

# The Nature of the Body of Christ

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The Body of Christ is a universal, interconnected community of believers, related to every other member of the Body, with Christ as our Head, and the Holy Spirit as the unifying factor.*

**Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 12:12

**Topics:** "The Body of Christ", "Unity in the Spirit"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the unique nature of the Church as 'The Body of Christ,' a concept exclusively articulated by the Apostle Paul. He explains that this designation transcends mere community or congregation, illustrating a profound spiritual union where every local assembly represents the whole Body of Christ. Sparks highlights that the Church is not localized but universal, with the Holy Spirit as the unifying factor, ensuring that every member is interconnected and vital to the whole. He stresses the importance of recognizing the Body's spiritual nature, which is rooted in the revelation and application of the Cross, and the necessity for believers to function under the Lordship of Christ and the liberty of the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a deeper understanding of the Body of Christ as a living, spiritual entity that reflects Christ's fullness and purpose in the world.

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## Transcript

We now proceed to consider the nature of the corporate life of the Church, and we want to note first of all one or two quite elementary facts which, nevertheless, always carry a freshness of meaning to those who are spiritually alive to the Lord, and the first simple truth is this, that the term, the designation "The Body of Christ," is peculiar to the Apostle Paul. Other designations of the Church are found before Paul's day and in other parts of the Scriptures outside of the writings of Paul, but the title, "The Body of Christ," "The Body," "The Church, which is His Body," is peculiar to Paul. The Church was not a new idea at all. The Lord's people were familiar with that title. The Lord Jesus had spoken of His Church to the Apostles. There was nothing new in that, but when you come to speak of that Church as "The Body of Christ," it is an entirely new idea, a new thought, a new conception bringing with it an entirely new presentation of the nature of this thing. It says very emphatically and forcefully and clearly that the Church, as regarded by God, is not just a community; it is not a congregation, it is not something denominational, or interdenominational, or even undenominational.

And yet you may use the term "Church" and have a mentality encircling that term which conceives of the Church as a community of Christian people, a Christian society, a company of people on the earth of

mutual interest in the things of Christ. But this designation carries things into an altogether different realm. It is a body. Not a body of people, but that which is represented and illustrated by the physical body of a man. I do not mean that the Church is the physical body of Christ, do not misunderstand, but that the physical body of a man is taken as an illustration of what the Church is. (Christ still has His own personal and separate being and spiritual body in glory).

### No Such Thing As A Local "Body"

Now another factor in the truth of the Body of Christ is that there is no such thing as a local body. There are local churches, or local assemblies, but there is no such thing as a local Body. That is made clear in one passage at least when rightly translated - 1 Corinthians 12:27 - where the unfortunate translation of some of our versions is "Ye are the body of Christ." In the Greek there is no article there, it does not say, "Ye are the body of Christ," but "Ye are Christ's body." That gives an entirely different complexion to the local assembly. This word spoken to a local company of believers at Corinth most clearly implies that the part is the whole in implication, that the local body is the whole in representation, the whole body is represented by that local company. Now that need not be so in the case of local assemblies or local churches, but you cannot localize the Body of Christ in that way. That is, you cannot cut off so many members of a physical frame and put them in one corner and call that the body. Wherever members of Christ are, there in implication and representation the whole Body of Christ is, and the Lord's mind is that every local company shall be a living representation of the whole Body, a microcosm of the whole Body of Christ. What is true of the whole Body has got to be true there, because they are not a detached company, not an isolated or separated assembly, there by implication the whole Body is. That embraces - whether you are able to grasp it or not - all the great elements and factors of the Body of Christ.

It says quite clearly that nothing in the thought of God is local, departmental, separate or independent. In the thought of God everything to do with His Church is universal, relative, interdependent; the Church is one. It is saying that you are so vitally related to other believers that you are the Body of Christ in implication, in effect, in nature. It declares most emphatically that the part is the whole in the thought of God, and is to be regarded as the whole. Let us put it this way.

Here are we in this place in this part of this city, a company of the Lord's people, and vitally related to this company here is the whole Body of Christ. We are not a detached or separate company, an independent assembly, we are in a living, functioning spiritual union with every other member of the Body of Christ in this whole world wherever they may be. France, Switzerland, Germany, Poland, America, Africa, China, India, etc., they are all here in the relativity of the Body of Christ, and all involved in our gathering together. We have to see that more fully presently, but when once that principle is spiritually apprehended then we have got our feet on the way of our universal ministry. Whenever we gather together, even as two or three, the whole Body is gathered with us in the heavenlies and is affected by our gathering together. It is tremendous to think that two or three of the children of God gathered in one place anywhere, in living touch with the Head, are affecting and can affect, the whole Body of Christ; every member, however many millions there may be, so that they are in effect the Body of Christ.

Now how does that come to you? Does it reach you, or is it so familiar that you say that you know all about that? It is necessary to place fresh emphasis upon it from time to time.

### The Body - Christ's Complement

Now further, the Church as the Body is the complement and fullness of Christ, associated with Him as Head over all things, the complement of Christ, completion of Christ, the fullness of Christ. We are in Ephesians, you know, and here the Church, the Body is "the fullness of Him that filleth all in all," the Church is said to be the fullness of Him. Associated with Him as Head over all things. To illustrate: while unrevealed, while still a mystery held from the ages and generations, the Body truth in principle is contained in the Word right from the beginning. It had never been specifically unveiled or mentioned but it is there. Truths are eternal, and from the very beginning you have a principle of the Body represented and illustrated in the case of Adam and Eve. The woman was taken out of the man and then brought to the man to complete him, and that is the Church, that is the Body of Christ; taken out of Christ and then brought to Christ to complete Him. His completion, His complement unto His fullness associated with Him as Head. "As the man is the head of the woman so Christ is the Head of the Church," associated with Him as Head over all things. We will take that up again presently for its practical outworking.

Let us note still further, the Word of the Lord reveals the Church as complete in the mind of God at any given time. This is never dealt with in tenses in the Word of God, that is, past, present and future. It is always complete in the present tense, in the mind of God. The Lord never talks about the Church when it will be complete; the Lord never talks about the completing of the Church in a future time. You have such phrases as these, "The whole Body," that is a declaration now, as though in Paul's day, when he wrote that phrase, the Body was complete; he is speaking NOW about the whole Body. "All the Body fitly framed," speaking in his own day. You have either got to decide that it was only the saints in Paul's day who made up the Body of Christ, or ruling that out and admitting believers after Paul's day, you have to come to this conclusion that in the thought of God as expressed by the Holy Spirit in these words the Body is complete in any given time. That takes you back to the Ephesian word to the "before times eternal" when God completed the Body in His own mind, "whom He foreknew, He predestinated." Back there in eternity the thing was complete, and that completeness IN THE MIND of God exists at any time and every time.

Then we go on to note that the Body is for the display of Christ. Just as a man expresses himself through his body, so Christ expresses Himself through His Body, and the Body's supreme and all inclusive function is for the display of Christ.

#### The Holy Spirit: The Unifying Factor In The Body

Now as to the great unifying factor in the Body of Christ. What is the unifying factor in the Body of Christ? It is not a mutual acceptance of certain truths presented. That does not constitute the Body of Christ. It is not that we all agree to believe certain doctrines. The unifying factor of the Body of Christ is the Holy Spirit. "We were all baptized in one Spirit into one Body" (I Cor. 12:13). "There is one Body and one Spirit" (Eph. 4:4). Individually we have each a spirit, a separate spirit. The Body of Christ has only one Spirit and that is the factor which makes the Body one.

Now you can clearly and immediately see how, out of that, many practical issues proceed. The necessity, for instance, for receiving the Holy Spirit. That is very elementary, I know, but it is a foundational fact. Our "Churchmanship" is tested on that truth. Have we received the Holy Spirit? But then the fact is not enough, the function is necessary; and for the Body to function, it is not only necessary that the members should receive the Holy Spirit, but that the Holy Spirit should have His full place in every member. His full place! The Body can only function when the Spirit has His full place, His complete place given Him in each member.

Now the order of things, not chronologically but spiritually, is very clear in the arrangement of the New Testament. Romans precedes Corinthians, and Corinthians precedes Ephesians, and necessarily so. Romans brings in the Cross specifically for the setting aside of the natural man. Corinthians has as its objective, its stress, its note, the place of Christ in absolute Lordship. All the trouble at Corinth was because the Lord Jesus was not in His place as Sovereign Head, as Lord; and the word of the Apostle is "We proclaim Christ Jesus as Lord." They were making men lords - Paul, Apollos, Peter; they were putting men in the place of the Lord Jesus. They were putting things in the place of the Lord Jesus, even the spirituals, they were not giving Him His right place as absolute Sovereign Head, and the letter was brought in for that purpose. Romans to set aside the natural man, Corinthians to bring Christ into His place as Lord; then Ephesians can come in and you have, as constructed upon those two principles - the natural man set aside, the Lord Jesus established as Lord - the Body presented and functioning upon that two-fold basis.

You cannot have an expression of the Body of Christ until the natural man has been set aside. The uprising of the natural man in any way or measure violates the whole Body of Christ, and is a positive antagonism to the Sovereignty of the Holy Spirit. The flesh cannot have a place in the Body of Christ if the Body of Christ is to be what the Lord conceives it should be. If it is to function, the Lord Jesus must be absolutely Lord in the case of every believer.

So that is the order, and then, beloved, the Spirit's method is again revealed in His wisdom in following that up by Colossians. Chronologically Colossians comes before, spiritually after, Ephesians. Colossians is the full inheritance in Christ, the fullness of God is vested in Christ, He is the sum total of all the Divine fullness. Colossians is the New Testament counterpart of the Book of Joshua. Christ is the inheritance. He is the land of promise flowing with milk and honey, the land of riches and wealth. He is all that, and you come into the fullness of Christ as the Body on the ground of His having become Lord, and the flesh, the natural man having been set aside. That is the Body of Christ in its nature. Apply those laws today and you will get a living expression of what is in Ephesians. The reason why we have no, or such little, expression of what is in Ephesians today, the Body mightily functioning in the heavenlies, is because the natural man has not been ruled out, because Christ is not in His place as absolute Lord.

Therefore, what is basic in the first instance to the Church, the Body of Christ, and to the revelation of the Body of Christ, is the practical outworking of the Cross. We shall never, by the Lord, be led to see the Body of Christ until we have been led to see Romans, especially Romans 6, until there has been a revelation to us of the Cross. I do not mean a presentation of the principle of the Cross, but a revelation of the Cross. Now probably in quite a number of cases that has been borne out.

Speaking for one's self, one preached Romans 6 for years, one preached the message of the Cross in fullness for years, as truth, as Scripture, and you could never find a flaw with the doctrine of the Cross as then preached. But then the practical application of it had not come about, and the time came when the Lord confronted one with the implications of Romans 6, and it was as though one knew nothing of Romans 6 when confronted with the real meaning of it, for the thing was so drastic, so terrific that it nearly knocked one off one's feet, and slew one. Such a difference between the doctrine of the Cross and the applying of it. When that was got through and worked in we came to see that the Lord had included us in the death of Christ, not only as sinners, but as men with every bit of our natural equipment, our natural facility, even to preach the Gospel (which was a natural facility to preach), and all those things which were employed in Christian service as our resources, the whole range, intellectual and every other realm. The Lord brought us to see that all was included in the death of Christ and that all things have to be out from Himself in the

new creation (that is the law of the servant of the Lord, as the Lord Jesus Himself said, "I do nothing of Myself" (John 5:19), everything now out from God, a life of total dependence upon Him for everything) when that was applied in a practical way it meant a tremendous upheaval and for a time it was death to everything, it was the end.

Now that is true to our experience, but when that was got through, when that in principle was established - not that there has been no more of the Cross applied since, for it is always being applied - when the Lord had the thing so registered that for evermore we recognized the necessity for the natural man to be kept out, then after a while the Lord began to reveal the great truth of the Body. We had preached on the Church, which is His Body, for years, had been of an interdenominational spirit and frame of mind where we regarded all believers as members of the one Church, the one great spiritual community, had studied Ephesians most thoroughly. But when the thing began to break as a revelation from heaven it was as though we knew nothing about it at all, and the practical outworking was tremendous as to cause again another revolution, for the teaching which before never raised practical issues in certain realms now began to raise these.

For instance, with the teaching apart from the revelation, the denominational issue was never raised at all; when the revelation came it was found impossible to be a denominationalist. It was not a mental attitude taken, but one had come into a spiritual position where one was out of the whole thing and it was a contradiction to go on in that thing when one was out of it. I am illustrating, not applying this to you as teaching and saying that the teaching of the Body of Christ demands that you shall leave a denomination. The revelation may put you into another position, but don't you move out on mere doctrine, or because of what I say. Stay where you are until you get a revelation which makes it impossible for you to remain. Revelation raises practical issues while doctrine may not do so in the same way. We need more than the apprehension of Bible truth with our natural minds, for many minds have many different apprehensions.

We were saying what is foundational to the Body of Christ is a revelation and application of the Cross, for when the natural man of the flesh is ruled out, put aside, smitten, then you see the way is paved for true spiritual apprehension of the Body of Christ because the Body of Christ cannot exist and function with any natural man about. That is the nature of the Body of Christ. The natural man is put out altogether, so again let us resay that the revelation of the Body is based upon A REVELATION and AN APPLICATION of the Cross. Then the Body becomes the sphere of the Holy Spirit's activity. The little phrase is in 1 Corinthians 12, "As He wills," He appoints, He gives gifts, He equips, as He wills, implying the complete liberty, the unrestricted liberty of the Holy Spirit. If the Holy Spirit is restricted, in that measure the Body is limited in its realization of the Divine calling and the fulfilment of the Divine purpose of its existence. Only the unrestricted liberty of the Holy Spirit can produce a right representation and a right functioning and activity of the Body because the Body is the sphere of the Holy Spirit's activity.

We have seen that Christ is the Head of the Body, and that the Holy Spirit has His sphere of activity in the Body. Now taking the familiar illustration from the physical body, we know that every member and every faculty of this physical body is related vitally to the head, and functions in relation to the head, if the body, of course, is in right order. Throughout the whole of this complex physical system there is the network of nerves; a tremendously comprehensive system, linking every needle-point of our physical frame to the farthest extremities with the head, so that you register pain from your finger or toe in your head. Cut your head off and you can injure as many fingers and toes as you like and you will not feel it! Everything has its location in the head, all the sensibilities of the members are registered in the head. It is possible to take a needle and, if the whole brain system is understood, to apply the needle-point to any given part of the

brain and put out of action any member of the body, and leave the others untouched. By an understanding of that system a needle can be applied to a certain point in the brain and put the hand, or the foot, out of operation and leave the other members operating, this whole thing is so wonderfully gathered up in the head. Christ is the Head of the Body, all the members are joined to the Head, all the members are consciously registered in the Head, have their consciousness by reason of their relationship to the Head, their consciousness spiritually, which Paul means when he says, "We have the mind of Christ" (I Cor. 2:16b).

But what is that nerve system? It is the Holy Spirit. He is the spiritual nerve system of the whole Body, linking all with the Head, He is the consciousness of the Body, He is the One Who brings from the Head those reactions of the judgments and decisions of the Head. He is the One Who brings to the Head everything concerning every member, and so makes the Body and the Head one complete whole. The Holy Spirit is that nerve system throughout the whole Body. Now if the Holy Spirit is arrested, checked, injured in any one member the completeness of the Body's functioning is at once hindered, interfered with. That is why I said at the beginning that any local company is the whole in effect, that if we, beloved, here, for instance, check the Holy Spirit, or He is arrested, or if here this member is injured in relation to the Holy Spirit the whole Body is affected by that. If the Holy Spirit is checked here, for instance, in the matter of prayer, the whole Body suffers in that, not the local company merely; the whole Body. If the Holy Spirit, on the other hand, has His full way here the whole Body will reap the benefit. This Body is a universal thing and its universality is centred in any local company, the whole is there. How in these bodies of ours, when they are in proper order, one member affects the rest! Have the toothache and every bit of your body suffers with it, it is not long before that abscess in the tooth has you universally involved! It is true. You suddenly burn a bit of your body, a small bit, and your whole body goes through with a shudder.

How true this presentation of the Body is in the Word of God. "If one member suffer, all the members suffer with it" (I Cor. 12:26). But that is not on the earth. I may be going through a very great deal of suffering without you knowing anything about it so far as the natural life is concerned, you are not affected by it, but beloved, there is a realm where if one member spiritually suffers the whole Body is involved in that suffering, which shows this Body is a heavenly thing and its relationships are not natural, they are spiritual, and that the unifying factor of the Holy Spirit operates apart from the natural consciousness. Have you got that? If we neglect our private prayer the Lord is losing something in His Body far away - His children on the other side of the world are affected by our behaviour. To the natural consciousness it is not so, but the Holy Spirit knows it.

But why always take the negative side, why not the positive, that the maintenance of a true Holy Spirit life is always, whether we are conscious of it or not, to the good of the whole Body of Christ. We do not live to ourselves, or die to ourselves (Rom. 14:7), but the maintenance of a true testimony even where other believers know nothing of the conflict, it may be in a home or business place, where we are physically out of touch with all other believers, members of Christ, yet the maintenance of the testimony there in faithfulness is in that realm of the Body, the heavenlies, a great service to the whole Body. That is why the enemy likes, if he can, to smash a testimony in a home or in a business, because it is not merely the local situation which is affected, but because of the universal blow that he can strike at the very Head, Christ, and we should see to it that the testimony is not something we try to keep up in public gatherings, it is involved in our domestic life, our business life.

Heavenly Relationships Reflected In The "Body"

This brings us back to the Ephesian letter again. All the relationships of the believers are to be on the principle of the one Body. It is not a sweep down from the heavenlies to the earthlies to bring in "Husbands love your wives," etc. That is not coming down to the earthlies, that is saying that relationships of believers are to be on the principle of the one Body. Am I a husband, then my attitude, relationship, conduct to my wife must not be on a human basis but as a fellow member of the Body of Christ, realizing that not merely natural interests are involved but universal interests. In our relationships the whole Body is bound up. You know quite well that is true. If husbands and wives become spiritually dislocated as children of the Lord, there is something in that which does great harm to the testimony of the Lord, and great harm to the Lord Himself and is used by the enemy to become a great adverse spiritual factor over and beyond that local domestic situation, it registers something in the spiritual realm which is harmful. And so in all other relationships; servants to masters, a maid to her mistress. Not just good Christians as on the earth doing their service in a good Christian way - earning wages; not just as an earthly thing, but to regard that master, that mistress, as a fellow-member of Christ. Not unto them as men and women but to recognize that bound up with our service to them is the whole universality of the Body of Christ.

Paul includes the whole Body in the relationships of master and servant, mistress and maid, in principle. That is, I think, most obvious in its outworking. You get believers who are in these relationships of masters and mistresses and servants, and you get some strain between them; beloved, that reaches far beyond the mere location of it, it reaches out and affects the Lord's interests in a much wider range than that.

If only we recognized this as a declared law of the Body of Christ! It is not a matter of whether we see it doing the mischief or not, it is whether the Lord says it is so. The Lord says here as clearly as anything can be said, that these relationships are not locked up within the compass of their own operation, but they do reach out into a great universal expanse of the heavenly Body and the whole Body of Christ is spiritually affected by these strains which come into these relationships.

You see what is involved, you see what a motive we have in our relationships for keeping them on a high level. If there comes between those in these relationships, these strains, these cross-purposes, these cross-currents, this being offended and upset, this breach of true love, our attitude must be, not just that this is a miserable unhappy thing, and the sooner we make it up the better; our attitude must be, this thing out in the realm of spiritual intelligences is working against the glory of Christ, this is working against Him as the Head because all these relationships are joined so vitally to the Head; this is working against the Holy Spirit as the unifying power of the whole Body, this is doing damage, and therefore, inasmuch as we are so minutely related to all the members by the Holy Spirit, what one does must somehow, all beyond our realization or consciousness, touch Christ, touch the Holy Spirit, and therefore, all other members. It is doing that. That is the revelation here, that is the nature of the Body. You see why we should see to these relationships and lift them up out of the earthlies. I think that is something to think more about.

Relativity is the law of the Body of Christ. Relativity is holding fast the Head; and let us beware of trying to maintain the Body in its oneness along the horizontal line. You cannot do it. It is a hopeless thing, and we shall always be running round and making apologies. On the horizontal we cannot do it, but if we hold fast the Head, we shall find our gravitation is together. We cannot give Christ His place fully and absolutely and be at cross-purposes with another believer. Christ must have His place so that we do everything unto Him, all for Him, all for His sake. We cannot have an attitude like that and maintain a grievance with another believer. Holding fast the Head and everything being unto Him would demand an adjustment in our relationships and bring it about. We cannot love the Lord with all our hearts and not love one of His; that is a contradiction. So that the oneness of the Body first of all demands that we hold fast the Head.

## The Liberty Of The Spirit

There must be the liberty of the Spirit in us in order to realize the Body and its ministry. I am coming down to practical questions. There must be absolute freedom from human organization, ecclesiastical government, man's control AS SUCH if there is going to be a full functioning of the Holy Spirit. To get into a hide-bound religious system, ecclesiastical control, a human organization of the Church where you have to preach every so often whether you have anything to say or not because you are paid to do it is absolutely against the Holy Spirit. That is not the principle of the Holy Spirit, and we must be absolutely free from all such things if the Spirit is going to function freely and we are going to have ministry in the Holy Spirit.

That is the principle of the Spirit. It was that that the Jews, the Jewish leaders, were so set against in the case of the Apostle Paul. He said, "certain came in to spy out our liberty" (Gal. 2:4). What was it? That he had thrown off the yoke of the law and the Jewish system and now he was exercising himself in the universal realm of the Body of Christ, Gentiles and Jews, just as much the one as the other, liberty in Christ. He was free from all yokes of tradition, system, and organization religiously on the earth, in order to fulfil his ministry of revelation as the Holy Spirit led him. That is essential to the Body of Christ. By which I mean that to try to organize the Body of Christ, the Church, and to try to set a programme for it and hand it to the Holy Spirit and say, "will you kindly take the chair and carry out our programme" (that may seem irreverent, I know, but it is not meant to be so) is so utterly contrary to the principle here revealed.

The Body of Christ is a thing emancipated from the earthly systems; it must be to function. It is not our forsaking the earthly system because we have taken hold of certain truths, but our being emancipated. There is a right place for spiritual government and subjection in the Church, and the "free lance" principle is just as wrong as officialism.

But I must come to a close. We will close on that point. We cannot take up Church membership, and we cannot take up Church work in the Body of Christ. We have heard people say they are going to take up Church work. Those ideas are utterly foreign to the truth of the Body of Christ. We cannot join the Body of Christ. Take the physical illustration again, and see how ludicrous it is for someone else's hand or arm to say that it is coming to join my body! It is absurd. This is a Church which we cannot enter into horizontally, we have got to come into it from heaven, we have to come into it by birth, not by adhering or accretion. That is the law of the Body's growth. It is by birth, out from the heavenlies, and what is true of the relationship, the membership of the Body of Christ, is true of the ministry, the work. We cannot take up work or ministry in the Body of Christ. When we get a true spiritual thing representing adequately the Lord's mind, people from the outside cannot come into that and begin to minister. They have to come into the revelation that is there by the Holy Spirit and come into that on an experimental basis. You cannot invite preachers to come and preach. The fellowship in that ministry is the fellowship of revelation: that you have come into it on the same ground, by the same way, you have been born into it from above, the only basis of Body ministry.

The organized church can do anything it likes, but in the Body of Christ, no! In its ministry the thing is essentially coming in from above and not joining from the outside. So we cannot join the Church in the New Testament sense, we cannot take up Church work in the New Testament sense, we have to be an organic part of it, and the revelation of the truth of the Body has no place for that system which appoints officers and workers in a kind of mechanical, official way. You cannot take hold of a brother and make him an official in the Body of Christ, you can in an earthly system, but not here. Such must grow up by a

spiritual process, and the ministry is expressed, grows up, out of the inner life, it is not official, it is organic.

That opens up a whole realm of truth that would be profitable, but we will stop there just now, and ask the Lord to give us the revelation, if we have not got it, for however much more we may say about it, after all it will become to us only as teaching, truth, doctrine, unless the Lord makes it live, gives us the revelation. But oh, there is such a vast difference between what is called the Church here, its system, its methods, its relationships, and this truth that the Body of Christ is a spiritual, heavenly thing: such a great difference! This heavenly thing is universal in its range and in its ministry even though it may be but represented by a handful in a location; a universal ministry, something that does not belong to time or space; it is essentially spiritual and that is heavenly, illimitable.

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