

The Church As The Body Of Christ¹

Every year at this time we have our annual meeting. And usually for the annual meeting, I like to present a message dealing with the church.

There is a lot we could consider regarding the church; it's a rather broad topic.

Most of us are probably aware that the NT describes the church as the body of Christ. Today, I want to say a few things about the church as the body of Christ.

I think there is probably a good bit of misunderstanding regarding the meaning of the church as the body of Christ. What does it mean for us as a local church that we are a part of the body of Christ?

I. The definition of the body of Christ

- A. A faulty/inaccurate definition: the body of Christ is composed of all saved people of all ages. I.e., anyone who ever has been saved is part of the body of Christ.

Why is that a faulty definition? Two reasons

1. OT believers were saved, but they were not baptized by the spirit into the body of Christ. Baptism by the Spirit is a NT experience; no OT believer is said to be baptized into the body of Christ.

The HSp was certainly working in the OT, but the NT ushers in a new ministry of the HSp.

1 Corinthians 12:13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.

¹ Much of this material is based on Rolland McCune's systematic theology notes, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary.

That “one body” is the church, not OT Israel. OT believers were not “baptized” into the church by the Spirit. OT believers didn’t know about the church; it was not revealed to them.

2. Second, the church begins on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). The only OT saints who also became part of the church were those of that first generation of believers. Those several thousand who made that transition were rather unique—they were both OT saints and NT saints.

OT saints who had died before the beginning of the church are not members of the Body of Christ.

- B. A precise definition: The body of Christ is the total number of Spirit-baptized believers in Jesus, i.e., those saved between the Day of Pentecost and the Rapture (including those who transitioned from OT to NT systems).

We could describe the body of Christ as the whole spiritual body of true Christian believers *of the church age* regardless of location or circumstances. I.e., all church-age believers in Jesus.

- C. The phrase “body of Christ” signifies a couple of things:
 1. It signifies that Christ is the head of the church—it’s his body, his church. We are part of it, but we don’t own it.
Col 1:18 [Christ] is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.
 2. It also signifies the unity of all those who are part of it. The body of Christ is one thing, one organism. Sadly, there is not much practical unity among all genuine believers. In fact, there is great disunity.

The unity of the entire body implies that each local body of Christ should be unified. Within itself, each local church should be united, not divided.

1Co 10:17 *For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread.*

Trans: So now we know what we are talking about. The body of Christ is composed of church-age followers of Jesus, those baptized by the HSp into the body of Christ, not OT saints.

II. The distinctions concerning the body church

Two major distinctions in particular are very important—the church is distinct from Israel, and the church is distinct from the kingdom.

A. The church is distinct from the nation of Israel

We know that that is true because the origin, purposes, and destiny of Israel and the church are different.

(1) Origin

(a) Israel had a two-fold origin.

(i) The Jews are the descendants of Abraham. They have a certain ethnicity; there is an *ethnic* basis of the nation of Israel.

(ii) Further, the exodus from Egypt and the giving of the Law at Sinai gave this people a *political* status. Israel became a nation after they left Egypt.

(b) What was the origin of the church?

(i) It was born on the Day of Pentecost when the Spirit of God baptized believers into the body of Christ.

(ii) The only people in the body of Christ are genuine believers. That is not true of the nation of Israel—many were not saved

- (iii) Racial and political status don't matter within the church.

(2) Purposes

(a) For Israel

- (i) God's purposes for the nation Israel are largely earthly and political.

Israel became a "kingdom of priests" (Exod 19:6) at Mt. Sinai when God revealed the OT law; Israel began as a theocracy or a theocratic kingdom—God was the ultimate ruler.

In Israel, the spiritual and the political were united and the religion was enforced by the nation. Government and religion were united in Israel.

- (ii) The "spiritual" aspects of life under the OT system was primarily for Israel. They were the people of God, and the other nations were not.

The OT contains no particular "missionary" mandate for Israel. They are a light to the Gentiles, but they had no Great Commission to convert the pagans to Judaism.

The major emphasis for Israel was life here on earth, life in the kingdom. The Messiah would come and set up an earthly kingdom. Frankly, there is not a lot about heaven in the OT. The focus is on earthly life in the kingdom.

- (b) God's purposes for the church are spiritual and are to be fulfilled mostly in a personal sense, not nationally or ethnically.
 - (i) There is no political or social mandate for the church. Our Great Commission is not to solve the problems of society or to control the government.
 - (ii) We have a missionary mandate—go into all the world, preach the Gospel, make disciples, baptize them, and add them to the church. Those are spiritual goals, not social ones.
 - (iii) The Great Commission says nothing about social or political duties. The church's purposes are mostly spiritual.
 - (iv) The separation of church and state is a very important factor for the church. For Israel, the state and the religion were unified. For the church, the state and religion are separate. "Render unto Caesar..."
- (3) Destiny
 - (a) Israel has a basically earthly destiny as head of the nations in the messianic Kingdom of God. Israel as a nation will be the head of the nations in the Kingdom as Christ rules over the world from the throne of David in Jerusalem.
 - (b) Similarly, the church is destined to reign with Christ in the messianic kingdom of God on earth. Cf. Revelation 19:6-16

The church is distinct from Israel in origin, purpose, and destiny. These are very important distinctions to keep in mind. We run into large problems when we fail to see the difference between Israel and the church.

B. The church is distinct from the kingdom of God.

1. Many confuse the church and the kingdom. They commonly use the terms “church” and “kingdom” interchangeable (e.g., “I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord ... the church our blest Redeemer saved...”). But they are not synonymous terms.

a) We affirm that those saved in the church age are *spiritually* citizens of the heavenly kingdom.

Colossians 1:13 *[God] has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love*

Christians are in the kingdom in the sense of being saved; our citizenship ultimately is in heaven. That’s a spiritual/positional truth.

b) However, the kingdom of God on earth has not yet come; Christ is not reigning from the throne of David over the nations with a rod of iron. Those OT prophecies have not yet been fulfilled.

2. The kingdom that the OT prophets foretold and that the early disciples were expecting is the earthly, messianic reign of Jesus over the world for 1000 years.

The kingdom is a basically Israel as the head of the nations ruled by the Messiah, and it is future to the present age. The kingdom age is the final and culminating dispensation in God’s program for earth history.

3. Church saints will rule with Christ in the messianic kingdom. But that is future; it’s not happening now.

Revelation 3:21 *To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, ...*

Trans: The church is a distinct thing; it's not Israel and it's not the kingdom. As we carry out the functions of the church, we have to keep those distinctions in mind.

III. The composition of the body church

A. The baptism of the Holy Spirit constitutes the Body of Christ.

1 Corinthians 12:13 *For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body.*

At Spirit baptism, the believer is placed into the body of Christ.

The baptism of the Spirit happens only once, and it happens at the point of salvation. You may not even feel anything unusual happen when you get saved.

The baptism of the Spirit is something like becoming a citizen of a country—your status or position changes.

Notice here that we are not talking about *water* baptism. Spirit baptism happens at salvation and brings you into the body of Christ/universal church. Water baptism happens after salvation and brings a believer into a *local* church. The first is automatic for all believers; the second is voluntary and limited.

B. The baptism of the Holy Spirit removes the distinction between Jew and Gentile for the church.

Ephesians 2:14–15 *For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace,*

Trans: So the body of Christ is built as the Spirit of God baptizes believers into the body.

IV. The time of the body church

We believe that the church is an organism unique to this age—the church age. The church age is distinct from what came before it—Israel—and what will come after it—the kingdom.

Some Christians claim that the church began long *before* the coming of Christ. They say the church started with Adam or Abraham, and it extends until the final judgment. We would disagree with that idea.

A. The church was a “mystery” to OT saints.

Ephesians 3:5-6 *That by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, ... which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, ... that the Gentiles are fellow-heirs and fellow members of the body*

1. A mystery, in the biblical sense, is truth hidden to some people and revealed later.
2. Church truth was not revealed until after the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). We don't find teaching about the church in the OT. Israel was not the OT church.
3. OT saints had no idea that God's intent was to create a body of people composed of both Jews and Gentiles with no ethnic distinctions. It was a mystery until revealed in the NT.

B. The church began with the ministry of Christ.

1. Jesus said that he would establish his church.

Matthew 16:18 “I will build my church.” Jesus said this about a year before His death, and is the first mention of a church headed by Jesus.

2. Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension were necessary for the formation of the church.

Acts 20:28 ... *shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.*

- a) Thus the church began only *after* Jesus' death.
- b) His death was necessary so that the Holy Spirit could come in His new capacity and ministry (John 16:7).
- c) His death was necessary for the validity of the ordinances of the local church, both of which (baptism, Lord's table) are directly related to Jesus' death.

Thus, the time of the church begins at Pentecost, not with any OT event or person.

We've considered a lot of information about the church as the body of Christ. It's important for us to understand these facts and distinctions because we are a local body of Christ. We must operate this church biblically, and the better we know the NT teaching on the church, the better this church will function.

There are several important distinctions to keep in mind regarding the church. We are not Israel, and we are not in the kingdom. If we don't keep these things straight, we get into other errors. We want to avoid getting tangled up in OT expectations for Israel or kingdom expectations that won't occur until Jesus returns.

As we begin our annual meeting in a few minutes, we need to keep in mind that Christ is the head of the church; it's his body, his assembly. Our primary job is to insure that this church, as a local assembly of the body of Christ, is operating under the authority of Christ and according to his expectations.