

The Corporate Vessel (1 Corinthians 12:12)

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Church is a corporate vessel, with the Headship of Christ being essential to its order and growth, and individual members functioning as parts of Christ through union with Him.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:12, Ephesians 4:15

Topics: "The Body of Christ", "Unity in the Church"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the corporate nature of the Church, identifying it as the Body of Christ, where individual members must recognize their role within the whole. He explains that the Church is not merely a collection of individuals but a spiritual entity where each member is vital to the functioning of the Body. The importance of Christ's Headship is highlighted, as it is essential for order and growth within the Church. Sparks urges believers to submit to Christ and to one another, fostering a spirit of mutual recognition and service that leads to the Church's growth in Christ's likeness. Ultimately, he calls for a deeper understanding of our identity as the Body of Christ, united in spirit and purpose.

Transcript

There are two titles or designations of the Church, which are, to my mind, supreme amongst the designations. The first is "Christ": "For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ" (I Corinthians 12:12). That seems to be the very highest designation of the Church. The other is "the new man." Both of these are represented by the other designation, "the Church which is His Body." In the sense in which Paul meant it, the Body is the Christ corporately presented. Again, it is the "one new man." In those two designations -- "Christ" and the "one new man" -- we have the whole idea of representation, and that is set forth as supremely a corporate thing.

There is one Body, and we are members one of another; and the importance of the individual has to be subjected to the importance of the whole Body. The importance of the individual is subjected in the Body to the Body. It is what the Apostle is leading to when, by the grace of God given to him, he exhorts every man not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think, because we are members one of another. The individual importance must not stand out from, or in, the Body as something over the Body -- something in itself. There is an importance of the individual member, as the Apostle makes perfectly clear... and great importance; but that importance of the individual is not to protrude.

That brings us to another very vital aspect of the great truth of the Body of Christ, as presented in the Word of God, and that is the Holy Spirit and the order in the Body. You cannot read these writings of Paul (Romans through Philemon) by the Holy Spirit in the light of facts as you see them, or of conditions as you meet them, without being rendered well-nigh breathless. It is an astonishing understanding that Paul has concerning the Body. You have only to stand back from these things as you read them, and feel this is either something amazing, or else impossible. Many have surrendered to the latter conclusion. You are sufficiently aware of, and alive to, the importance of this matter. This is not just a presentation of teaching about great themes, great ideas; this has to do with God's ultimate purpose represented in this universe -- an expression of God in Man-form. That is our destiny, that is what we have our being for; and we miss our destiny unless we recognize this. We have no adequate knowledge and understanding of what God is doing, and why He is dealing with us as He is, until we see this purpose of God in our being conformed to the image of His Son, the producing in this universe of a corporate Man which is Christ in full expression.

Firstly, the Body grows and makes increase through order. Paul makes that perfectly clear. It is as the Body is fitly framed that it grows. It makes increase with the increase of God. That is on the basis of being fitly framed and of every joint working in its due measure. Growth and increase, therefore, are by means of this order. We hardly need turn again to the analogy of the physical body, which is presented to the mind of the Apostle as he writes about the Body of Christ. It is quite true that there is no growth in the body -- no development -- unless there is an ordered state in the body... what he calls a fit framing. It is wonderful how the Lord has created things in the physical world so that their position is best suited to their purpose. Conceive of any other order in the arrangement of our members, and see how we should be handicapped. We do not want to be humorous, but rather to simplify this matter and get the principle home. But supposing your thumbs were on the other side of your hands and you had to work in that way... And get hold of everything on the outside. Get anything that is freakish, and see at once how limitation arises.

Now the Lord has an order which, if recognized and if functioning, leads to the greatest measure of increase -- it is itself determined to realize the goal of God; and we can no more realize God's goal without God's order than we can realize the physical possibilities of our bodies with a body disordered. The inclusive factor in this order is the Headship of Christ... and, of course, our holding it: "holding the Head, from which all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God." The Headship of Christ and our holding that, is the inclusive factor. Every faculty is centered in Him as Head. No part of a body can function if the head is severed from the body or in any way separated in the sense of function. Get in between the head and the body in any way by a nervous disorder or a fracture, and the whole body is out of order and incapable of functioning. Everything is gathered up into the head. Thus the Headship of Christ becomes essential to the order of His Body, the Church.

Now we must take up the whole matter of the individual function of the members. We have not to take up the matter of our own function in the first place -- as to what it is. That is not the first consideration. Our relatedness to others is likewise not a thing of which we are to make a mental problem. The first thing that we have to do is to be subject to Christ; and when the individual is subject to Christ, that individual is by the Holy Spirit brought into a proper function and relationship with every other expression of Christ. Harmony comes in that way. It is spontaneous.

Secondly, the members of Christ are functioning parts of Christ. That follows from our being one spirit, as joined to the Lord. Let us get rid of the physical idea altogether and recognize how that the Body of Christ is the uniting of renewed spirits indwelt by the Holy Spirit. It is not the uniting of so many physical bodies

and calling them the Church. That is merely a congregation. It is what we are together in spirit that makes us the Church. Congregations do not make a Church. The Church is spiritual... because it is the union of spirits. We are not talking about something physical, but about the spiritual Body, the Church. "But he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit" (I Corinthians 6:17). That is the nature of union, and that is the nature of the membership of the Body. Membership of Christ is something other than our physical relatedness. What a lot of notions we have to get rid of.

If we have our names put down on a certain Church roll, we say we have joined the Church. Membership of the Church is membership of Christ by union with Him in our spirits, and that union is brought about by Christ's indwelling our spirits. The next thing that Paul will teach us is that there must be a mutual recognition of the Body of Christ: "...to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think" (Romans 12:3). If he does that, he will be setting other members at naught... or in a place less than should be occupied by them. It does a great deal of harm to the Body of Christ when one member dominates the situation. Mutual subjection to, and recognition of, one another represents what the Lord would have.

Further, there must be a ministering of Christ to one another. We have something of Christ -- a faculty of Christ for ministering Christ; that is, a measure of Christ to be ministered by us... and our business is to minister Christ to one another. In that way the Body grows. Is not Christ our Life... and can we not, as functioning in Christ, minister Life -- His Life -- to one another? Surely we can. That is what we are called to. Thus the Body grows. Oh, that the Lord will enable us to be greater ministers of Life -- His Life -- to one another, and not of death.

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