

The King and his Body

Introduction

I have suggested that we could think of this Covid 19 shutdown as a kind of fast. A fast from structures and meetings and activities. And during the fast we could undertake a Spring Clean. In the first place a Spring Clean of ourselves. And in the second place a Spring Clean of our activities and structures.

We have looked at three areas which shine a light on our life together:

- We looked at the King and his Gospel,
- We looked at at the King and his disciples.
- We looked at the King and his Spirit.
- Today we look at the King and his church, for that will tell us who we are as a body. This will help us understand how we should meet – which we will look at another day..

Last week John reminded us that ‘it is time to ask the Father to glorify his Son in our midst, to ask him for the power and presence of the outpoured Spirit so others might “see Jesus”. ‘

Today I want to tell you about a secret that concerns the Son in our midst.

1. Members of What?

Of course it is not a secret any longer. But it was kept hidden until the time came when it could be revealed and understood. And it is not merely a secret. It is a profound revelation of an astounding thing that God has done.

The place to start is a discussion about marriage in Ephesians 5.28-30

In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church— 30 for we are members of his body.

In this passage Paul compares the way a husband loves his wife as his own body, with the way Christ loves and cares for his body – the church.

We will come to the amazing truth about the relationship of Christ and his body. But first we should note that Paul says we are members of Christ's body.

This is a confusing idea to modern people. Because for us being a member is usually about belonging to some kind of organisation or group of which we can be a member. Usually by agreeing to the rules of the group or by paying a fee, and so having membership. Being members of a body seems to mean we are one member among others in the group.

But the analogy here is about a human body: "members" means limbs, body parts. Once we see that we can see a different picture. This is a picture of a person with limbs etc. The husband who looks after his own body, and his wife, is looking after a person.

So to say we are members of Christ's body is to say we are members of Christ himself because presumably his body is his body.

2. One Flesh

There is more to this, because Paul goes on to say,

31 "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." 32 This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.

The husband who loves his wife loves himself, because the two have become one flesh. The quotation goes back to Genesis 2 where the woman is taken (not from the dust of the earth like Adam and everything else) but from Adam. The two become one again because their unity is based on their origin.

Paul explains that the unity of the man and woman is both a picture and model of something greater. The great archetype of marriage is Christ and his body. The unity between Christ and his church points to the origin and source of the church.

3. The New Race

Paul describes it differently in Ephesians 2.14-17

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, 15 by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to

create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, 16 and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

The subject is the two divisions of humankind (according to a Jewish perspective) – Jews and Gentiles. The divided humanity is united in Christ, and by Christ. He has done this by creating a new humanity (literally a new Man) – in himself.

This is a new race. A new human race established in Christ himself.

The Creator who set up the first human has set up a new version. The first humans were made in the image of the Creator. The new version is the image. He is the image in such a way that he is the Creator and a human at the same time.

Now this is very helpful because the new human can deal with the inbuilt corruption of the old humans. A corruption that has terribly ruined that race.

This happens because the new human has taken on the old humanity. Amazingly he hasn't abandoned the old and started with something completely different. But he has taken the old in order to start a new humanity.

He has taken on the old humanity and done to it what ought to have happened a long time ago. He has killed it. Buried it. Put it to death. Put himself to death in fact.

Which seems a bit pointless if that is the end of the story.

But this dead human who is the image of the Creator was brought to life by his Creator Father. And it is this resurrection of the old/new human that allows a new race to develop free from the old corruption.

The wonderful thing is that people who are still one of the old humans – Jew or Gentile- can join this new race. They do it by deciding to abandon their old life, believing the promise of Jesus (who is the new human) that his death included them, and that it rescued them from the judgment of futility and foolishness that is their life, and from the impending much more serious judgement of death that is hanging over them. Not only that but by an amazing change in their inner being, they are given a heart and spirit to love

and obey Jesus. God in his grace has brought them to start a new life with a new heart (a kind of inner resurrection – actually a new birth is the way it is described). More than that Jesus comes and lives his life in them. Actually they now have their life in him.

This new race grows and increases. But wonder of wonders it is not left to grow on its own like the old humans were. Its life comes from Jesus. Its life is Jesus. It turns out that the new race is actually the new human. Its whole origin is all from Christ.

This is the hard bit to understand. The new race (you know we are referring to the church) is somehow one with Jesus. Jesus embodied in a body of people. Jesus and his body. So united that the life of Jesus fills his body. So one as to say that the complete being of God the Son fills it in every way. Jesus and the church: distinguishable but inseparable.

4. The Secret of the Church

Today I only want to remind you of a couple of simple things. Before we can discuss what the church does, we need to understand what the church is. That is what I am talking about so far. What it is – is Christ. Christ himself embodied in his people whom he has united with himself in his death and resurrection. It is a picture in advance of the culmination of creation when everything that exists will be brought to unity in and under Christ (Eph 1.10).

How it meets and what it does when it does meet, and what the limbs of Christ do in their different callings are matters for another day.

So the first simple thing is to know that the church is Christ himself embodied in his people whom he has united with himself in his death and resurrection.

5. The Secret of the Limbs

The second simple thing is to remember how a person from the old humanity becomes part of Christ's body. That is the same as how they become part of Christ. It is not by turning up to church (although that may result in good), not by church ceremonies. It is not by knowing things, or by doing things, and it is not by behavioural improvement.

Paul says it wonderfully in Ephesians 2.4-10

Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. 4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you

have been saved. 6 And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7 in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. 8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast. 10 For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

It is by grace. God makes us spiritually alive. Raises us up with Christ. We gain this salvation by faith because of God’s grace.

Here is the wonderful secret – but no longer a secret: old humans become members of Christ’s church only by grace. God makes us alive with Christ (v4-5). It has to be this way because of the corruption of the old human nature.

This means that you cannot be a limb of Christ’s body without this supernatural change brought about by God and received by you by faith in what God has said.

All the limbs are renewed limbs. Limbs joined to Christ, filled with his life, filled with his Spirit. Forgiven, brought out of the old humanity into the life of God.

Is that you? Make sure it is today. If you claim human membership of a church and are not a limb of Christ’s body you weaken its life. And you fool yourself.

6. The Splendour of the Body of Christ

Christ and his body is one way of looking at the church. But Paul develops it, fills it out, shows how really splendid it is.

Because this body is Christ’s body it is directly connected to the Father. Just as Christ has unhindered and perpetual access to the Father so does his body – since they are one. Here is Eph 2. 18

18 For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

Paul goes on to use different images to describe the church: a nation, God’s household, God’s house, a holy temple (in the Lord).

19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

And the different limbs and parts, or stones or bricks on this analogy are being built – built together – to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Here is a wonder. Christ the new human has taken to himself a renewed humanity united them together in himself made them his body, made them parts of his own body, brought them into the Father's presence with the same full and free access that he has. But not only that: there is movement in the opposite direction. The church is where God dwells by his Spirit.

The presence of the Holy Spirit among the people of Christ marks that body out as God's dwelling place. A holy Temple.

The holy Temple, because this is the eternal gathering around God. The experience in advance of the culmination of the gathering together of all things in Christ. This is why, as we will see another day, the gathering of the church is so crucial. It is a gathering in the presence of the Holy God who dwells in our midst by his Holy Spirit and sanctifies us as his holy temple.

This gathering has a Godward aspect: praise, thanks, listening to his Word. It also has a mutual aspect: building each other together to be like Christ.

From this centre flow all the work and ministries of the body.

7. So what?

So what has all this got to do with us here and now coming out of Covid 19 restrictions?

We began with the Son in our midst. The Son is our middle and our circumference. He is the body: the church. He is its life. Christ is our life.

So make sure Christ is your life. Make sure you are a living limb of Christ's body. Make sure you draw your life from him. Make sure you are being united

by his Spirit with all the other limbs and body parts. Make sure you are part of the building up and growing of his body. When you work out what to do in the church, make sure it is Christ's body that you are working in.

Understanding who we are makes a great difference to how we behave and what we do. To the extent that we don't understand who we are as Christ's body, to that extent we will follow ideas and practices that come from religious traditions, or psychology, or management systems, or politics.

Knowing we are limbs together of Christ's body, which he loves and cares for and which is the embodiment of Christ himself and the dwelling place of God by his Spirit – that is a powerful secret.

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