:

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love. Eph 4:11-16. Paul combines Spirit-gifts with Mystical Body in this rich message. The Spirit animates the Mystical Body, and all His gifts build it up, equipping the saints to serve. Each cell lives increased unity of the faith. Faith-life is Christ-life. The more we believe, the more we live Christ. If we mature, we attain fullness as body-cells, and Christ's body matures to fullness in Him. Personally, we advance from childish fancies to speaking the truth in love. Thus we grow into Love = Christ. He is our head, our Lord, our leader. From being like leaves in the wind, we mature into functional parts of the Mystical Body. Solid cells, we work properly, for the growth of the body, building up in Love. Love is the key. Love is Christ, Who is the Soul of this Body. Love is the Trinity, acting as One, though Three Persons. Who sees Christ, sees the Father and the Spirit. Who sees the Mystical Body, sees the Trinity, plus all those angels and saints who accept God.

If you say that this is hard to understand, you understand its immensity. You identify its main value. Easily understood things bore us. But hard to comprehend things intrigue us. There's always more to know. What we know is good, so there's always more to love. We call inexhaustible fascinating being: mystery. Since our act of knowing identifies us with what we know, we become this fascination. We become this mystery. Our act of loving also identifies us with what we love. So we become the mystery we love. Between the two, we become any mystery that we give our selves to. By giving ourselves away to mystery, we grow. If we are better at loving, then we love the mystery. Either way, or using both our acts of identifying, we unite with mystery. Created mysteries intrigue us for a long time. But they end, and we move on. The Mystical Body is the main mystery. Somehow it's God plus His followers. It's the union of God with free creation. What more could we want? As NJB, p 1389, attests: Paul sees the Gospel as mystery. It's not a finished, static mystery, but an ongoing, dynamic force in the universe. As Paul puts it: ***Jesus ... is delivering us from the coming wrath***, 1 Thes 1:10. Jesus, everlasting Life, visible in His Mystical Body, acts wherever His followers live in Him.

Paul was so imbued with Christ, so receptive to His mystery, that he lived Mystery Himself. We follow behind, but we too experience Mystery. This is the Mystery for which God created the world. This is the culmination of creation. God creating humans is marvelous. Humans rejecting God is tragic. God saving us from sin is barely believable. But He did. Then He united His followers with Him. This union is so intimate that we become flesh of His flesh, bone of His bone, by allowing His Spirit to animate us. This is the Mystery of the Mystical Body. It perfects creation beyond our wildest expectations. For all eternity, we can delight in this Mystery. Never exhausting its rich meaning and value, we will learn more and love more without end. That's Infinity present in and by Christ. That's what we want to contemplate eternally. That's what will finally satisfy our infinite longing. Only Infinity can fill our infinite need for Infinity.