

One Body in Christ

by Watchman Nee

The sermon explores the significance of the Cross of Christ and its relationship to the purpose of God, highlighting the importance of revelation, faith, and experience in Christian experience.

Scripture: Romans 12:4

Topics: "Christian Experience", "Unity in the Body of Christ"

Description

Watchman Nee emphasizes the concept of unity in the Body of Christ, explaining that while individual experiences of faith are important, they must be understood within the context of the collective body of believers. He warns against oversimplifying salvation and stresses the necessity of recognizing the various phases of Christian experience, including revelation, crisis, and continuous process. Nee highlights that the work of Christ on the Cross encompasses both remedial and positive aspects, ultimately leading to the creation of a glorious Church that reflects God's eternal purpose. He calls for believers to present themselves as one living sacrifice, acknowledging their interdependence within the Body of Christ, which is essential for fulfilling God's purpose. The sermon concludes with the assurance that through Christ, the Church is empowered to overcome the challenges posed by sin and the enemy.

Transcript

Before we pass on to our last important subject we will review some of the ground we have covered and summarize the steps taken. We have sought to make things simple, and to explain clearly some of the experiences which Christians commonly pass through. But it is clear that the new discoveries that we make as we walk with the Lord are many, and we must be careful to avoid the temptation to over-simplify the work of God. To do so may lead us into serious confusion.

There are children of God who believe that all our salvation, in which they would include the matter of leading a holy life, lies in an appreciation of the value of the precious Blood. They rightly emphasize the importance of keeping short accounts with God over known specific sins, and the continual efficacy of the Blood to deal with sins committed, but they think of the Blood as doing everything. They believe in a holiness which in fact means only separation of the man from his past; that, through the up-to-date blotting out of what he has done on the ground of the shed Blood, God separates a man out of the world to be His, and that is holiness ; and they stop there. Thus they stop short of God's basic demands, and so of the full provision He has made. I think we have by now seen clearly the inadequacy of this. Then there are those who go further and see that God has included them in the death of His Son on the Cross, in order to

deliver them from sin and the Law by dealing with the old man. These are they who really exercise faith in the Lord, for they glory in Christ Jesus and have ceased to put confidence in the flesh (Phil. 3. 3). In them God has a clear foundation on which to build. And from this as starting-point, many have gone further still and recognized that consecration (using that word in the right sense) means giving themselves without reserve into His hands and following Him. All these are first steps, and starting from them we have already touched upon other phases of experience set before us by God and enjoyed by many. It is always essential for us to remember that, while each of them is a precious fragment of truth, no single one of them is by itself the whole of truth. All come to us as the fruit of the work of Christ on the Cross, and we cannot afford to ignore any.

A GATE AND A PATH

Recognizing a number of such phases in the life and experience of a believer, we note now a further fact, namely that, though these phases do not necessarily occur always in a fixed and precise order, they seem to be marked by certain recurring steps or features. What are these steps? First there is revelation. As we have seen, this always precedes faith and experience. Through His Word God opens our eyes to the truth of some fact concerning His Son, and then only, as in faith we accept that fact for ourselves, does it become actual as experience in our lives. Thus we have:

1. Revelation (Objective). 2. Experience (Subjective).

Then further, we note that such experience usually takes the two-fold form of a crisis leading to a continuous process. It is most helpful to think of this in terms of John Bunyan's 'wicket gate' through which Christian entered upon a 'narrow path'. Our Lord Jesus spoke of such a gate and a path leading unto life (Matt. 7. 14), and experience accords with this. So now we have:

1. Revelation. 2. Experience: (a) A wicket gate (Crisis) (b) A narrow path (Process).

Now let us take some of the subjects we have been dealing with and see how this helps us to understand them. We will take first our justification and new birth. This begins with a revelation of the Lord Jesus in His atoning work for our sins on the Cross; there follows the crisis of repentance and faith (the wicket gate), whereby we are initially "made nigh" to God (Eph. 2.13); and this leads us into a walk of maintained fellowship with Him (the narrow path), for which the ground of our day-to-day access is still the precious Blood (Heb. 10. 19, 22). When we come to deliverance from sin, we again have three steps: the Holy Spirit's work of revelation, or 'knowing' (Rom. 6. 6); the crisis of faith, or 'reckoning' (Rom. 6. 11); and the continuing process of consecration, or 'presenting ourselves' to God (Rom. 6. 13) on the basis of a walk in newness of life. Consider next the gift of the Holy Spirit. This too begins with a new 'seeing' of the Lord Jesus as exalted to the throne, which issues in the dual experience of the Spirit outpoured and the Spirit indwelling. Going a stage further, to the matter of pleasing God, we find again the need for spiritual illumination, that we may see the values of the Cross in regard to 'the flesh'-the entire self-life of man. Our acceptance of this by faith leads at once to a 'wicket gate' experience (Rom. 7. 25), in which we initially cease from 'doing' and accept by faith the mighty working of the life of Christ to satisfy God's practical demands in us. This in turn leads us into the 'narrow path' of a walk in obedience to the Spirit (Rom. 8. 4).

The picture is not identical in each case, and we must beware of forcing any rigid pattern upon the Holy Spirit's working; but perhaps any new experience will come to us more or less on these lines. There will certainly always be first an opening of our eyes to some new aspect of Christ and His finished work, and then faith will open a gate into a pathway. Remember, too, that our division of Christian experience into

various subjects: justification, new birth, the gift of the Spirit, deliverance, sanctification, etc., is for our clearer understanding only. It does not mean that these stages must or will always follow one another in a certain prescribed order. In fact, if a full presentation of Christ and His Cross is made to us at the very outset, we may well step into a great deal of experience from the first day of our Christian life, even though the full explanation of much of it may follow later. Would that all Gospel preaching were of such a kind!

One thing is certain, that revelation will always precede faith. When we see something that God has done in Christ our natural response is: 'Thank you, Lord!' and faith follows spontaneously. Revelation is always the* work of the Holy Spirit, who is given to come alongside and, by opening the Scriptures to us, to guide us into all the truth (John 16. 1.3). Count upon Him, for He is here for that very thing; and when such difficulties as lack of understanding or lack of faith confront you, address those difficulties directly to the Lord: 'Lord, open my eyes. Lord, make this new thing clear to me. Lord, help Thou my unbelief!' He will not fail you.

THE FOURFOLD WORK OF CHRIST IN His CROSS

We are now in a position to go a step further still and to consider how great a range is compassed by the Cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the light of Christian experience and for the purpose of analysis, it may help us if we recognize four aspects of God's redemptive work. But in doing so it is essential to keep in mind that the Cross of Christ is one Divine work-and not many. Once in Judea two thousand years ago the Lord Jesus died and rose again, and He is now " by the right hand of God exalted " (Acts 2. 3 3). The work is finished and need never be repeated, nor can it be added to.

Of the four aspects of the Cross which we shall now mention, we have already dealt with three in some detail. The last will be considered in the two succeeding chapters of our study. They may be briefly summarised as follows:

1. The Blood of Christ to deal with sins and guilt.
2. The Cross of Christ to deal with sin, the flesh and the natural man.
3. The Life of Christ made available to indwell, re-create and empower man.
4. The Working of Death in the natural man that that indwelling Life may be progressively manifest.

The first two of these aspects are remedial. They relate to the undoing of the work of the Devil and the undoing of the sin of man. The last two are not remedial but positive, and relate more directly to the securing of the purpose of God. The first two are concerned with recovering what Adam lost by the Fall ; the last two are concerned with bringing us into, and bringing into us, something that Adam never had. Thus we see that the achievement of the Lord Jesus in His death and resurrection comprises both a work which provided for the redemption of man and a work which made possible the realisation of the purpose of God.

We have dealt at some length in earlier chapters with the two aspects of His death represented by the Blood for sins and guilt and the Cross for sin and the flesh. In our discussion of the eternal purpose we have also looked briefly at the third aspect-that represented by Christ as the grain of wheat-and in our last chapter, in our consideration of Christ as our life, we have seen something of its practical outworking. Before, however, we pass on to the fourth aspect, which I shall call 'bearing the cross', we must say a little more about this third side, namely, the release of the life of Christ in resurrection for man's indwelling and

empowering for service. We have spoken already of the purpose of God in creation and have said that it embraced far more than Adam ever came to enjoy. What was that purpose? God wanted to have a race of men whose members were gifted with a spirit whereby communion would be possible with Himself, who is Spirit. That race, possessing God's own life, was to co-operate in securing His purposed end by defeating every possible uprising of the enemy and undoing his evil works. That was the great plan. How will it now be effected? The answer is again to be found in the death of the Lord Jesus. It is a mighty death. It is something positive and purposive, going far beyond the recovery of a lost position ; for by it, not only are sin and the old man dealt with and their effects annulled, but something more, something infinitely greater is introduced.

THE LOVE OF CHRIST

Now we must have before us two passages of the Word, one from Genesis 2 and one from Ephesians 5, which are of great importance in this connection.

" And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept ; and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof : and the rib, which the Lord God had taken from the man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And the man said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh : she shall be called Woman (Heb. ishshah), because she was taken out of Man (Heb. ish)" (Gen. 2.21-23). "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself up for it ; that he might sanctify it, having cleansed it by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish " (Eph. 5. 2 5 - 2 7).

In Ephesians 5 we have the only chapter in the Bible which explains the passage in Genesis 2. What we have presented to us in Ephesians is indeed very remarkable, if we reflect upon it. I refer to what is contained in those words: " Christ ... loved the church ". There is something most precious here.

We have been taught to think of ourselves as sinners needing redemption. For generations that has been instilled into us, and we praise the Lord for that as our beginning ; but it is not what God has in view as His end. God speaks here rather of " a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but ... holy and without blemish ". All too often we have thought of the Church as being merely so many 'saved sinners'. It is that; but we have made the terms almost equal to one another, as though it were only that, which is not the case. Saved sinners-with that thought you have the whole background of sin and the Fall; but in God's sight the Church is a Divine creation in His Son. The one is largely individual, the other corporate. With the one the view is negative, belonging to the past; with the other it is positive, looking forward. The " eternal purpose " is something in the mind of God from eternity concerning His Son, and it has as its objective that the Son should have a Body to express His life. Viewed from that standpoint-from the standpoint of the heart of God-the Church is something which is beyond sin and has never been touched by sin.

So we have an aspect of the death of the Lord Jesus in Ephesians which we do not have so clearly in other places. In Romans things are viewed from the standpoint of fallen man, and beginning with 'Christ died for sinners, enemies, the ungodly' (Rom. 5) we are led progressively to " the love of Christ " (Rom. 8. 35). In Ephesians, on the other hand, the standpoint is that of God " before the foundation of the world " (Eph. 1. 4), and the heart of the gospel is: " Christ ... loved the church, and gave himself up for it " (Eph. 5. 25). Thus, in Romans it is "we sinned", and the message is of God's love for sinners (Rom. 5. 8); whereas

in Ephesians it is " Christ loved ", and the love here is the love of husband for wife. That kind of love has fundamentally nothing to do with sin as such. What is in view in this passage is not atonement for sin but the creation of the Church, for which end it is said that He gave himself ".

There is thus an aspect of the death of the Lord Jesus which is altogether positive and a matter particularly of love to His Church, where the question of sin and sinners does not directly appear. To bring this fact home Paul takes that incident in Genesis 2 as illustration. Now this is one of the marvellous things in the Word, and if our eyes have been opened to see it we will certainly worship.

From Genesis 3 onwards, from the 'coats of skins' to Abel's sacrifice, and on from there through the whole Old Testament, there are numerous types which set forth the death of the Lord Jesus as an atonement for sin; yet the apostle does not appeal here to any of those types of His death, but to this one in Genesis 2. Note that ; and then recall that it was not until Genesis 3 that sin came in. There is one type of the death of Christ in the Old Testament which has nothing to do with sin, for it is not subsequent to the Fall but prior to it, and that type is here in Genesis 2. Let us look at it for a moment.

Could we say that Adam was put to sleep because Eve had committed a serious sin? Is that what we have here? Certainly not, for Eve was not yet even created. There were as yet no moral issues involved and no problems at all. No, Adam was put to sleep for the express purpose that something might be taken out of him to be made into someone else. His sleep was not for her sin but for her existence. That is what is taught in these verses. This experience of Adam had as its object the creation of Eve, as something determined in the Divine counsels. God wanted an ishshah, He put the man (ish) to sleep, took a rib from his side and made it into ishshah, a woman, and brought her to the man. That is the picture which God is giving us. It foreshadows an aspect of the death of the Lord Jesus that is not primarily for atonement, but answerable to the sleep of Adam in this chapter.

God forbid that I should suggest that the Lord Jesus did not die for purposes of atonement. Praise God, He did. We must remember that to-day we are in fact in Ephesians 5 and not in Genesis 2. Ephesians was written after the Fall, to men who had suffered from its effects, and in it we have not only the purpose in Creation but also the scars of the Fall-or there would need to be no mention of " spot or wrinkle ". Because we are still on the earth and the Fall is a historic fact, 'cleansing' is needed.

But we must always view redemption as an interruption, an 'emergency' measure, made necessary by a catastrophic break in the straight line of the purpose of God. Redemption is big enough, wonderful enough, to occupy a very large place in our vision, but God is saying that we should not make redemption to be everything, as though man were created to be redeemed. The Fall is indeed a tragic dip downwards in that line of purpose, and the atonement a blessed recovery whereby our sins are blotted out and we are restored; but when it is accomplished there yet remains a work to be done to bring us into possession of that which Adam never possessed, and to give God that which His heart desires. For God has never forsaken the purpose which is represented by that straight line. Adam was never in possession of the life of God as presented in the tree of life. But because of the one work of the Lord Jesus in His death and resurrection (and we must emphasize again that it is all one work) His life was released to become ours by faith, and we have received more than Adam ever possessed. The very purpose of God is brought within reach of fulfilment by our receiving Christ as our life.

Adam was put to sleep. We remember that it is said of believers that they fall asleep, rather than that they die. Why? Because whenever death is mentioned sin is there in the background. In Genesis 3 sin entered

into the world and death through sin, but Adam's sleep preceded that. So the type of the Lord Jesus here is not like other types in the Old Testament. In relation to sin and atonement there is a lamb or a bullock slain ; but here Adam was not slain, but only put to sleep to awake again. Thus he prefigures a death that is not on account of sin, but that has in view increase in resurrection. Then too we must note that Eve was not created as a separate entity by a separate creation, parallel to that of Adam. Adam slept, and Eve was created out of Adam. That is God's method with the Church. God's 'second Man' has awakened from His'sleep'and His Church is created in Him and of Him, to draw her life from Him and to display that resurrection life.

God has a Son who is known to be the only begotten, and God is seeking that the only begotten Son should have brethren. From the position of only begotten He will become the first begotten, and instead of the Son alone God will have many sons. One grain of wheat has died and many grains will spring up. The first grain was once the only grain ; now it is changed to be the first grain of many. The Lord Jesus laid down His life, and that life emerged in many lives. These are the Biblical figures we have used hitherto in our study to express this truth. Now, in the figure just considered, the singular takes the place of the plural. The outcome of the Cross is a single person: a Bride for the Son. Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for it.

ONE LIVING SACRIFICE

We have said that there is an aspect of the death of Christ presented to us in Ephesians 5 which is to some extent different from that which we have been studying in Romans. Yet in fact this aspect is the very end to which our study of Romans has been moving, and it is into this that the letter is leading us as we shall now see, for redemption leads us back into God's original line of purpose.

In chapter 8 Paul speaks to us of Christ as the firstborn Son among many Spirit-led " sons of God " (Rom. 8. 14). " For whom he foreknew, he also foreordained to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren: and whom he foreordained, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified" (Rom. 8. 29, 30). Here justification is seen to lead on to glory, a glory that is expressed not in one or more individuals but in a plurality: in many who manifest the image of One. And this object of our redemption is further set forth, as we have seen, in " the love of Christ " for His own, which is the subject of the last verses of the chapter (8. 35 - 39). But what is implicit here in chapter 8 becomes explicit as we move over into chapter 12, the subject of which is the Body of Christ.

After the first eight chapters of Romans, which we have been studying, there follows a parenthesis in which God's sovereign dealings with Israel are taken up and dealt with, before the theme of the first chapters is resumed. Thus, for our present purpose, the argument of chapter 12 follows that of chapter 8 and not of chapter 11. We might very simply summarize these chapters thus: Our sins are forgiven (ch. 5), we are dead with Christ (ch. 6), we are by nature utterly helpless (ch. 7), therefore we rely upon the indwelling Spirit (ch. 8). After this, and as a consequence of it: " We ... are one body in Christ " (ch. 12). It is as though this were the logical outcome of all that has gone before, and the thing to which it has all been leading.

Romans 12 and the following chapters contain some very practical instructions for our life and walk. These are introduced with an emphasis once again on consecration. In chapter 6. 13 Paul has said: "Present yourselves unto God, as alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto

God". But now in chapter 12. 1 the emphasis is a little different: " I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service ". This new appeal for consecration is made to us as " brethren ", linking us in thought to the " many brethren " of chapter 8. 29. It is a call to us for a united step of faith, the presenting of our bodies as one " living sacrifice " unto God.

This is something that goes beyond the merely individual, for it implies contribution to a whole. The 'presenting' is personal but the sacrifice is corporate ; it is one sacrifice. Intelligent service to God is one service. We need never feel our contribution is not needed, for if it contributes to the service, God is satisfied. And it is through this kind of service that we prove " what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God " (ch. 12. 2), or, in other words, realise God's eternal purpose in Christ Jesus. So Paul's appeal "to every man that is among you " (12. 3) is in the light of this new Divine fact, that " we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and severally members one of another " (12. 5), and it is on this basis that the practical instructions follow.

The vessel through which the Lord Jesus can reveal Himself in this generation is not the individual but the Body. " God hath dealt to each man a measure of faith " (12. 3), but alone in isolation man can never fulfil God's purpose. It requires a complete Body to attain to the stature of Christ and to display His glory. Oh that we might really see this!

So Romans 12. 3 - 6 draws from the figure of the human body the lesson of our inter- dependence. Individual Christians are not the Body but are members of the Body, and in a human body " all the members have not the same office ". The ear must not imagine itself to be an eye. No amount of prayer will give sight to the ear but the whole body can see through the eye. So (speaking figuratively) I may have only the gift of hearing, but I can see through others who have the gift of sight; or, perhaps I can walk but cannot work, so I receive help from the hands. An all-too-common attitude to the things of the Lord is that, 'What I know, I know; and what I don't know, I don't know, and can do quite well without.' But in Christ, the things we do not know others do, and we may know them and enter into the enjoyment of them through others. Let me stress that this is not just a comfortable thought. It is a vital factor in the life of God's people. We cannot get along without one another. That is why fellowship in prayer is so important. Prayer together brings in the help of the Body, as must be clear from Matthew 18. 19,20. Trusting the Lord by myself may not be enough. I must trust Him with others. I must learn to pray " Our Father . . ." on the basis of oneness with the Body, for without the help of the Body I cannot get through. In the sphere of service this is even more apparent. Alone I cannot serve the Lord effectively, and He will spare no pains to teach me this. He will bring things to an end, allowing doors to close and leaving me ineffectively knocking my head against a blank wall until I realise that I need the help of the Body as well as of the Lord. For the life of Christ is the life of the Body, and His gifts are given to us for work that builds up the Body.

The Body is not an illustration but a fact. The Bible does not just say that the Church is like a body, but that it is the Body of Christ. " We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and severally members one of another." All the members together are one Body, for all share His life-as though He were Himself distributed among His members. I was once with a group of Chinese believers who found it very hard to understand how the Body could be one when they were all separate individual men and women who made it up. One Sunday I was about to break the bread at the Lord's table and I asked them to look very carefully at the loaf before I broke it. Then, after it had been distributed and eaten, I pointed out that though it was inside all of them it was still one loaf-not many. The loaf was divided, but Christ is not divided even in the sense in which that loaf was. He is still one Spirit in us, and we are all one in Him.

This is the very opposite of man's condition by nature. In Adam I have the life of Adam, but that is essentially individual. There is no union, no fellowship in sin, but only self-interest and distrust of others. As I go on with the Lord I soon discover, not only that the problem of sin and of my natural strength has to be dealt with, but that there is also a further problem created by my 'individual' life, the life that is sufficient in itself and does not recognize its need for and union in the Body. I may have got over the problems of sin and the flesh, and yet still be a confirmed individualist. I want holiness and victory and fruitfulness for myself personally and apart, albeit from the purest motives. But such an attitude ignores the Body, and so cannot provide God with satisfaction. He must deal with me therefore in this matter also, or I shall remain in conflict with His ends. God does not blame me for being an individual, but for my individualism, His greatest problem is not the outward divisions and denominations that divide His Church but our own individualistic hearts.

Yes, the Cross must do its work here, reminding me that in Christ I have died to that old life of independence which I inherited from Adam, and that in resurrection I have become not just an individual believer in Christ but a member of His Body. There is a vast difference between the two. When I see this, I shall at once have done with independence and shall seek fellowship. The life of Christ in me will gravitate to the life of Christ in others. I can no longer take an individual line. Jealousy will go. Competition will go. Private work will go. My interests, my ambitions, my preferences, all will go. It will no longer matter which of us does the work. All that will matter will be that the Body grows.

I said: 'When I see this . . .' That is the great need: to see the Body of Christ as another great Divine fact ; to have it break in upon our spirits by heavenly revelation that " we, who are many, are one body in Christ ". Only the Holy Spirit can bring this home to us in all its meaning, but when He does it will revolutionise our life and work.

MORE THAN CONQUERORS THROUGH Him

We only see history back to the Fall. God sees it from the beginning. There was something in God's mind before the Fall, and in the ages to come that thing is to be fully realised. God knew all about sin and redemption ; yet in His great purpose for the Church set forth in Genesis 2 there is no view of sin. It is as though (to speak in finite terms) He leaps in thought right over the whole story of redemption and sees the Church in future eternity, having a ministry and a (future) history which is altogether apart from sin and wholly of God. It is the Body of Christ in glory, expressing nothing of fallen man but only that which is the image of the glorified Son of man. This is the Church that has satisfied God's heart and has attained dominion.

In Ephesians 5 we stand within the history of redemption, and yet through grace we still have this eternal purpose of God in view as expressed in the statement that He will 'present unto himself a glorious Church'. But now we note that the water of life and the cleansing Word are needed to prepare the Church (now marred by the Fall) for presentation to Christ in glory. For now there are defects to be remedied and wounds to be healed. And yet how precious is the promise and how gracious are the words used of her: "not having spot "the scars of sin, whose very history is now forgotten ; " or wrinkle "-the marks of age and of time lost, for all is now made up and all is new; and " without blemish "-so that Satan or demons or men can find no ground for blame in her.

This is where we are now. The age is closing, and Satan's power is greater than ever. Our warfare is with angels and principalities and powers (Rom. 8. 38 ; Eph. 6. 12) who are set to withstand and destroy the

work of God in us by laying many things to the charge of God's elect. Alone we could never be their match, but what we alone cannot do the Church can. Sin, self-reliance and individualism were Satan's master-strokes at the heart of God's purpose in man, and in the Cross God has undone them. As we put our faith in what He has done -in " God that justifieth " and in " Christ Jesus that died" (Rom. 8. 33, 34)-we present a front against which the very gates of Hades shall not prevail. We, His Church, are " more than conquerors through him that loved us " (Rom. 8. 37).

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