

Functional Union

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the concept of Functional Union in the Body of Christ, emphasizing the importance of interdependence and mutual support among believers.

Scripture: Romans 12:4

Topics: "Unity in the Body of Christ", "Functionality of Believers"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the concept of 'Functional Union' within the Body of Christ, illustrating how each member plays a vital role in expressing the personality of Christ. He explains that the Church exists not for self-expression but to manifest Christ's presence and personality, highlighting the importance of interrelatedness, interdependence, and mutual support among believers. Sparks warns against both the exaggeration and neglect of the Body, urging Christians to recognize their responsibility in functioning as part of this living organism. He concludes that Christ's headship is essential for the Body to operate effectively, and that spiritual growth is contingent upon maintaining a strong connection with one another and with Christ. The sermon calls for believers to actively engage in their roles within the Body to fully express Christ's life and purpose.

Transcript

"For even as we have many members in one body, and all the members have not the same office: so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and severally members one of another" (Rom. 12:4,5).

"For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of the body, being many, are one body; so also is Christ. For in one Spirit were we all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether bond or free; and were all made to drink of one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; it is not therefore not of the body. And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; it is not therefore not of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? But now hath God set the members each one of them in the body, even as it pleased him. And if they were all one member, where were the body? But now they are many members, but one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of thee: or again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. Nay, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be more feeble are necessary: and those parts of the body, which we think to be less honorable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness; whereas our comely parts have no

need: but God tempered the body together, giving more abundant honour to that part which lacked, that there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffereth all the members suffer with it; or one member is honoured, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ, and severally members thereof" (1 Cor. 12:12-27).

"...His body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all" (Ephesians 1:23).

"That he... might reconcile them both in one body unto God" (Ephesians 2:15,16).

"...For the perfecting of the saints, unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12).

"Christ... from whom all the body fitly framed and knit together through that which every joint supplieth... maketh... increase" (Ephesians 4:15,16).

"He is the head of the body, the church" (Col. 1:18).

"For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, being himself the saviour of the body" (Ephesians 5:23).

"We are members of his body" (Ephesians 5:30).

We continue with our consideration of this great and many-sided revelation of union with Christ. We come now to the fifth aspect of union with Christ, which we are calling Functional Union: that is, as a body, with head and members.

Inclusive Function: Expressing the Personality - Christ

I am going to begin with the inclusive function of the Body of Christ. That function is the expressing of the personality of the Body, which is Christ. The Body of Christ, the Church as the Body of Christ, does not exist for self-expression. It does not exist for any other purpose at all than that of expressing the inward personality, the personality dwelling within the Body, that is, Christ. We never rightly speak of a corpse as a man. We can speak of it as the body of a man, but never as a man. The man is not there. His body may be there. We may, on the other hand, speak of a living body as a man, but we know quite well that the body, even though it is animated, is not the man, or is at most only a small part of him. The body is only the vehicle or vessel for the expression and activity of the man. The real man is what is inside the body.

So it is with the Body of Christ. We discriminate between Himself and His Body and yet we identify them: that is, we identify Him with His Body, and in a sense we identify His Body with Him, and yet there remains that difference. It is important to keep this in mind. Christ is not merged into something called His Body and His own personality lost. He remains the personality of His Body. There may be the framework without the personality, just as there can be the personality without the Body; but - and this is the teaching concerning the Church as His Body - for all practical purposes the two are one. That is, Christ demands His Body, and the Body demands Him. The Body is dominated by Him in order that, according to one passage we have just read, it may be His completeness, "the fullness of him that filleth all in all."

So, then, the Body has as its function two main things. One is to LOCATE the person or the personality, to bring Christ where the Body is, so that, where the Body is, there Christ should be. He has decided and chosen so to bind Himself up with His Body, that that Body, the Church, should be the place where He is

found; that, in the minimum of representation - two members - it should bring Him into any place, that by it He should be able to come into any location or situation. One purpose of the Body, then, is to locate Christ.

Secondly, its function is to express the personality, to be the means, the vessel, wherein and whereby He can express Himself, make Himself known - bring people to see the Lord, to know the Lord, to understand the Lord. That is quite simple, but it is quite challenging.

There are several matters connected with this. Let us look in the first place at some things of relative or secondary account. It is possible to exaggerate the Body. That is sometimes done in the physical, human realm! Such an assertiveness, such an elaboration, such an aggrandizement, such an adornment and decoration of the external, the body, the fabric - to the hiding of the personality - so that the thing which impresses is the form, the pageantry, the external, not the presence of the Lord. It is that which touches the senses of men, so that their sight is taken up and their human natural senses of perception are occupied with the externals of the Church and often with the people themselves making an impression, and the Lord Himself is not to be found. It is possible to exaggerate the body; and apart from that - possibly exaggerated - observation, in many other ways we can bring the TECHNIQUE of the Church, of the Body of Christ, how it must be done and so on, so much into view, that all this is occupying the attention instead of the Lord Himself. The very teaching can obscure, if we are not very careful. Unless the Lord, the personality within, transcends all the means employed, then there is something wrong and we had better reconsider our means.

In the next place, it is possible to make the body ARTIFICIAL - now I am on very thin ice! - by titivating and decorating and painting. And what is it all about? It is an attempt to create personality where it is felt to be lacking. Forgive me if this makes any reader feel uncomfortable! But that is its underlying object - to make an impression, to carry weight, to give a sense of personality, or to make up some conscious lack. It is possible to be so occupied with this elaboration in connection with the Church in order to make an impression. How much of it, indeed, is already being done by the organized Church, with this object in view. All sorts of things are being put on, taken on, employed, all the paint and gilt and tinsel, all the artificial, in order to try to overcome this sense of a lack of impact, in order to make an impression because the impression is not there naturally; and it is quite possible to make the Body of Christ artificial, and its registration an artificial one, which will wear off unless you put more paint on and still more. You have to keep it going or it will fade out. It has to be done every morning!

On the other hand, it is possible to underestimate and be careless about the body, and that is equally evil. To be careless, slovenly, shabby in your bodily presence dishonors the personality, it takes something from the man, it degrades him. That could be applied in many ways. We make the observation as we go on that we must honor the Body of Christ. We are under obligation to keep the Body in respect for the sake of the One who is inside. While I speak, of course, of the fellowship of the Lord's people - the mutual honoring and respecting and helping and trying to elevate the standard of spiritual life; keeping things from becoming spiritually shabby and threadbare and down at heel, it does have - and forgive the somewhat mundane application - it does have an application to our personal presence, as to whether we, as Christians, in our personal appearance are really discrediting our Lord, by carelessness in habits or in dress, in behavior or manners. These things let the Lord down. As Christians we ought to be far above them. Now I am not suggesting to you that you at once go and begin to elaborate your personal adornments, but I do say that Christ deserves to be honored by the body and in the body, and it is possible to sin against Christ by carelessness with regard to the body. I would like to follow that more closely in our

mutual care of one another - what the Word calls "provoking one another to good works," and "washing one another's feet"; that is, helping one another to keep from the earth, to keep out of touch with the low level of this world.

Functional Relatedness

We turn now to look at some things of primary account. The things that we have just been considering are perhaps only relatively important but there are also the greater things, the things of primary account for the full expression of the personality. I am using that word deliberately, for the time being, instead of Christ, because you will get the point better, I think, if I do so. For the full expression of the personality, which is Christ, there must be first of all a body, and a body, as we have read in 1 Cor. 12, is not so many individual scattered members. The body is not so many disconnected or unconnected members. The Body of Christ is the fellowship of believers, in the Holy Spirit, in a very definite, conscious relatedness, involving an inward registration and recognition that we are related to all the Lord's people, that locality in this matter is not the final criterion, that we are related to the Lord's people everywhere. That is, indeed, most definitely emphasized in the New Testament as an absolute necessity for the full expression of Christ. The full expression of Christ cannot come through unrelated individual believers. There may be some small, some partial expression of Christ in such, but fullness requires relatedness, and I challenge you on this matter. It is open to proof and it is constantly demonstrated. Your measure of Christ depends upon your relatedness. You will never get beyond a certain small degree of the expression of Christ in isolation, in separation, in independence, in apartness. The increase of your measure of the expression of Christ demands that you are in vital union with other members of His Body. I cannot be too emphatic about that, because I see everywhere the spiritual limitations and even the spiritual ravages resulting from the loss of that great reality. The Body must exist; there must be relatedness. And not just as an abstract thing; it must be real, it must be conscious, it must be deliberate, it must be a part of the very life. We know it - and if we do not know it, Satan knows it - but the Lord knows it.

Interrelatedness

And then there must be interrelatedness. Interrelatedness is essential to the full expression of this union, this fellowship, this relatedness; there must be a working together, there must be a mutual consideration with a view to helping one another, definitely helping one another. We are members not only of Christ - we have read that twice already - but "severally one of another." That is interrelatedness, and it is the very practical aspect of the Body of Christ that there is mutual support and mutual helpfulness, and that we are really laying ourselves out for the good of other members of the Body of Christ. That is the only way of the fullness of His expression. I said this is subject to test, to proof. You will find that your measure of Christ increases when you go to help another member of Christ; when you consider the need of other members of the Body and do what you can to meet it, Christ is coming out in fuller expression in your own life. If you are wrapped up in yourself, circling around yourself, occupied with yourself, nursing your own grievances and sufferings and trials and difficulties, and so becoming more and more isolated and imprisoned within yourself, your measure of Christ is diminishing all the time. It is that outward movement to His own that means spiritual increase to the one who makes it. It is necessary, it is essential, for the full expression of the personality. The New Testament is largely constructed upon that truth.

Interdependence

And in the next place, interdependence. It is only another phase of the same thing. This brings in a general spirit of meekness. One member cannot say to another, "I have no need of you." It is not, perhaps, likely that you would say that in so many words. It may have been said in Corinth. It does seem as though something like that was going on there, and those actual words may have been used by some about others. "We can do without you!" "You do not count!" But it is not likely that spiritual people would use those actual phrases. Yet we act them. We behave like that too often. It is one of the lessons that we have got to learn. We really must consider this matter - that somehow or other the members which are least honorable are necessary. Somehow or other, those whom we would discount are necessary. It may be difficult sometimes to see how they are necessary. At any rate, it is to be an attitude. Can the Lord do without that one? Does not all the grace of God in salvation and in glorification come down to that least one? And am I not the least one, after all? Do we feel we are more important than others, and that we therefore merit the grace of God more than some others do? You see, the whole question of meekness arises. Interdependence means that somehow we need one another. That is true, and that is a necessary basis for the full expression of Christ - mutual recognition, mutual honoring; so that we take the attitude, "Now, this child of God, with all the faults and weaknesses, cannot be despised, cannot be cut off as of no account. Somewhere they fit into the whole in the realm of the Spirit, and the measure of Christ is increased." In that way we try to make the most of the least. There must be an acceptance of the fact of the Body.

Functional Constitution and Appointment

Then we must accept, definitely accept, the fact of the constitutional function of each member: that is, that each member, if really a member of Christ - and so possessing the indwelling Holy Spirit - each member, by the Holy Spirit, is in some way constituted with a function. Now, we must take that to ourselves. You may feel that you have not any place or function; you have always been trying to find out what it is, but you have never discovered it. How many people have come to me and said something like this - "Do you really believe that I represent some function in the Body of Christ? I wish you would tell me what it is!" I will answer that in another way. I am saying that we must accept the fact as stated in the Word of God, that, if this is not just some picture, some illustration, this figure of the body; if it is a reality, if the body is more than a metaphor, if it is a living reality and the Church is constituted on the very principles of the physical body of a man, as undoubtedly it is, if that is true, then these facts hold good, they are facts and we have got to accept the facts.

Now you can theorize about the functions of your body, if you like, but you will sooner or later have to accept the facts of it: they are facts. And so are these things that I am mentioning. We have to accept the fact that as members of Christ, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we are constituted with a function in the Body of Christ and we have got to function. We have to recognize that we are there to function, not to be parasites or passengers, but to fulfil vital functions in the Body of Christ. If we accept the fact, and adjust ourselves to the fact, the Holy Spirit can do things; but if we become passive, if we sit down and decide that we do not count for anything and therefore what is the good of it - today we are eggs, tomorrow we are feather-dusters! - if we adopt that kind of attitude, the Holy Spirit will not do anything. The Holy Spirit says, Now then, on your feet and give Me an opportunity; take a positive attitude toward this reality, this truth, that you are a member of Christ's Body and that He has no paralyzed members.

That means, of course, more than the acceptance of the fact of our position in the Body and of our having a function in the Body. It means the acceptance of our RESPONSIBILITY, that we regard ourselves as responsible people in the Body of Christ, that we take responsibility for the expression of Christ - not

personal importance, assertiveness, self-realization, but the expression of Christ. I am here as a member of a Body, the function of which is to express the indwelling personality, which is Christ. That is a serious responsibility, a solemn charge and obligation, as well as a privilege. We must take this up. Why am I joined to Christ? Why am I a member of Christ's Body? For such I am if I am in Christ. Why am I in that position? For no other and no lesser purpose than to be the vehicle of the expression of Christ, and if I am not doing that I am contradicting the very meaning of my union with Christ. We have to take responsibility over it. Every day we have to feel responsible about this matter of the expression of Christ. Of course, that will come down to many things. We slip up, we make mistakes; we speak a wrong thing, or a right thing in a wrong way; somehow or other we default; and at once we say, "That is not Christ, I must put that right; that has made a false impression, that has dishonored my Lord, let me clear that up." That is taking responsibility. There will be many small things like that - though nothing is truly small in the Body of Christ; and we could speak of many other things.

Unconscious Functioning a Sign of Health

Now in a healthy body all this exists very largely unconsciously. Coming back to what I said, asking, What is my function? - your trouble will be that you will not know. In a healthy body, everything happens without your being conscious of it. You do not mentally reason out, work out and think and decide when you are going to take the next breath. You just do it. You never thought anything about it. That is going on in your body if you are healthy. It is all functioning so largely unconsciously. There is an unconscious sense in our physical system. It registers before we register. When we are pulled up by some symptom, some feeling, we begin to realize that something has gone wrong physically. But the system registered that before we were conscious of it. It is only bringing us to recognize what it has already recognized. That is going on all the time. In a healthy body there is no self-occupation with - What am I, who am I, where am I, what is my function? And when the Body of Christ is healthy, there is a spontaneous expression of Christ. It just happens, and it is most healthy when it is like that - indeed it is only healthy when it is like that. When people are self-conscious, when people are letting you know that they are trying to do something for the Lord - there is something wrong there. That is the Body occupied with itself instead of with the Lord. If we are really occupied with the Lord, a very great deal of this self-occupation disappears. Do not worry as to what your function is. You live in union with the Lord and you will function. You may not be able to see what it is that represents your value, but it will be there; you may not be able to see how it is that you are serving the purpose of the Body, but it will be served. Is it not true that we have known those who have felt themselves the poorest, the weakest, the most foolish, and we have found a fragrance of Christ, a beautiful fragrance of Christ, in that life, and they were all the time so troubled because they did not feel they were any good at all? We have met Christ. It is quite a healthy state to be in - far better than the opposite. There is an unconscious registration going on.

And when there is this unconscious registration, if anything does go wrong, what has been registered in the spirit within begins to make itself felt outwardly, and we become aware of the symptoms. We know there is something wrong. It has come up somewhere from the depths; something is not right. What I am saying is that there is a fact of things before there is an understanding of things. Before there is a mental apprehension, there is a fact, the fact of function before we understand. We said in an earlier chapter in this series that sometimes there can be a true living, beautiful expression of the real meaning of the Body of Christ without any of the teaching or the technique. That does not mean that teaching becomes unnecessary; but the right order is that the thing should be there first, and that you should come to something more by understanding what is there: whereas if you put it the other way and get all the

teaching and technique and then try to get reality, it does not work - it is the wrong way round.

Christ's Headship

I am going to close with this, the key to all - and there is a great deal more than I have said: you know how much we could say about the Body of Christ and its function, it is just full of wonderful Divine meaning - but the key to all is Christ's Headship expressed in every member, in every part. There is a sense in which our heads, physically, naturally can be said to be present in every part of a healthy body. You can take the finest point and touch any part of the body to the farthest extremity - and how do you sense it? you know it in your head, you register it there. In a healthy body, the head, if it is free to function and is really functioning, is in touch with, and as it were represented in, every part. In the same way the Headship of Christ - His absolute Headship, Lordship, sovereignty, call it what you will - being expressed in any and every part of the Body and in every function, is the key to everything.

This means, of course, simply that every one of us, howsoever many we be, must be immediately and utterly under the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ if the foregoing is to be true. The expression of Christ demands the Lordship of Christ, the manifestation of Christ demands that He have His place as Head in every part.

Now do take that as the sum of everything; but do remember, do believe it - for you are going to prove it - you are going out or you are going on, you are going down or you are going up; we are all either going to make spiritual progress or we are going to retrogress. There is no standing still in this. We are on a slippery slope, and the only way is to keep going up or else we shall go down, and it is going to be like that all the way. Have no mistake about it. We are not just going to be stationary. If we do not go on we are going to lose ground. It is a fact which is borne out by the experience of every one of us, that we just CANNOT cease to be positive. It is a most perilous thing to cease to be positive in the Christian life. Lack of fervency of spirit uncovers us, it takes our defenses away, and we shall be steadily undone, steadily disintegrated, steadily made to lose out. This matter of the Body of Christ as a living organism, with relatedness and interrelatedness and interdependence, is no theory or technique. These are vital relationships connected with the increase of spiritual life, the enlargement of the expression of Christ, the justification of our very existence. But they are necessary things. You let your fellowship with the Lord's people suffer and you let your own spiritual life suffer. If you in any way become detached and isolated in spirit, in mind, in action, you cut the very vitals of your own spiritual life. It is like that. This functional union with Christ in His Body is essential. It is essential to Him, for the fulfillment of His purpose. It is essential to us in the fulfillment of our very life as Christians.

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