

"The body of Christ" (Eph. 4:12)

Supporting and nurturing the ecclesial family

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This article seeks to:

- examine the apostle's argument in Ephesians 4, which uses the figure of the body of Christ as the ecclesia
- consider the practical consequences for believers as the body of Christ in the first century and today
- encourage the members of the one body to care for and help each other and to deal with problems that will arise as Scripture advises and instructs.

THE IDEA OF one body runs through the whole of the Epistle to the Ephesians. In the first chapter Paul sets out the purpose of God in Christ: "... that in the dispensation of the fulness of times He might gather together in *one* all things in Christ" (v. 10). Christ is appointed as "the head over all things to the *church* [ecclesia], which is *his body*" (vv. 22,23). When Paul considers the dramatically changed position of Gentiles when they become believers, he says: "but now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both *one*, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition . . . for to make in himself of twain *one new man*, so making peace; and that he might reconcile both unto God in *one body* by the cross" (2:13-16).

He returns to this theme in chapter 4, where he emphasises the unity in the believers' calling. The unity of the spirit is seen firstly in "*one body*", for which there is "one hope of [our] calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (vv. 4-6). The first-century Spirit ministry was available because Jesus had "led captivity captive" and had risen from the dead (v. 8). The function of this ministry was "for the perfecting of the saints, unto the work of the ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ" (v. 12, RV).

This built-up body would be seen in a "full-grown man" patterned on Jesus in his perfection (v. 13, RV). The figure as it is used sees the ecclesia, in this specific case Ephesus, but in principle the ecclesia in every place, as the body with Christ as the head. Consequently, as the head controls the functions and activities of a natural body, so the thinking and behaviour of Jesus the

Christ must control the spiritual body which is the community of believers.

This collective body, as an ecclesia, is meant to display the attributes of Jesus, "speaking the truth in love" and "edifying . . . itself in love" (vv. 15,16). This is accomplished when individual members respond to the reality of their position in Christ; that is, that we are a new creation, a new man, now distinct from and largely changed from the old man before belief and baptism. So the apostle writes that those who have learned Christ have heard and been taught the truth, as the truth is in Jesus. As a consequence he urges believers to "put away, as concerning your former manner of life, the old man, which waxeth corrupt after the lusts of deceit; and . . . be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new man, which after God hath been created in righteousness and holiness of truth" (vv. 22-24, RV). Practical illustrations of how this is to happen are given in verses 28-32, which we will consider in more detail later.

The ecclesia: the body

The focus of this article is to consider the ecclesial family, which, as we have seen, is described in Ephesians as the body of Christ. Ultimately, of course, all the ecclesias throughout the world and throughout time constitute the body of Christ, which will only be manifest in its maturity at the resurrection and judgement at Jesus's Kingdom and glory.

The first-century ecclesia was supported in its development from Pentecost by a Spirit-powered ministry, which involved all believers. Few, if any, had all the gifts, so that it was essential for each member to play his or her part: "Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particu-

lar. And God hath set some in the church [ecclesia], first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues. Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles? have all the gifts of healing? do all speak with tongues? do all interpret?" (1 Cor. 12:27-30).

Paul's following exhortation to covet earnestly the best gifts implies that they were potentially available to all those who wanted to have and use the gifts wisely (see 14:1). Even within this context of Spirit-endowed members, all were part of the body and therefore had a role to play: "For the body is not one member, but many" (12:14). Even those who might have felt inferior or not needed compared with those having a more significant role to play were to remember that this was by God's appointment, and that all the members were necessary to make the body complete, even the comparatively insignificant, for "God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked: that there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another" (vv. 24,25).

After the first century

How does this work out today, when there are no Spirit-appointed apostles or teachers?

We need not feel disadvantaged. The first-century ministry of apostles, prophets and teachers has provided the Scriptures of the New Testament, under God's good hand. These instruct, admonish and encourage those who heed them, for "the holy scriptures . . . are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15). That Word of God which is the incorruptible seed responsible for the birth of the new man in each believer is also the "milk", and ultimately the "strong meat", which allows individual members to grow to spiritual maturity (Heb. 5:12-14; 1 Pet. 1:23-2:5). This Word of truth gives advice, warning, rebuke, encouragement and vision for the individual members to develop together as the ecclesia which is the body of Christ.

We learn from Acts 2 that the first-century believers in the Jerusalem ecclesia "continued stedfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers" (v. 42, RV). This must be the pattern for the ecclesia today, and those who are elders in the ecclesia must accept as a responsibility the

implementing of arrangements so that these features are promoted. Combined with these requirements it is clear that the first-century ecclesias witnessed to their contemporaries of God's work in Christ and were careful for the needs of each other, especially those who were poor and those who suffered for the gospel's sake.

Paul especially commends Onesiphorus for regularly visiting him despite personal risk when he was a prisoner in Rome. He also names in various epistles many who were very supportive of the brethren and sisters' needs, such as Phoebe, Priscilla and Aquila, Stephanus and his household, Epaphroditus, Epaphras and Philemon, amongst others. How we do this will depend on local circumstances; but James reminds us that it is the believer's duty to "visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep . . . unspotted from the world" (Jas. 1:27). Neither is it solely the responsibility of those who may be appointed by the ecclesia to visit those in need.

Responsibility of elders

When Paul wrote to Timothy he indicated how the truth of the gospel would be passed on to later generations. He says: "the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2). This teaching role for elders, who were to be "apt to teach", is clearly noted in 1 Timothy 3, where Paul describes the characteristics of a bishop (overseer). Peter likewise expects elders to "Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock" (1 Pet. 5:2,3). The commendation that will result when "the chief Shepherd [Jesus] shall appear" (v. 4) makes it clear that he is the ultimate example for us to follow.

The call for elders to be ensamples to the flock challenges all those who are leading the ecclesia. Such need to be aware that their lifestyle, the quality of their commitment to serving the Lord by serving the brethren and sisters, and their spiritual maturity in dealing with ecclesial difficulties, should be above reproach. There can be no laying of burdens on others that we are not prepared to shoulder and carry ourselves; there can be no saying for others to do but not doing ourselves. Jesus was rightly critical of such double standards among the rulers of his day. The

mature believer in the body (Eph. 4:13) is able to discern and speak the truth in love.

As Paul develops in Ephesians 4 his theme of the one body he draws attention to the changes in personal behaviour expected in the individual believers that will therefore be manifest particularly within the ecclesia. This new man which is put on (v. 24) manifests certain traits which the apostle develops (4:17-6:9). Many of these are touched upon specifically in other articles in this issue. Here we consider some which affect the relationships between brethren and sisters in the ecclesia.

What do we talk together about?

Paul says that we must put away lying and speak the truth each one with his neighbour. This should be true in all our ways, but here he is concerned with the ecclesia, for he says: "we are members one of another" (4:25). Similarly, in 5:3,4 he requires that conversation is free from topics involving "fornication . . . all uncleanness, or covetousness . . . filthiness . . . foolish talking . . . jesting". This would surely require us to forgo interest in much of the material produced by the media as entertainment. The kind of conversations we engage in should be "good for edifying as the need may be, that it may give grace to them that hear" (4:29, RV).

The level of concern for each other requires us to put away "all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking . . . with all malice" (v. 31), replacing these characteristics with kindness and tenderheartedness, which enables us to forgive each other (v. 32), because this is the pattern of Divine behaviour that has brought us into the way of salvation. What we speak about as brethren and sisters will not ignore the realities of the world we live in; rather will we focus on how the Truth revealed by God and exemplified in Jesus helps us to live faithfully in a world of spiritual darkness. It will promote discussion about the reality of the exceeding great and precious promises, and give no place to false accusations (v. 27) about other brethren and sisters or about God's work.

Care and help

It is possible to think of the ecclesia only in terms of times when brethren and sisters are together at meetings: the breaking of bread, the lecture, the Bible class. However, we are to be members one of another, and there are many other opportunities to meet together. For most of us the

trials of everyday life are those which sap our spiritual strengths and dull our vision. There are times when a visit provides the opportunity for fellowship in the Lord. Here again, "speaking the truth in love" can provide real support for those who are struggling with their life in Christ.

It may be appropriate also to give assistance in a practical way. It is part of "pure religion" to "visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction" (Jas. 1:27). In his description of the judgement scene Jesus commends those who visited the sick and imprisoned, and provided in various ways for "the least of these my brethren" (Mt. 25:40). It ought to challenge us to consider whether our lifestyle has been so influenced by our contemporary society that we are too busy with work, hobbies, relaxation and holidays to find time to visit and help brethren and sisters in some kind of need, and to equip ourselves with a good understanding of God's Word. Does our preoccupation with material comforts and material status mean that we choose to live where meeting with brethren and sisters is made difficult? Have we chosen to live further from the meeting place, making it difficult for us to attend all meetings regularly and also making it difficult for brethren and sisters to visit us?

It is possible for a wife looking after a young family to be effectively in isolation throughout the week, without support of the brethren and sisters. Indeed, the nature of our contemporary society means that we often are no longer near family to whom we might naturally turn for help. It also can mean that both husband and wife are working, and therefore daytime visiting and other activities to promote the preaching of the Truth are no longer possible. In some cases there is no choice about both husband and wife working, but it is a choice that needs to be considered carefully; there is much demand for ecclesial support for brethren and sisters in need through the week.

The call to be members one of another requires that we avoid talking with and visiting only those whom we naturally like. The figure of the body calls us to have care for each other. It is so easy to form a group within the body, and neglect others who are outside the group, and worse, to despise them. This happened in Corinth, and Paul rebukes them for it (1 Cor. 1:10-17).

Dealing with problems

No ecclesia will be without problems. The pattern of Israel's history, which is a record of a

privileged people called to serve God, makes this painfully clear. Jesus himself said: "It is impossible but that offences will come" (Lk. 17:1). The teaching of the apostles also confirms that problems would arise (1 Cor. 11:18,19). However, these provide the situation to develop the characters of the faithful.

Ecclesial problems may come from without, by persecution and opposition from the contemporary world. This is not a feature at the moment for the ecclesia in the Western world. It could become so if we witness faithfully and the political and religious climate changes. It is a reality in some parts of the world. This provides an opportunity for those not affected to pray for those who are suffering opposition and persecution. Indeed, prayer for brethren and sisters by name ought to be a feature of our prayers. The Apostle Paul is a good example of this practice; for example, see Romans 1:9; Ephesians 1:16; 1 Thessalonians 3:10; and 2 Timothy 1:3. The advice of Jesus himself in these circumstances is to continue to hold fast to the faith, for to the faithful in Smyrna who were to experience persecution by the authorities he says: "ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life" (Rev. 2:10).

More frequently, ecclesial problems arise within, often prompted by situations from without. The thinking of the flesh (the carnal mind) is not in practice destroyed at baptism. This can only be achieved as the outcome of a lifetime exposure to hearing the Word of God. The problems that arise are many and varied. Some involve personal differences between individuals over non-fundamental issues. Such situations call for tact and patience by a brother or sister who can speak the truth in love and encourage the parties to adopt the spirit of Christ and reconcile their differences. Much trouble could be avoided if we really adopt apostolic advice: "let each esteem other better than themselves" (Phil. 2:3).

More serious situations arise when believers sin grievously or become involved in unwise alliances, such as marriage to an unbeliever or business partnerships with an unbeliever. Other difficulties concern those that teach false teachings or promote ideas that will ultimately undermine the truth of the gospel. It is required of all believers, especially those who are elders, to "earnestly contend for the faith" (Jude v. 3). This does not, however, require us to be rude or arrogant or abusive. The apostolic advice is: "the

servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth" (2 Tim. 2:24,25). Painful as it is, those who reject sound Biblical teaching and are factious must be rejected and therefore disfellowshipped.

Whatever the situation that the ecclesia faces,¹ it should be dealt with on the basis of, "What saith the scripture?". For it is here that we have sound teaching and examples of how problems were dealt with, often with great patience and longsuffering. In any situation it is important to listen carefully to establish the facts of a case rather than rely on hearsay evidence.

Conclusion

The ecclesia is God's provision of a family context in which to work faithfully. The mutual support of brethren and sisters who are genuinely seeking to be patterned on Jesus will prove invaluable in encouraging others to be faithful. The recognition and tackling of difficulties and problems will shape and refine our characters in a way which easier circumstances cannot provide. Even the disappointments of our own failures, and the falling away of some, allow us insight into the trials of those who were faithful in earlier generations, and especially into the sacrifice of Jesus, for whose sake God has forgiven us and called us to be part of the body of Christ.

Points for thought and discussion

- *What active steps am I taking to put off the old man and put on the new?*
- *In Ephesians 4:8 the apostle quotes Psalm 68:18 to support his development of the idea of the one body. Psalm 68 is a commentary on the Exodus salvation of Israel. How does this quotation and its Exodus association help us to understand the role of the Spirit gifts in the first century?*
- *In what ways can we be angry and not sin (see Ephesians 4:26)?*

1. *A Guide to the Formation and Conduct of Christadelphian Ecclesias*, Robert Roberts, available from the Christadelphian Office, has some helpful advice in Sections 35 to 42.