

## Essential Truths III: Working With God

# 4

## The Body of Christ

Most of us view our salvation in highly personal terms. We may know the date we made that personal commitment to Christ, or the day when we were baptized, or the time when we came to the life-changing realization that we have been called to a purpose higher than simply surviving on a day-to-day basis in the rat-race we call everyday life.

Yet the Scripture reveals that your walk with God is part of a larger picture. This wider context is called, by the Bible, the Church.

### The Meaning of the Church

Most of us already know that the word “church” doesn’t actually refer to a physical building (**Acts 7:48-50**). Church equals people, or more accurately, the company of the redeemed.

The Greek word that is translated “church” in English is *ekklesia*. This word is derived from the verb *ekkaleo*, which is made up of two parts:

- *ek* means ‘out,’
- *kaleo* means ‘to call or summon.’

Thus the literal meaning of the Greek word for “church” is “those who are called out.” This meaning is further explained in the *Holman Bible Dictionary*:

“*Ekklesia* means ‘called out,’ and in classical Greek referred to the body of free citizens called out [in assembly] by a herald.”<sup>1</sup>

The Birthright

Taking the Baton

The Great Commission

▶ **The Body of Christ** ◀

The Ministry of Every Believer

Joining the Work of God

The Tree of Life

Ministry of Reconciliation

Filled with the Spirit

Ministry to the Body

Sent into the Harvest

Speaking the Word of God

A Lifestyle Gospel

Salt of the Earth

Enforcing the Victory

Signs and Wonders

A New Kind of Leadership

Establishing a Daily Church

Making Disciples

The New Wine

The Goal of Ministry

Do you notice how the call of God lies at the very heart of the definition of the Church? It is not man's organization that defines the Church. Rather, it is the call of God that defines the Church.

In order to understand what the Church really means, we need to put aside our pre-conceived ideas and see it from God's perspective. **Ephesians 1:22-23** provides God's own definition of the Church, and a very remarkable definition it is. Let's take a look at this definition, as it is translated by various versions of the Bible.

**New International Version:**

"And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, *the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.*"

**New American Standard Bible:**

"And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, *the fullness of Him who fills all in all.*"

**God's Word:**

"God has put everything under the control of Christ. He has made Christ the head of everything for the good of the church. The church is Christ's body and *completes him as he fills everything in every way.*"

**New Century Version:** "God put everything under his power and made him the head over everything for the church, which is Christ's body. *The church is filled with Christ, and Christ fills everything in every way.*"

**New Living Translation:** "And God has put all things under the authority of Christ, and he gave him this authority for the benefit of the church. And the church is his body; *it is filled by Christ, who fills everything everywhere with his presence.*"

## Origin of the Word "Church"

Jesus was the first person to use the word *ekklesia* to refer to the Church (**Matthew 16:18; 18:17**). Thus it can be said that Christ not only established the Church, he also named it.

But the Greek word *ekklesia* also had roots in the Old Testament. In Hebrew, two words are used to describe the assembled people of God:

- *'edah*, which is translated into Greek as *sunagoge* in the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament that many first century Jews used.
- *qahal*, which is translated into Greek as *ekklesia* in the Septuagint.

Both Hebrew words describe the people of Israel as a congregation of holy people, but in late Judaism, the word *sunagoge* (rendered "synagogue" in English) refers to the whole congregation of Israel, whereas the word *ekklesia* came to mean the ideal elect of God, called to salvation.

As Joe E. Luncford comments:

"Significantly the Christian community chose the Old Testament term for the ideal people of God called to salvation (*ekklesia*), rather than the term which described all Israelites collectively (*sunagoge*)."<sup>2</sup>

**The Living Bible:** “And God has put all things under his feet and made him the supreme Head of the Church – which is his body, *filled with himself, the Author and Giver of everything everywhere.*”

**The Message:** “He’s in charge of it all, has the final word on everything. At the center of all this, Christ rules the church...The church is Christ’s body, in which he speaks and acts, *by which he fills everything with his presence.*”

**The New Testament in Modern English:** “God has placed everything under the power of Christ and has set him up as head of everything for the Church. For the Church is his body, *and in that body lives fully the one who fills the whole wide universe.*”

**Young’s Literal Translation:** “...and all things He did put under his feet, and did give him – head over all things to the assembly, which is his body, *the fulness of Him who is filling the all in all.*”

**The Amplified Bible:** “And He has put all things under His feet and has appointed Him the universal and supreme Head of the church (a headship exercised through the church), which is His body, *the fullness of Him Who fills all in all – for in that body lives the full measure of Him Who makes everything complete, and Who fills everything everywhere [with Himself].*”

God has a very high concept of what he desires the Church to be. Even though we may look around us and see the Church as falling short of God’s ideal, we need to understand that **Ephesians 1:22-23** does not describe God’s *end goal* for the Church (that is found later, in **Ephesians 4:12-13**). It is actually the *starting point* for the Church!

This passage describes the Church in terms of:

- **Authority** – Christ’s supreme position “far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given” (**Ephesians 1:21**) is for the sake of the Church! God “appointed him to be head over everything *for the church*” (note also this emphasis on Christ’s authority “over everything” in **Ephesians 1:9-10**). This emphasis on authority for and delegated to the Church is also found in the Great Commission (**Matthew 28:18-20**).
- **Identity** – The Church is not seen as separate from Christ, but an organic extension of him. We are the Church “which is his body.” This organic unity with Christ impacts every ministry and activity within the Church.
- **Totality** – The Church is now the “the fullness of him who fills everything in every way” in the same way that Christ is “the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.” Our identification with Christ is total and God has purposed that the totality of Christ be expressed through his Church.

**Read Colossians 2:9-10**

The *Amplified Bible* amplifies the original meaning of Paul's words:

“For in Him the whole fullness of Deity (the Godhead) continues to dwell in bodily form – giving complete expression of the divine nature. And you are in Him, made full and have come to fullness of life – in Christ you too are filled with the Godhead: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and reach full spiritual stature...”

When Jesus walked the earth, his physical body housed the fullness of God. His body was the temple of the Spirit (**John 2:19-21**). Now the Church is his Body, the temple of God's Spirit (**1 Corinthians 3:16; 2 Corinthians 6:16**). In fact, Jesus said he was returning to his Father “for your good,” for only then could he send the Holy Spirit (**John 16:7**), the one who takes individual believers and unites them into one organic whole (**1 Corinthians 12:13**).

Although Christ's physical body was limited by space and time, his corporate Body – the Church – has no such limitations (**John 14:12**). This corporate Body is expressed on three levels:

- **The universal Church** – this is the sum total of all believers presently alive and also includes believers who have lived down through the ages.
- **The regional Church** – this is the sum total of all believers in a given area, such as a city or state. This is the largest expression of unity that can be practically expressed on the earth.
- **The local congregation** – this is the Church in microcosm, expressed as individual assemblies where believers relate and participate.

## A Body Prepared

**Hebrews 10:5-7** tells us:

“Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: ‘Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but *a body you prepared for me*; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, “Here I am – it is written about me in the scroll – *I have come to do your will, O God.*””

The function of any body is to do its owner's bidding. Jesus came to the earth in bodily form to fulfil the will of his Father (**John 5:19; Matthew 26:39**). Jesus was God manifest in the flesh (**John 1 :1,14,18; 1 Timothy 3:16**). Now the Church, as Christ's corporate Body, is to express God's will on earth (**Matthew 6:10**) – to be God manifest again in the flesh.

## One Body

The Body of Christ is a unit comprised of many members (**1 Corinthians 12:14**). This unity is possible because in Christ we have:

## ***One Spirit***

The Body of Christ is filled with the Holy Spirit – also called the Spirit of Jesus (**Acts 16:6-7; Galatians 4:6**). This Spirit is the bond that holds the Body together (**Ephesians 4:3-4**).

## ***One Blood***

True Christians have a common denominator – we have been redeemed by the blood of Christ (**1 Corinthians 10:16-17; Ephesians 1:7**). This blood is the basis of our life in God and continues to nourish us (**John 6:53-56**) and cleanse us (**Hebrews 9:14**).

## ***One Mind***

This is not just doctrinal agreement, but agreement in purpose and vision. For the Body of Christ to function as God intended, we must all be motivated by the heart of Christ (**Philippians 2:5-8**) and guided by the mind of Christ (**1 Corinthians 2:16**).

## **Many Parts**

### **Read 1 Corinthians 12:12**

In **1 Corinthians 12:15-27**, the apostle Paul deals with two problems in attitude that will hinder the proper functioning of the Body:

- Inferiority (**verses 15-20**)
- Superiority (**verses 21-27**)

We are not to think more highly of ourselves nor more lowly of ourselves than we should. Rather, we should see ourselves as a vital but integrated part of the Body of Christ.

The Message sheds a colloquial light on Paul's words in **1 Corinthians 12:12-27**:

“You can easily enough see how this kind of thing works by looking no further than your own body. Your body has many parts – limbs, organs, cells – but no matter how many parts you can name, you're still one body. It's exactly the same with Christ. By means of his own Spirit, we all said goodbye to our partial and piecemeal lives. We each used to independently call our own shots, but then we entered into a large and integrated life in which he has the final say in everything...

“I want you to think about how all this makes you more significant, not less... But I also want you to think about how this keeps your significance from getting blown up into self-importance. For no matter how significant you are, it is only because of what you are a *part* of.”

### **Read Romans 12:3-6**

## Positioned by God

In **1 Corinthians 12:18-19**, Paul describes how God has gone about forming the Body of Christ to express Christ to the world. He writes:

“But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be?” The Body of Christ has unity, but not uniformity. Just as there is a wonderful diversity in the natural body, so it is with the Church – a diversity of function and a variety of expression. In **1 Corinthians 12:7-10**, Paul writes:

“Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. *To one* there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, *to another* the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, *to another* faith by the same Spirit, *to another* gifts of healing by that one Spirit, *to another* miraculous powers, *to another* prophecy, *to another* distinguishing between spirits, *to another* speaking in different kinds of tongues, *and to still another* the interpretation of tongues

In this passage, the apostle Paul uses two Greek words – translated in English as “to one kind” and “to another kind” – to describe the diversity found in the Body of Christ:

- *Allos* - “of one kind”
- *Heteros* - “of an entirely different kind”

Christians tend to gather with others of their own kind (*allos*), but the Body is also made up of people of completely different kinds (*heteros*). Yet God has divided up the gifts of his Spirit among the *allos* and *heteros*. And he has done this for a reason. It is only when the *allos* and the *heteros* come together that the whole Christ is manifest to the world.

### Read 1 Corinthians 1:10

The unity of the Church is a key part of the Gospel message (**Ephesians 2:14-16; Galatians 3:28**). As we have seen in **Module 102**, the Gospel is a contract between God and the believer. This contract has two levels of expression:

### ***The Individual Level***

When we individually respond to the Gospel in faith:

- God blesses us in Christ (**Ephesians 1:3; John 1:16**)
- We have personal access to God (**Hebrews 4:14-16; Ephesians 2:18**)
- We are being conformed to the image of Christ (**Romans 8:29**)
- We have been given gifts for ministry (**Ephesians 4:7-8**)
- We are each a temple of the Holy Spirit (**1 Corinthians 6:19-20**)

Most Christians view their lives largely on this individual level. This is a product of Western culture, which emphasizes the individual over the corporate. But in Scripture we see another whole level of the Gospel at work in our lives.



## ***The Multiple Level***

The Christian life has not been designed by God to be a solitary experience (**Ephesians 3:17-19**). As individuals, we receive salvation and reconciliation to God. But in order for God's purpose to be fulfilled in our lives, we need to be connected to others in the Body of Christ. This is because when we come together:

- God blesses us in our unity (**Psalm 133:1,3; 1 Peter 3:8-9**)
- Christ manifests his presence in our unity (**Matthew 18:20**).
- We grow into the full stature of Christ (**Ephesians 4:13**)
- We are a body of interdependent gifts (**1 Corinthians 12:14-27**)
- We are together being built into God's temple (**Ephesians 1:22-23; 2 Corinthians 6:16**).

## **The Prayer of Jesus**

### **Read John 17:20-23**

This prayer, prayed by Jesus just before he went to the Cross, described the "joy set before him" (**Hebrews 12:2**). His words reveal the whole reason he was willing to endure the pain of Calvary.

*"...I pray...that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe..."*

Jesus prayed that his Church would have the same expression of unity as God has himself – three and yet one (note **Deuteronomy 6:4**). Jesus is even now interceding for us (**Romans 8:34**), continuing the prayer he began in **John 17**.

This is a unity in Christ, however, *not* a unity in compromise. The foundation of true Christian unity is the Gospel and a common relationship with Jesus. We can have unity with each other only because we are all individually united with Christ (note **Philippians 2:1-2**). Christ is the foundation of our individual lives and also the foundation of our unity (**1 Corinthians 3:11; 2 Timothy 2:19**).

What is the secret to unity in the Body of Christ? Paul tells us quite clearly in **Romans 15:5-6**:

*"May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."*

It is only as we *individually* follow the Lord Jesus Christ that we can *corporately* express the unity that is found in Christ.

## **The Command of Jesus**

### **Read John 13:34-35**

Unity is not an option. It is a command. This command is delivered repeatedly throughout Scripture.

**Read John 15:12-14****Read 1 John 4:21****Read 2 John 5-6**

The early Church obeyed the command of Jesus and the outworking of their obedience was unity. **Acts 4:32** records the extraordinary quality of that unity:

“All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.”

This verse shows three expressions of unity:

- Unity in heart – *a common Spirit* (**1 Corinthians 12:13**)
- Unity in mind – *a common purpose* (**2 Corinthians 13:11**)
- Unity in life – *a common concern* (**1 John 3:16**)

## **Barriers to Unity**

**Read 2 Corinthians 12:20**

The only thing that can destroy the unity of the Church is self-interest. In **Mark 9**, we find the disciples participating in three different arguments, each an expressing on underlying self-interest.

- We're right! (**Verses 14-16,28**)
- We're the greatest! (**Verses 33-34**)
- You're not one of us! (**Verses 38-40**)

These same arguments can be found in the Church today. God is working to break down these three barriers to unity – divisions over doctrine and methodology (**Titus 3:9-11**), divisions through selfish ambition (**Philippians 2:3-4; Romans 12:10**) and divisions due to exclusiveness (**Romans 12:3-5; 15:7**) – to conform his Church to the full, practical unity found in Christ.

This does not mean that we all become the same. It does not even mean that we must all agree on every small point of doctrine. God has built great diversity in the Body and part of our unity means having an appreciation for that diversity.

**Read Ephesians 4:3-6**

We do not need to ask God for unity. We already have it in Christ! But we need to keep that unity “through the bond of peace.” This unity is the foundation for all ministry. We must show this unity in many practical ways (**Romans 12:9-21; Ephesians 4:2-3; Colossians 3:12-16; Hebrews 10:24-25**). We must have a common identity and a common purpose. We must have a genuine desire for the success of other leaders and other churches. It is in this unity that “the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” is expressed through our lives to the world (**Ephesians 4:13; Colossians 2:2**).

**Read 2 Corinthians 13:11**



## Read Philippians 1:27

# Purpose of the Body

God's plan is that Christ, through his Body, should manifest to the world four things:

- The glory of God (**Ephesians 2:21; Habakkuk 2:14**)
- The wisdom of God (**Ephesians 3:10**)
- The grace of God (**Ephesians 2:6-7**)
- The praises of God (**1 Peter 2:5,9**)

# The Whole Christ

## Read Ephesians 2:12-13

It is the work of the Holy Spirit to reveal Christ to the world (**John 16:14-15**), and he does this by dwelling in the Church. In order to reveal the whole Christ, the Body must reveal Christ...

- In his character (**Galatians 5:22-25**)
- In his power (**1 Corinthians 12:8-10**)
- In his authority (**John 16:23-24**)

God has given you a ministry – a part to play in his eternal purpose. But that ministry must find its context within the Body of Christ. The individual expression must mesh with the corporate expression. It is only “as each part does its work” that “we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ” (**Ephesians 4:15-16**).

The Gospel is God's *method* of salvation, but the Body of Christ is God's *vehicle* of salvation. No wonder Paul's excitement overflows in the doxology he writes in **Ephesians 3:20-21**:

“Now unto him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, *to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.*”

<sup>1</sup> *Holman Bible Dictionary*, excerpted from QuickVerse 5.0.

<sup>2</sup> Joe E. Luncford, *Holman Bible Dictionary*, “Congregation,” excerpted from QuickVerse 5.0

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