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The Body of Christ: Its Heavenly Aspect

by T. Austin-Sparks

We are going, as the Lord enables us, to meditate afresh on the Body of Christ. We know, when we want to have the larger unfoldings of this "Mystery" where to turn; we instinctively turn to the Ephesian letter. In this letter we note, first of all, the simple preliminary fact, that the Church is designated "The Body of Christ", it is "the Church which is His Body." That distinguishes the Church in this letter from other designations which we find elsewhere. There is the Temple, there is the House of God, and other suchlike designations, but in this letter it is particularly. The Body of Christ that is basic to all that the letter unfolds, and what is contained in the letter is in line with the conception of a body. Now the word which seems to predominate through this letter in connection with that designation is the word translated "Together." It is impressive to note how frequently that word occurs. Here we are said to have been "quickened together" in Him. That does not only mean that our together-ness individually was with the Lord Jesus in His rising, but it means that we corporately were quickened, we were together quickened in Him, not only with Him but in Him corporately quickened.

The Eternal Oneness of the Body

In the resurrection of the Lord Jesus the whole Church was included together. And then in the same verse (2:6), we are said to be "raised together" in Him. Further, in the same place, we are said to be "seated together" in Him. Coming back a step into 1:10, we are "gathered together into one" and then on again to 2:21, we are "framed together." So this word "together" brings into view in a very simple way the fact of the corporate nature of the Church, the Body of Christ. We want to get the full force of that as far as it is possible, because this letter undoubtedly emphasizes the fact that the Church is a corporate Body; not that it one day will be when the work of grace is completed; not that it is merely that in the mind and thought of God, the will of God, the intention of God; not that it was intended to be when the Lord started it; but that it is; that in spite of what is seen here on the earth; in spite of the ever-increasing number of divisions and separations, all the unhappy schisms which have entered into the fellowships of God's people on the earth, in spite of everything that ever has been and ever is or will be along that line, the Church is still a corporate whole. It is that, not as to the people as on the earth, but it is true as to the essential nature of the Church, the Body of Christ, and the sooner we get that rooted and settled in our spiritual acceptance and consciousness the better. No schism, beloved, that is incidental to the relationships of Christian people on the earth can alter that fact. The differences which exist or which come about by the different mentalities, choices and preferences, likes and dislikes, intellectual acceptances or rejections; all those differences do not touch this ultimate fact that there is a realm in which there is a togetherness, a oneness, a corporateness which is unaffected by anything that is of man in himself religiously or theologically. There is a realm of course in which is unaffected by anything that is of man in himself religiously or theologically. There is a realm of course in which there may be a breach of fellowship, that is where it enters into the realm of the spirit and where the spirit is affected. There you may very definitely strike a blow at the Body of Christ, but ultimately the Body is one; which, of course, clearly indicates that this is something other than an earthly thing and that it is a heavenly Body, unaffected and untouched by earth.

We are inclined to accept what we see, to be affected by the divisions that are here, and are almost in despair because of what we see. The sooner we sweep that whole thing aside the better, and let there be fifty thousand earthly departments of Christian people, the Body of Christ remains one. It is a seamless robe, it is a Body which cannot be divided, it remains one. That is the basic fact to which we must come back, that is where we begin. This letter, in which there is the unveiling of the mystery of Christ and His members, The Church, the one Body, states most emphatically the fact of the corporate nature of the Body. It does not argue about it, or discuss it, it takes it for granted, it is a settled thing. Of course there are degrees of enjoyment of it, and there are degrees of the fruitfulness of it as here, but there are no degrees of the fact of it. The fact remains as solid and settled. Our business is to enter into the settled fact and come into the meaning of it: but our not having come into the full meaning of it does not mean that it does not exist. The trouble is that we have to know what it is that makes the Body one, and that is our business. The unity exists; our business is to apprehend it, not make it. We go on to that almost immediately, but note, the letter to the Ephesians is still alive, it is still applicable, it is still true for to-day. After all these centuries when we have all that we have on the earth, the departments and divisions of Christian people, all of whom may be members of the Body of Christ, still after all these centuries the Ephesians letter remains where it was at the beginning, and it represents the Body as a solid whole, a corporate unity.

A Heavenly Position Necessary to Apprehending the Oneness

It is only as we get up into the heavenlies and away from the earthlies that we begin to enter into the fact and realize what that fact means to God, to the heavenlies, to hell, and to this world. So, in order that we should enter into the fact with all that that fact contains of effective vocation and life, we have to introduce the whole matter by our position in Christ in the heavenlies, and see exactly where we are placed spiritually: for not until we come to recognize that and to enter into our heavenly position in Christ can we see, appreciate, or come into the meaning of this heavenly reality the Church, which is His Body. We cannot see the Church from the earthlies, we can only see it from the heavenlies.

Our Attitude Towards Differences

I do not want to pass away from that as having merely stated something. I do want that we should get the benefit of it. You and I may have a disagreement, but it makes no difference to our relationship in the Lord Jesus. The fact that you and I fall out or disagree does not tear us as limbs out of the Body of Christ. No, that is our shame, that is incidental in our Christian life, that this a breakdown somewhere in grace in us, but we shall recover ourselves from that if we yield to the movements of the Spirit in us, and come back to find that we have not to be rejoined in Christ in His Body, that fact remains. You see the working principle is this: that there may be much amongst believers on this earth of division, but we have not to accept that as ultimate, we have not to take that as meaning that some are in Christ and some are out of Christ, that we are in Christ and others are not, and that we are in Christ and others are not, and that the Body has altogether collapsed and disintegrated. The only hope of enjoying the fact is that we repudiate what looks like another fact, and we seek to get above that which, being earthly, brings these things about, and discover we are in the heavenlies, and fellowship abides. That is a working principle and we should recognize that is the meaning of the fact. We have got to accept the fact, and we have to seek to overcome or repudiate the other things which come in against the ultimate fact.