

You in Christ

by Ray C. Stedman

We have been looking together at the Scriptures, trying to gain a panoramic view of the Bible. I hope you have been following this through and checking it out in your own Bible, because that is a perfectly scriptural procedure, to check up for yourself on what any speaker says. They did that to the Apostle Paul in Berea, and he commended them for it. It is the right thing to do.

As you remember, the whole purpose of revelation, the aim of the entire Bible, the focal point of this tremendous book, is, as Paul puts it in Ephesians 4, that we might grow up – might mature – in Christ. God is not interested in forming chapters of the PWA – the Pew-Warmers Association – where people simply sit and sulk and sour. He is interested in having people grow in Christ, never staying the same but moving on. I am afraid that in too many places the theme song of Christianity is – “Come Weal or Come Woe, Our Status Is Quo.” This is what the Word of God is designed to avoid. It is aimed at keeping us walking in the Spirit. And a walk is not a sit-in. It is moving on with God.

We have already seen that the purpose of the Old Testament is to prepare us for truth. The purpose of the New Testament is to realize that truth. And in the New Testament, first of all, the four Gospels and The Acts present Jesus Christ to us. Then follow the thirteen letters of Paul. Following them we have the letter to the Hebrews and then the letters of James, Peter, John and Jude. These epistles are the explanation of Jesus Christ. We desperately need them, because here we find the answers to all the fine points of the Christian faith which puzzle us.

In our last study we looked at the first group of epistles – Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians. These four letters set forth the theme “Christ in you, the hope of glory” – i.e., the lost secret of humanity, which is God’s indwelling of man. Man

is to be the vehicle of divine life. Man’s body and soul and spirit are the instruments by which God expresses himself. This is the way the invisible God becomes visible to men. This is the secret of successful living. Living on any other basis is a total failure – and will prove to be so by experience if you attempt it. Only on this basis, which is what we were designed for, and made for, do we find fulfillment. Therefore, these four epistles are vital and foundational in our Christian experience.

The next group of epistles sets forth – “you in Christ.” Remember that in John 14 the Lord Jesus used the formula “I in you and you in me,” {cf, John 14:20}. When we talk about him in us we are talking about the indwelling life – the walk in the Spirit. When we talk about us in him we are speaking of the relationship of the body of Christ – the fact that we are members of his body. Our life is incorporated in the totality of life in the body of Christ. And we soon discover that we are not only Christians individually but corporately as well. We belong to each other as well as to Christ. By ourselves, we can never come to fulfillment and full development in our Christian lives. There are times when Christians have to be isolated and cut off from fellowship with other Christians for various reasons, such as work or military circumstances. If that condition continued for a long time, though, it would doubtless result in great weakening, for we need one another. We can never be complete in Christ without sharing ourselves with each other, and this corporate life is what these epistles take up.

This group of epistles comprises Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus and Philemon.

They are like the best books in a doctor’s library. Most of the books in a doctor’s library aren’t very interesting to a layman. This library is

full of heavy tomes which have the most frightening titles. However, in any doctor's library we will also find a book on physiology – meaning the entire science and study of the makeup of the human body. Ephesians answers to that; it is the study of the nature of the body of Christ. And you will find a book on pathology – meaning the treatment of the diseases of the body and how to cure them. The book which answers to that is Philippians, the book on the treatment of the problems of the body of Christ. Then, there is a book on biology – the fundamental study of life itself, what makes the cells of the body operate as they do. You have this in the book of Colossians – a wonderfully detailed study of the body of Christ.

Let's now examine all of these epistles.

In **Ephesians** we have the nature of the body. Someone has said that there are only two things essential to living. One is light on the mystery of life, and the other is life itself in order that we may master life. Light and life – these are the themes of the letter to the Ephesians, where the body of Christ is set forth. The key to this book is found in the second chapter, Verses 19 through 22:

So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. {Eph 2:19-22 RSV}

That is the life of the body. It is made up of the foundation and the membership functioning in the unity of the Holy Spirit, and all of this letter gathers around that theme.

When we come to the letter to the **Philippians** we find that here Paul, in a very practical way, is taking up the problems and diseases which threaten the body of Christ. As we run through the list, we can see they are very frequently experienced today. There is, first of all, discouraging circumstances. Have you found your spiritual life threatened by discouraging circumstances? Then read the epistle to the Philippians for the answer.

Second, there is the problem of divisive personalities. I often quote the little jingle:

To live above with saints we love –
Oh, that will be glory!
But to dwell below with saints we know –
Well, that's another story!

Unfortunately, it is too frequently true. In Philippi there were two ladies, among others, who were at odds with one another. We know their names – Euodia and Syntyche, or as someone has rendered them, “Odious” and “soontouchy” – “I beseech Odious and Soontouchy that they be of the same mind in the Lord.” When you have “Odious” and “Soontouchy” together in a church, you have problems! This was the case in Philippi.

Third, there is the problem of deceitful teachers – men who were going about deliberately teaching untruth, and doing it in the name of Christ. This was a problem then, and there is probably no problem more threatening to the Church of Jesus Christ today than this.

Fourth, there is the threat of destructive ambitions – seeking to exalt oneself in the name of Christ. Paul speaks of his own problem of wanting to be something in himself, but learning to say at last, “Whatever gain I had, I count as loss for the sake of Christ.”

Finally, there are distressing pressures so great that you wonder if Jesus Christ is adequate. But Paul says to the Philippians:

... in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things in him who strengthens me. {Phil 4:12b-13 RSV}

That is the key to this epistle.

In **Colossians** we come to the setting forth of the power of the body of Christ. What motivates the body? What force ties all Christians together? What is the answer to our continual search for overall control of the body? We are always struggling with this, aren't we? Here we are, a local church. Under God we are trying to contribute to the total ministry of Christ's body in the world. But sometimes we get worried about the other members of the body and what they are doing, and we wonder who is keeping them straight. We are

doing all right – we presume! We are right on target. But what about the others? Who is regulating the other parts of the body? We get a wonderful answer in Colossians, where we learn that this is not a headless body. This is not a headless horseman chasing an Ichabod Crane. No, this is a body with a Head, and that Head is the life of the body. As we read of the Head and see him in action, we learn that in his sovereign, authoritative direction of the body he is keeping all of it united and correlated so that it is working together to accomplish his end. The key to this is Colossians 3:3:

For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. {Col 3:3 RSV}

There is the answer to all of the problems of control in the body of Christ.

In the **Thessalonian** letters we have the hope of the body of Christ. This is a look into the future. In the first letter Paul sets forth the certainty of Christ's second coming. These people were troubled. They were wondering if some of them were not going to miss the coming of Christ, because some of their loved ones had died and they didn't know what had happened to them. The purpose of Paul's writing is to show them that Christ is coming, and that when he comes the entire Church will be together. None will be missing. And this coming is a bright and glowing hope in every Christian's heart, purifying him and leading him to walk softly and cautiously before Christ.

The second letter is largely centered around the time of Christ's coming – not in the sense of date-setting but in a relative sense, with relationship to events in the world. The key to these two letters is found in 1 Thessalonians 5, Verses 23 and 24:

May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. {1 Th 5:23-24 RSV}

In Paul's letters to **Timothy**, the young man who had accompanied him on his travels, we have the ministry of the body. Referring to a doctor's library again, this is a study of neurology – the science of nerves. In the body of Christ you find certain men who have been specially gifted by God to

act as stimulators to carry the message from the Head to the body. That is exactly how the gifted men Paul refers to in Ephesians 4 serve. Paul says Christ has given apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastors-teachers unto the perfecting of the saints for the work of the ministry. And here is one of them – Timothy – with special instructions on how to stimulate the body, how to mobilize its resources, how to instruct its leaders, how to correct and reprove and rebuke, where need be, and how to get the body to work. The first letter is a general teaching that covers most of the problems a young pastor would face, while the second letter is specialized instruction in view of apostasy and decline. What do you do in a church that is beginning to lose its life, where vitality is seeping away and the church is drifting into deadly formalism? The second letter of Timothy answers this question.

When you come to the epistle of **Titus** you find similar discussion of ministry, of the work of the body. Here the emphasis is not so much on the ministry of the nerves of the body as on the body itself, on what the body is supposed to do. The key to this letter is in the second chapter, Verses 11 and 12:

For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, training us [that is the end, you see, of the body's ministry] to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world [not out of it; right in it], awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. {Tit 2:11-13 RSV}

When we come to the letter to **Philemon** – one of the shortest books in the Bible – we have a beautiful emphasis upon the unity of the body. This little book was occasioned by a slave who has run away from his master. He found Paul in Rome and, through the ministry of the apostle, had been led to Jesus Christ. Though he was a valuable man to Paul – ran his errands and ministered to him in many ways – Paul sent him back to his master, because he felt he had an obligation to do so and, further, because his master, Philemon, was a Christian. Paul sends this slave Onesimus, back to Philemon and writes this letter for Onesimus to take to Philemon. In it Paul urges Philemon to re-

ceive Onesimus as a brother in Christ. In Verses 15 and 16 you have what serves as a key:

Perhaps this is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back for ever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. {Phmn 1:15-16 RSV}

In this epistle, more than any other letter of the New Testament, you see that the ground is level at the foot of the cross. All distinctions between Christians are done away with in Christ. We are all brothers and sisters together. There is to be no difference in our attitudes toward one another because of any superficial distinctions of background, training, color, education, or whatever. As Jesus said, in Matthew 23, "One is your Master, and you are all brethren," {cf, Matt 23:8}. This letter, then, sets before us the unity of the body of Christ.

This is life in the body of Christ. I commend these nine epistles to you for your own study, so that you might see how to behave yourself in the church of the living God, which is the pillar and the ground of truth. It is for this purpose that these letters were written.

Prayer

Our Father, we give thanks to you for these marvelous letters which have come to us. As we open this book, O Lord, we see that its very pages are soaked with the blood of men and women who have had to die in order for us to have it. We pray, therefore, that we may treat it carefully, and read it reverently and frequently, in order that we may arrive at the understanding of the truth you have for us. We thank you for it and for the warmth and fellowship and glory of life in the body of Christ, our Lord Jesus; for we pray in his name, Amen.

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