

Incorporation

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We conclude this little series on union with Christ by exploring the fourth main concept, the concept of *incorporation*. Incorporation reminds us that our union with Christ is not just about individuals and their relationships with Christ. It's about us together as people who have been joined to each other because we've been joined to Christ. The key metaphor that is used in the Bible to get at this concept is the metaphor of the body, the body of Christ. And it's a brilliant metaphor because it captures everything that we need to say about what we are as the collected people of Christ.

First, a body must be one for it to be a body. If my arm is over there and my leg is over there, my body is not really a body anymore. We're talking about body parts that are disjointed and separated, but if my body is whole, I'm one. Okay, so being the body of Christ means we are one together, but also a body helps us to understand the importance of diversity because I'm not just an eye. I'm not just a hand or a foot. I have two hands and two feet and two eyes, and I have ears and a nose, and I have hair, and I have bodily organs, and I have lots of different parts. And all of those parts are necessary for the body to function.

So we have oneness, and we have diversity, we have difference. And the two things belong together. The two things are needed. The two things are essential for the body to work, and so it's a brilliant image. It's a brilliant metaphor to understand the church and to understand who we are in union with Christ together.

Now our key passage for this is Ephesians chapter 4 where Paul really explores this image of being the body of Christ together. He begins by focusing on the unity of the body. So I'll pick it up in Ephesians 4 verse 1. He says, "As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just

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Ephesians 4:1–16 NIV

who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) ¹¹It was he who gave **some** to be apostles, **some** to be prophets, **some** to be evangelists, and **some** to be pastors and teachers, ¹²to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

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as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (vv. 1–6). So Paul begins by really emphasizing the oneness, and the first one that he mentions is the one body. But this one body has the one Spirit, and the one hope, and the one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God, one Father.

We have all these things in common that make us one, but then Paul pivots to discuss the diversity, the differences, within this one body. He says in verse 7, “But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.” What he’s really saying there, I think, is that as Christ pours out gifts to the church, to this body of Christ through His Spirit, He gives different gifts for different purposes. And he quotes from Psalm 68 by saying, “This is why it says, ‘When he ascended on high, he [led] captives [in his train] and gave gifts to [men]’” (vv. 7–8). Verse 9 says, “(What does ‘he ascended’ mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe)” (vv. 9–10).

Now, these verses are quite complicated, and I don’t have time to go into them right now. But the gist of it, drawing on Psalm 68, is to say that Christ is victorious through His resurrection from the dead, His ascension into heaven, and His position at God’s right hand to pour out His Holy Spirit. This is a position of victory over the evil powers, over the forces of evil, over the competing rulers and dominions. Christ has been seated above them all, and as that victorious King at God’s right hand, He pours out gifts through His Spirit. And that’s what Paul leads on to talk about in verse 11: “[It was he who] gave [some to be] apostles, [some to be] prophets, [some to be] evangelists, [and some to be] pastors and teachers, to [prepare God’s] people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (vv. 11–13).

So we see in verse 11 that Christ gives different gifts, namely, different people with different roles. Some are apostles. Some are prophets. Some are evangelists. Some are pastors and teachers. Notice the word “some.” Not all. Not all are apostles. Not all are prophets. Not all are evangelists and pastors and teachers. That would be like saying the whole body is one eye or the whole body is one hand. We don’t need the whole body to be an eye. In fact, the body wouldn’t work if it was just an eye. The eye needs the

rest of the body—the brain, the blood and everything else—for it to work, to function. So, the church needs some to be apostles, some to be prophets, and so on. Not all. There's diversity, there's difference—different gifts, different roles, serving the body.

And the purpose of these gifts are, verse 12, “to [prepare God's] people for works of service.” It's so that all may serve, so that the body of Christ may be built up. See, there it is. The diversity within the body of Christ serves the whole body of Christ. We need the different parts in the body for the body to function, and this is so that the body will reach unity in the faith. So the diversity serves the unity so that the body will be one in faith and in knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Then Paul goes on to say, verse 14, “We will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of [men] in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will [in all things] grow [up into] him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (vv. 14–16). So Paul contrasts infants (plural) with one mature adult, the body of Christ. See, immaturity is represented by plurality—they're infants (plural), but maturity is represented by oneness, by being one mature person, one mature body of Christ. Each part will do its work so that the oneness of the body can grow up into He who is the head, that is Christ.

Now, it's an interesting use of the metaphor, the body of Christ, because on the one hand you've got the body growing out of its head, Christ, but on the other hand, you've got it growing up into its head, which is Christ, which is kind of a weird image if you think about it in your head. But it gets at two different things. One, Christ is the source of this body. He is the one who has poured out the gifts—the apostles, the prophets, the pastors and teachers—who will build up this body. But also, Christ is the goal of the body. That is, the body builds itself up in love. It will grow up in conformity with Christ and continue to be like Christ, transformed into His image, and be further united to Christ.

So we see that this image of the body of Christ is profoundly important for understanding our union with Christ. We're not just individuals in a relationship with Christ. We're part of a body. We need all the parts, all the functions, all the gifts, so that the body as a whole can build itself up in love to be like Christ, united to Christ.