

THE PAULINE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

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The doctrine of the church is one of the prominent themes of Pauline theology. A glance at a concordance will show that Paul uses the term *church* sometimes to denote a local organization of professed Christian believers (1 Cor. 1:2) and other times to denote the whole body of believers (Col. 1:18). This twofold usage not only embodies the principal divisions of Pauline ecclesiology, but it also indicates the reason why this doctrine receives the attention it does by Paul. The local organization is emphasized in his writings because of the apostle's desire to organize his many converts into self-governing and self-propagating groups. The teaching concerning the universal church, the body of Christ, is vitally connected with Paul's relation to the revelation of the mystery (Eph. 3:1-12).

THE ORGANISM

The church as an organism is the complex structure of the body of Christ which carries on living activities by means of the individual believers who are distinct in function but mutually dependent on and governed by their relation to Christ the Head. This definition is built on the Pauline revelation of the church as an organism under the figure of the body. The body of Christ is the chief way the organism is pictured in Paul, although he also used two other figures—the church as a bride (Eph. 5:22-32) and the church as a building (1 Cor. 3:11; Eph. 2:20-22).

The unity of the body. In Paul's view the church is one. It never occurred to him that differences that do exist could be construed as a basis for division. This essential unity of the organism is illustrated by all the figures of the church which Paul uses. The body is one functioning entity needing all the parts in proper working order (1 Cor. 12:12-26). The parts cannot separate themselves from the body, so that as long as there is a body of Christ it must be one (cf. Eph. 4:11-13). The bride relationship pictures one bride united forever with the bridegroom, Christ (Eph. 5:22-32). The inseparable unity of the figure allows for no idea of polygamy or divorce. The figure of the building likewise emphasizes this idea of oneness. Each believer has his own special place in the building of which Christ is the chief cornerstone (Eph. 2:20-22), and the believer who is a part of this temple must have no association with

the idol temples, for "what agreement hath a temple of God with idols?" (2 Cor. 6:16). Thus the idea of unity is a basic feature of the doctrine.

The entrance into the body. Paul affirms that there is a definite act and time of entering the body of Christ. The act which is the means of entrance is the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13). It is the Spirit who effects this entrance by introducing all who believe into the new sphere of resurrection life in the body of Christ. Paul makes it clear in the context of 1 Corinthians 12:13 that the Spirit's work is in no way restricted to a certain group of believers, for there were all kinds of Christians in Corinth who, according to the apostle, were all baptized into the body. Even those who did not speak in tongues were baptized by the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13; cf. v. 30). Faith in Christ is, of course, the human requirement for entrance into the body, but the divine act which accomplishes it is the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit that automatically and simultaneously accompanies faith.

The direction of the body. As with other organisms the body of Christ also receives direction from the Head. The basis of Christ's headship over the church, though related to and presupposed by His universal headship over all men, is particularly His work of redemption (Eph. 5:22-32). In other words, the rights of redemption result in the prerogatives of headship.

The concept of headship incorporates certain corollaries. First, headship involves subordination (1 Cor. 11:2-16). In this passage Paul clearly teaches order and rank. The head of Christ is God, the head of man is Christ, and the head of woman is man. Thus the order is God, Christ, man, and woman. Subordination does not imply inferiority, for just as there is no inferiority of Christ to God (though the Son may be subordinate to the Father) so there is no inferiority of woman to man (though there is subordination). The doctrine of Christ's headship over the church is meant to convey the idea of the subordination of the church to the directions of Christ (Eph. 5:24).

Second, headship involves interdependence (Col. 2:19; Eph. 5:30). The Head is dependent on the members to carry out His directions, and in turn the members are dependent on the Head for leadership and upon each other for co-operation in carrying out the functions of the body. The very nature of the organism as living implies this interdependence.

Third, headship means loving direction. As Head Christ is no

autocratic or blind ruler. Like a bridegroom, Christ's direction is saturated with love for His bride.

The gifts to the body. Except for one reference (1 Pet. 4:10) Paul is the only New Testament writer to use the word *Charisma*. His usage is wide, ranging from the use of it to refer to the gift of salvation (Rom. 6:23) to that of God's providential care (2 Cor. 1:11). However, the most frequent occurrences refer to the special gifts or abilities given to men by God. In this sense a grace gift is a God-given ability for service.

The gifts are described by Paul in three passages: Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4. They include apostleship, prophecy, miracles, healing, tongues, evangelism, shepherding, ministering, teaching, faith, exhortation, discerning spirits, showing mercy, giving, and administration. Nowhere does Paul suggest that gifts are to be attached to a designated place. For instance, Paul does not equate the gift of pastor with the pastorate (as is commonly done today). The gift is that of shepherding, with all that that idea includes and it may be exercised in connection with what is called the office of pastor today or apart from it. Kennedy thinks that "probably none of these gifts represent permanent officials" (H.A.A. Kennedy, *The Theology of the Epistles*, p. 148). Although this may be too sweeping a statement, certainly it is true that Paul differentiated the gift from the office. Furthermore, Paul nowhere suggests that there are different gifts for specific age groups. There is no gift of young peoples' work, for instance, because all ages need teachers, pastors, helpers, etc. (cf. Titus 2:1-8). In Paul's mind the gift is the God-given ability, not the place or age group where that ability might be used.

Gifts are given with a purpose. First, they promote the unity of the body (1 Cor. 12:12-26), for unity within the organism can only be accomplished when every part is functioning properly. Second, they promote the growth of the body (Eph. 4:12-16). According to this passage, gifts are given to equip the saints so that they in turn may give themselves to the work of ministering in order that this body will be built up. This building up involves both quantity and quality. Third, they are given to promote the glory of the Head (Col. 1:18). This is the ultimate purpose of the organism in its entirety.

Paul's doctrine of the church as an organism is true ecumenicity. His view of the oneness of all believers was deeply rooted, and it brought with it a firm sense of the necessity of the interdependence of all Christians. Most of the functioning of the

organism is done, it is true, through the visible organization. For instance, gifts to the body are exercised in the local assemblies, but their ultimate purpose is the upbuilding of that one universal body to which they are given. The church as an organism is basic to all that Paul says about the church as an organization.

THE ORGANIZATION

Paul's Epistles were written in the heat of battle. The great theologian was also the great missionary. Therefore, it is not surprising to discover that for every time that Paul used the word *church* of the organism he used it six times of the organization. This is not to say that he thought that the organization was six times more important than the organism, but it is to recognize that the organization occupied a large place in his writing. However, in the theological substructure of his thinking, Paul undoubtedly gave the larger place to the organism, for he placed too much importance on the revelation of the mystery of the body to conclude otherwise. In his writing the organization occupied the larger place, for his written ministry was concerned with the practical problems of the churches in which he had an interest. Organism and organization are not opposing ideas; rather they are complementary, the former being the basis for the latter.

The officials of the church. Elders were evidently taken over into the early church organization from the synagogue (cf. Acts 11:30). They were considered essential to the proper functioning of a local assembly so much so that Paul saw to it that they were appointed in the churches he had established before returning from the first missionary journey (Acts 14:23—an extended note showing that this verse indicates that the elders were appointed and not chosen by vote of the people can profitably be studied in W. Kelly, *Lectures on the Church of God*, pp. 217-23). He also recommended to Titus that they be appointed in the churches in Crete in order that things might be set in order in those assemblies (Titus 1:5). The principal duties of elders include ruling (1 Tim. 5:17), guarding the truth (Titus 1:9), teaching (1 Tim. 5:17), and the general oversight of the church (1 Tim. 3:1). In his Epistles Paul generally mentions elders in the plural (Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:5), but in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 the elder is spoken of in the singular while a plurality of deacons is mentioned in the same passage (cf. v. 8). This might possibly indicate that as time went on a single elder led each assembly with the help of several deacons. The high qualifications

for the elder are set down by Paul in two passages (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9). Nothing is said about removing an elder from office once he had been chosen, though it might be inferred that if he ceased to qualify he should cease to function.

The origin of deacons is not so clear as that of elders. Probably they were a distinctly Christian development, being at first helpers of the elders by performing duties which did not involve superintendence. The general sense of the word *deacon* as servant is found in the latest of Paul's Epistles (Col. 1:17; 1 Tim. 4:6), while in the same groups of epistles the specific official sense of the word is also found (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8-10). The qualifications for deacons (1 Tim. 3:8-10) indicate that they performed a spiritual ministry, so that one would conclude that the distinction between elders and deacons was not that the former performed the spiritual ministry while the latter concerned themselves with material things (cf. Acts 11:30). Rather the distinction was that the deacons constituted the subordinate office performing their duties under the general direction and oversight of the elders. They were the helpers of the elders.

Did Paul recognize the office of deaconess? Phoebe is called a servant of the church (Rom. 16:1) and certain women helpers are mentioned in 1 Timothy 3:11. Whether these were official deaconesses or merely women helpers or servants (using the word *deacon* in the unofficial sense) is a question which probably can never be answered conclusively. It seems doubtful to this writer that Paul used the word *deacon* in the official sense when speaking of these women. Phoebe was a helper of the church but not a member of an order of deaconesses. The women mentioned in 1 Timothy 3:11 are probably the wives of the deacons who helped the men with their work.

The ordinances of the church. References to baptism are scarce in the Pauline Epistles. We know that Paul was himself baptized (Acts 9:18) and that he baptized others (1 Cor. 1:14-16). He evidently considered that all believers should be baptized (Acts 16:33), and yet he clearly distinguished it from the gospel itself (1 Cor. 1:17). On one occasion at least Paul practiced rebaptism of those who had not received Christian baptism (Acts 19:1-7). Undoubtedly there was a very close connection in Paul's mind between the baptism of the Spirit and baptism with water. This is most clearly seen in Romans 6:1-10 where the accomplishments described can only be the result of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, but where the ordinance and that which it pictures cannot be ruled out of the

background of the passage. For Paul the ordinance apparently pictured the believer's association with Christ in resurrection life—the very thing which baptism with the Spirit accomplishes.

The Lord's Supper was a continual memorial of the sacrificial death of the Lord (1 Cor. 11:23-24). It was to be preceded by a self-examination, and failure in this point had already resulted in the sickness and death of some of the Corinthian believers. The Supper also was a fellowship (1 Cor. 10:16) and a reminder of the oneness of all believers in Christ (1 Cor. 10:17). We are bound together because we are bound to Christ.

The order of the church. Detailed instructions regarding the order and conduct of the meetings of the organized churches are surprisingly few in the Pauline Epistles. In general Paul urges the importance of reverence and proper decorum in the public meetings and especially in the observance of the Lord's Supper. Specific regulations for the use of the gift of tongues are given (1 Cor. 14), and church discipline of wayward members is enjoined (1 Cor. 5).

Without question Paul placed the leadership of the affairs of the churches in the hands of men. His view concerning the place of women in the church was that they should be subordinate and silent. Their subordination, based on the natural facts of creation, was to be exhibited in the meetings of the church by the wearing of a veil. This was the general practice of all the churches (1 Cor. 11:16) and was for the purpose of teaching men and angels an order which God effected in creation (1 Cor. 11:7-9). It was not connected with some local Corinthian peculiarity. In exhibiting subordination by wearing the veil, the women would be teaching sound doctrine.

If a summary statement is to be made from this survey of Pauline ecclesiology it would be that Paul's primary emphasis was on the unity of the Spirit binding every believer to the Head and to each other in the organism and ideally displaying itself in the properly functioning order of the local assembly. Although the primitive church experienced its problems and divisions, Paul never campaigned for organizational unity. He firmly believed that true unity in the church was not outward (though ideally it should be displayed outwardly), but was inward, and it is this spirit which permeates his ecclesiology.

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