

The Body Universal & Local—A Twofold Truth

"You Are Christ's Body"

Christians are members of the Body of Christ. This is a great New Testament revelation. All believers were baptized into one body (1 Cor. 12:13). The Body of Christ is unique—there is only "one Body" (Eph. 4:4). It is universal, encompassing all believers from every tribe, people, and country throughout the age of grace¹ (Rev. 7:9). Based upon this revelation, the believers in a city are not merely a local assembly, they also belong to the universal Body. As such they should seek fellowship and receive grace from fellow-believers throughout the globe. As Watchman Nee said,² *"God's children must...learn to be one with all God's children on the whole earth today."* This implies more than merely "blending" with the other local churches within the Lord's recovery around the globe. This is the universal aspect of the Body of Christ.

Yet there is the principle of the "twofoldness of divine truth." This occurs when³ *"two seemingly opposed principles are found placed side by side in the Scripture"*. Concerning the church, there are two sides⁴—one universal church (Matt. 16:18), yet many local churches (Rev. 1:11). The Body of Christ also has two aspects: it is both universal and local.

The Local Aspect of Christ's Body

Where is the local aspect of the Body in Scripture? In 1 Corinthians Paul ends his exposition on the Body with the striking statement, "Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually" (12:27). Expositors agree that the reference here is local, i.e., Paul is saying the believers in Corinth are Christ's body. Robert Govett says,⁵ *"There is a sense in which each particular church, as with that of Corinth for instance, might be regarded as a body of Christ."* In the Greek text of 1 Corinthians 12:27 there is no definite article—"the." This implies Paul is not telling the Corinthian believers, "You are the one, unique Body of Christ." Yet neither does Paul describe them as "part of the Body." Rather, he tells the Corinthians, "You are Christ's body." James Dunn comments,⁶ *"In 1 Cor. 12:27-28 in particular, it is evident that Paul had in mind the church in Corinth as such: 'You [the Corinthian believers] are Christ's body [in Corinth], and individually parts of it.'" The local aspect of the Body is found here—"You [the church in Corinth] are Christ's body." (1 Cor. 12:27)*

Placing this Scripture alongside the "one Body" in Ephesians 4:4, we see the "twofoldness" of this truth. Christ does not have thousands of "bodies," one in each city. He has only one Body, the global and temporal aggregate of all God's people. Yet, on the "other side" of this twofold truth, the believers in a particular locality are also "Christ's body." Some might respond by agreeing that the Corinthian believers are the "practical expression of the universal Body in their city." But, in saying this, haven't we diminished the impact of Paul's statement? The apostle did not use such convoluted expressions. He didn't tell the believers, "You are the practical expression of the universal Body in Corinth." Rather, he asserted unreservedly, "You are Christ's body." 1 Corinthians 12:27 means a local church is Christ's Body. Rather than attempting to subsume Corinthians under Ephesians, shouldn't we affirm both of the aspects testified in Scripture—that the Body of Christ is both universal and local? Consistent with this, Witness Lee makes the succinct statement,⁷ *"the Body is both local and universal."* Elsewhere, he says,⁸ *"the local church...is the Body to Christ and the dwelling place of God...Every local church is the Body of Christ for expressing Christ,"*

The Body in Ephesians—the universal church, in Corinthians—the local church
Watchman Nee emphasizes this twofold truth concerning the Body. He contrasts Paul's treatment in Ephesians and Corinthians:⁹ "The Body spoken of in Ephesians refers to *all the children of God, but the Body spoken of in Corinthians refers to the children of God in a certain time and at a certain place. The children of God there and then are also the Body of Christ.*" Again W. Nee writes,¹⁰ "The Body of Christ spoken of in 1 Corinthians is different from that which is spoken of in Ephesians.... The Body of Christ in Ephesians refers to the universal church. This is not a problem to most Bible students. But *the Body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12 refers to the church at Corinth.*"

There is a local aspect to the Body of Christ. Yet it seems, in the Lord's recovery during the last decade, this side of the truth has been ignored, depreciated and (even) denied. One "blended co-worker" asserted,¹¹ "Not one local church is the Body; every local church is a part of the Body; there are many local churches but there are never many bodies." We acknowledge that Christ does not have "many bodies," corresponding to the many local churches. However, this "blended co-worker's" assertion, "every local church is a part of the Body" does not follow as a corollary. That declaration is a *non sequitur*. It appears to contradict the Scripture—"You are Christ's body" (1 Cor. 12:27).

Experiencing the Body starts at Home, in your local church

The distinction between these two aspects might seem to be merely a matter of semantics, of "splitting hairs." I think not. The church in a locality is not merely part of the Body; a local church is not a "thumb" or "ear" of a greater universal Body. Yet this concept has been expounded from the LSM-podium.¹² However, according to the New Testament, a local church, consisting of the believers in a locality, is Christ's body in that place. Based on 1 Corinthians 12, we should not expect all the believers in one locality to have uniformly the same gift. Rather, by faith we should anticipate that diverse gifts exist among God's children in every place to enable an adequate expression of the Body (1 Cor. 12:18-19).

Moreover, this truth implies that experiencing the Body does not require Christians to engage in artificial extra-local exercises. There is no need to join a worldwide organization, synod, or conference in order to experience the Body life. The Body-life is not reserved for a select group of Christians who amass millions of frequent flyer points by blending with every local church on the globe! The experience of the Body starts at home; in their own localities, believers can experience being Christ's body. In the New Testament the usual pattern is that apostles (workers) travel, the saints do not. We look in vain for exhortations for the saints to gather nationally, internationally or globally for "blending," "feasts," for conferences or trainings. The only conference recorded in the New Testament involved the apostles going to Jerusalem to confer with the elders and saints there (Acts 15).¹³

Local Sect, Global Sect or the Body of Christ?

The principle of twofold truth applies to the Body. We should recognize and apply both the universal and local aspects. Overemphasis on either aspect produces problems. If the members of a local church see themselves as the Body of Christ, to the exclusion of believers outside their locality, the result is a "local body." In reality, however, this could be a local sect isolated from other local churches. Such believers need the Ephesian revelation—that there is one Body in the universe. They are one local church among many local churches which together express the Lord's testimony. As such, they should fellowship with the other churches to receive the supply of life from the Body.

Moreover, we should recognize that the universal Body includes all believers, not merely those meeting practically as local churches in the recovery. Failure to take seriously the inclusiveness of the Body risks producing an exclusive global sect. We reject as unscriptural such statements as:¹⁴ *"the Body equals the recovery"* and *"the recovery is the Body."* This teaching diminishes Christ's universal, mystical Body, composed of millions of genuine believers, down to the 300,000 believers currently in the Lord's recovery around the globe. This reduces something as "innumerable as the stars of heaven" (Gen. 22:17; Gal. 3:29) to a finite number equal to the population of a small-sized city or town. Applying the truth of the universal Body means we should *"learn to be one with all God's children on the whole earth today."*(W. Nee)

Local Divisions in the name of Universal Oneness!

On the other hand there is danger in emphasizing only the universal aspect of the Body. A believer may see himself as a member of the universal Body. He has fellowship with believers all around the globe. He claims to practice the Body life, yet he may ignore, reject, or divide from his fellow-believers meeting as the church in his own city. He is "one with the Body," yet perhaps he is divisive in his own locality. Such a believer has an "extra-local Body." He needs Paul's practical teaching in Corinthians which confronts the issue of local division. As Brother Nee says,¹⁵ *"The brothers in Corinth...needed to descend to see the Body of Christ in 1 Corinthians before they ascend to see it in Ephesians. They needed to descend to see the Body of Christ in 1 Corinthians because it is much more practical."* Since the believers in Corinth are Christ's body (12:27),¹⁶ *"Paul showed them that having divisions in the locality of Corinth was the same as having divisions in the Body of Christ."* If we fail to see the local aspect of the Body, we can be divisive locally while proclaiming that we are one with the universal Body. I believe an over-emphasis on the universal Body and the depreciation of the local aspect of the Body is responsible for the divisive activities we currently see in the recovery. For example, some local church members aligned with the "blended co-workers," feel justified in causing turmoil, division, and (even) lawsuits in their locality, while claiming a universal oneness with "the Body." Yet division in a local church is division in the Body. Moreover, I fear the "blended co-workers" unbalanced teaching will result in an exclusive global LSM-sect, which calls itself 'the Body.'

In the Pauline Epistles the Body of Christ has two aspects. On one hand the Body is universally one. Because there is "one Body and one Spirit" (Eph. 4:4), we are exhorted to "keep the oneness of the Spirit" (Eph. 4:3). On the other hand, there is the local aspect of Christ's body. The children of God residing in a certain place are also "Christ's body" (1 Cor. 12:27). Both aspects of this twofold divine truth should be recognized, proclaimed, and practiced.

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January, 2007

Notes:

This is an extended and revised version of a piece with the same title which appeared in the ***Fellowship Journal***, vol. 2, No. 5

1. Consistent with this, Witness Lee clearly taught that *"The church is ... an organic Body **constituted of all the believers, who have been regenerated and have God's life...**"*(The Conclusion of New Testament, p. 2245) Moreover, he says, *"... **through the centuries, all God's chosen people were, are, and will be brought into not only the reality but also the practicality of the Body of Christ...**"*(The Conclusion of New Testament, p. 2106.) These statements recognize the universality of the Body in both time and space.
2. The quote in context reads, *"...God's children are living on earth today. When all these children of God are added together, we also have the general church. What was there yesterday was past, and what will be there in the future is not here yet. Between the past and the future, there are all the*

children of God on earth today. God's children must not only practice the oneness in the locality, but they must learn to be one with all God's children on the whole earth today." W. Nee in The Resumption of W. Nee's Ministry. Vol. 2, p. 593.

3. Robert Govett, The Twofoldness of Divine Truth, p. 4
4. The relationship between the universal and local aspects of the church is described by W. Lee as follows "*The universal church is the sum total of all the local churches. If we add up all the local churches of **the past and the present**, local and abroad, this would equal the universal church.*" [W. Lee, The Testimony & Ground of the Church, Section 2, chapter 5]. Notice that the universal church is not merely the sum total of the local churches existing on the earth at a point in time. That is the "global church." The universal church also includes the believers throughout the New Testament age of grace. It is inclusive both in terms of space and time ("*the past and the present*" and the future). Moreover, in this context, the local church is understood as including all the genuine believers in a given locality. As stated, "*We recognize all the blood-redeemed and Spirit-regenerated believers in Christ as members of the one church in each city.*" (Beliefs and Practices of the local churches, p. 4)
5. Robert Govett, The Church of Old, p. 44
6. James D. G. Dunn, The Theology of Paul the Apostle, p. 541
7. Witness Lee, Life-Study of First Corinthians p. 527
8. The quote in its fuller context reads: "*The universal church is the Body of Christ for the expression of Christ and the dwelling place of God for the expression of God (Eph. 1:22-23; 2:20-22). Just as the universal church has these two aspects, **the local church** also has these two aspects: it is **the Body to Christ** and the dwelling place of God (Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Tim. 3:15)...**Every local church is the Body of Christ** for expressing Christ," (W. Lee, The Testimony & Ground of the Church, Section 2, chapter 5)*
9. W. Nee, The Collected Works of W. Nee, Vol. 56, p. 363, (emphasis added).
10. W. Nee, The Collected Works of W. Nee, Vol. 56, p. 364.
11. Benson Phillips, The Ministry, Vol. 9, No. 2, Feb. 2005, p. 113
12. See the previous note. I recall hearing Brother Dick Taylor ridiculing the thought that a local church could be the Body by saying "If a church thinks it's the Body, it thinks it's thumb-body" (or words to that effect). The implication seemed to be that a local church was a "thumb" (in the greater Body) claiming to be "thumb-body" (somebody)
13. Concerning this W. Nee says: "*Acts chapter 15 is the only place in the entire Bible which records a meeting in which the church discussed business affairs...The entire church has had only one such conference. Therefore, God has specifically placed this unique conference in the Bible to be a pattern for all conferences.*" W. Nee, Church Affairs, pp. 150-1
14. **The Ministry**, vol. 7, no. 6, Aug. 2003, p. 196. For more on this see my: "*The Body Equals the Recovery*"-- Going Beyond what has been written? www.concernedbrothers.com
15. W. Nee, The Collected Works of W. Nee, Vol. 56, p. 365.
16. W. Nee, The Collected Works of W. Nee, Vol. 56, p. 364.

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