

Does First Corinthians 12 Mean the Universal Church

by A.W. Pink

The speaker argues that the 'body' in 1 Corinthians 12 refers to a local church, and that Scriptural baptism is essential for membership in a New Testament church.

Scripture: Matthew 12:36, Matthew 20:3, 1 Corinthians 3:13, 2 Corinthians 5:10, Galatians 6:10, Titus 1:12, James 2:20, 2 Peter 1:5, 2 Peter 3:18

Topics: "Faith And Works", "Christian Living"

Description

Greek Word Studies delves into the meaning of 'argos,' which signifies being without work, ineffective, unproductive, or worthless. The term is used in the New Testament to describe idleness, laziness, and unprofitability, emphasizing the importance of faith accompanied by works. A life without good deeds is likened to barren land or money gaining no interest, failing to fulfill its purpose for God. Believers are encouraged to grow in virtues and do good to others, ensuring their lives are not useless or ineffective.

Transcript

For almost ten years after his regeneration the writer never doubted that the "body" spoken of in 1 Corinthians 12 had reference to "the Church Universal." This was taught him by those known as "Plymouth Brethren," which is found in the notes of the Scofield Reference Bible, and is widely accepted by evangelicals and prophetic students. Not until God brought him among Southern Baptists (a high privilege for which he will ever be deeply thankful) did he first hear the above view challenged. But it was difficult for him to weigh impartially an exposition which meant the refutation of a teaching received from men highly respected, to say nothing of confessing he had held an altogether erroneous concept so long, and had allowed himself to read 1 Corinthians 12 (and similar passages) through other men's spectacles. However, of late, the writer has been led to make a prayerful and independent study of the subject for himself, with the result that he is obliged to renounce his former view as utterly untenable and unscriptural.

The Authorized Version of 1 Corinthians 12:13 reads as follows: "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into the body"--concerning this we shall have more to say later on. On 1 Corinthians 12 Dr. Scofield, in his Reference Bible, has this to say: "Chapter 12 concerns the Spirit in relation to the body of Christ. This relation is twofold: (1) The baptism with the Spirit forms the Body by uniting believers to Christ, the risen and glorified Head, and to each other (vs. 12, 13). The symbol of the Body thus formed is the natural, human body (v. 12), and all the analogies are freely used (vs. 14-26). (2) To each believer is given a

spiritual enablement and capacity for specific service," etc., etc. In capitalizing the word "body" Dr. Scofield unquestionably has in mind "the Church Universal." Should there be any doubt upon this point it is at once dispelled by a reference to the notes of Dr. Scofield on Hebrews 12:23--"The true church, composed of the whole number of regenerate persons from Pentecost to the First Resurrection (1 Cor. 15:52,) united together and to Christ by the baptism with the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:12, 13), is the Body of which He is the Head." It is to be noted that in both places the Doctor speaks of "the baptism with the Spirit," but in 1 Corinthians 12:13 there is no mention made at all of any baptism "with" the Holy Spirit, either in the English or in the Greek; such is merely a figment of the Doctor's imagination.

The Revised Version of 1 Corinthians 12:13 reads thus: "For in one Spirit were we all baptized into one body." We believe this is much better and a more accurate translation of the Greek than the Authorized Version rendering. But we have one fault to find with the Revised Version rendering too. The capitalizing of the word "spirit" (pneumati) is utterly misleading, and while it is well nigh impossible to get the real meaning of the verse. For the benefit of those who do not read the New Testament in the Greek, we may say that in the language in which the New Testament was originally written there are no capital letters used, except at the beginning of a book or paragraph. Pneuma is always written in the Greek with a small "s," and it is a question of exposition and interpretation, not of translation in any wise, whether a small "s" or a capital "S" is to be used each instance where the word for spirit is used. In many instances it is translated with a small "s"--spirit (Matt. 5:3; Rom. 1:4; 1:9; 1 Cor 2:11; 5:3; etc.). In others, where the Holy Spirit of God is referred to, a capital is rightly employed. Furthermore, the Greek word pneuma is used not only to denote sometimes the Holy Spirit of God, and at others the spirit of man (as contra-distinguished from his soul and body), but it is also employed psychologically; we read of "the spirit (neuma)of meekness" (1 Cor. 4:21), and of "the spirit (neuma) of cowardice" (2 Tim. 1:7), etc. Again, in Philippians 1:27 we read "stand fast in one spirit." Here "spirit" has the force of oneness of thought, accord, object. Note that in Philippians 1:27 the Greek for "in one spirit" is precisely the same in every respect, as the Greek at the beginning of 1 Corinthians 12:13, and in Philippians 1:27 even the translators of the Authorized Version have used only a small "s" for "spirit"--as they most certainly ought to have done in 1 Corinthians 12:13. One other point concerning the Greek: The preposition translated "by" in 1 Corinthians 12:13 is "en," which is translated in the New Testament "among" 114 times, "by" 142, "with" 139, "in" 1,863 times. Comment is needless. "In one spirit were we all baptized" should be the rendering of 1 Corinthians 12:13. The "baptism" here is not Holy Spirit baptism at all, but water baptism. Note: whenever we read of "baptism" in the New Testament without anything in the verse or context which expressly describes it (as in Gal. 3:27; Eph. 4:5, etc.), it is always water baptism which is in view.

"In one spirit were we all baptized into one body." Into what body? The "church Universal" or a local church of Christ? We submit that a careful study of 1 Corinthians 12 can furnish only one possible answer--a local Baptist church. Note the following points.

(1) The head of the "body" described here in 1 Corinthians 12 is seen to be on earth--verse 16, 17. Now it would be utterly incongruous to represent the Head of the mystical, universal church (supposing such a thing existed, which, as yet it certainly does not) as on earth, for the Head of that church which, in the future, will be the universal Church of Christ, is in heaven, and it is in heaven the universal church will assemble (see Heb. 12:22-24). But it is perfectly fitting to represent (in the illustration of the human body) the head of the local church as on earth, for wherever a local New Testament church assembles for worship or to transact business for Christ, He is in their midst (Matt. 18:20).

(2) In 1 Corinthians 12:22, 23, we read of members of the body which seem to be "more feeble," and of those "less honorable" and of "uncomely" parts of members. Now such characteristics of members of the human body accurately illustrates the differences which exist between the spiritual states of various members in a local assembly, but the illustration of the "body" here fails completely if the "Church Universal" is in view, for when the Church Universal meets in heaven every member of it will be "like Christ," "fashioned into the body of glory," and such comparisons as "more feeble," "less honorable," "uncomely members," will forever be a thing of the past!

(3) In 1 Corinthians 12:24 the apostle speaks of what God has done in order that there should be no schism in the body (v. 25). Now let any impartial reader ask, in what body is a schism (division) possible? Certainly not in the Church Universal for that is solely of Divine workmanship, into which human responsibility and failure do not enter. When the church of the First-Born assembles in heaven, glorified, "not having spot or wrinkle or anything," there will be no "schism" there. But in the church which the apostle is contemplating in 1 Corinthians 12 there was "schism" (see 1 Cor. 11:18, etc.). Therefore it is proof positive that it is the local church, and not the Church Universal, which is in view in 1 Corinthians 12.

(4) In Corinthians 12:26 we read "and whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it: or one member be honored, all the members rejoice with it." Now is this true of a Universal Church? Certainly not. Is it true that whenever a believer in Christ in India or China (of whom I have never even heard) "suffers" that "all the members," all believers in America, "suffers" with it or him? Certainly not. But it is true ideally, and often in experience that when one member of a local church "suffers" all the members of that local church suffer too. We must refrain from adding further arguments.

Sufficient has been advanced, we trust, to prove that the "body" referred to in 1 Corinthians 12:13 is a local church, and that the "human body" is here used to illustrate the mutual dependence and relationship existing between its various members. From this established and incontrovertible fact several conclusions follow:

First, the "baptism" by which one enters "into" a New Testament church is water baptism, for the Holy Spirit does not "baptize" anybody into a local assembly.

Second, no matter what our nationality--Jew or Gentile--no matter what our social standing--slave or freeman--all the members of the local church have been baptized "in one spirit," that is, in one mind, purpose, accord, and there is therefore oneness of aim for them to follow, oneness of privilege to enjoy, oneness of responsibility to discharge. Furthermore, they are said to "drink of one spirit," that is, they are one, and all appropriate (symbolized by "drink") this oneness of spirit.

Third, there is only one way of entrance into a local church of the Lord Jesus Christ, and that is by "baptism" scripturally performed by a scripturally qualified and scripturally authorized administrator, for we read "in one spirit we were all baptized into one body." It therefore follows that none save those who have been Scripturally "baptized" have entered "into" a New Testament Church, all others being members of nothing but man-made institutions. Hence the tremendous importance of "keeping the ordinances" as they have been delivered by Christ Himself to His churches.

The writer would apologize for writing at such length (he has condensed as much as he possibly could) but cherishes the hope that his own personal confession with which he began this article will exercise others to search the Scriptures more diligently and to "prove all things" for themselves, not accepting the teaching of any man, no matter who he may be. Brethren, let us covet to be "Bereans."

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