

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

The Body of Christ
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the Christian Fellowship
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Brief Studies

Homiletics

Theological Observer

Book Review

VOL. XXXV

May 1964

No. 5

The Body of Christ

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EDITORIAL NOTE: This paper was presented to the Workshop on Church and Ministry conducted by the School for Graduate Studies, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo., in cooperation with the Board for North American Missions, the Board for World Missions, and the Lutheran Laymen's League, July 22—26, 1963.

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession warns against two distortions in the meaning of the church. The one is that the church be viewed as an outward organization in which believers and hypocrites are mingled. In the days of the Reformation this distortion implied that the church was a political organization to which men adhered through the carrying out of rites and obligations. In our own time it may take the form of stress on extending and financing the church's business to the point of devaluating its other concerns. The other distortion is that the church is regarded as a figment of the imagination, an abstraction without counterpart in fact. The Roman church thought this was what the Lutheran concept of the church tended to be; the enthusiast and spiritist reformers made it that in reality. Today this distortion becomes apparent in that view of "the invisible church" which assumes that Christian unity is basically perfect and there is no need of mutual nurture.

Hypocrites and evil men are indeed associated with the true church as far as outward ceremonies are concerned. But when we come to define the church we must define that which is the living body of Christ and the church in fact as well as in name. . . . If we were to define the church as only the outward organization embracing both the good and the wicked, then

men would not understand that the kingdom of Christ is the righteousness of the heart and the gift of the Holy Spirit but would think of it as only the outward observance of certain devotions and rituals. (Apology, Arts. VII and VIII, 13; The Book of Concord, ed. T. G. Tappert [Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959], p. 170)

(Christ) clearly says in Matt. 13:38 that "the good seed means the sons of the kingdom, the weeds are the sons of the evil one." The field, he says, is the world, not the church. (Apology, VII and VIII, 19; Tappert, 171)

We are not dreaming about some Platonic republic, as has been slanderously alleged, but we teach that this church actually exists, made up of true believers and righteous men scattered throughout the world. And we add its marks, the pure teaching of the Gospel and the sacraments. . . . Of course, there are also many weak people in it . . . but because they do not overthrow the foundation, these are forgiven them or even corrected. (Apology VII and VIII, 20; Tappert, p. 171)

The Biblical picture of the church which most conveniently corrects and forestalls these distortions is that to which the Apology alludes, the body of Christ, the community of true Christians in which each member nurtures each other one. We shall review this picture under five propositions.

I

The body of Christ is composed of people who are attached to Christ as head because of His redeeming work and by means of the Gospel of that work.

God hath put all things under His feet,

and gave Him to be the head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all. (Eph. 1:22, 23)

The church, the body of Christ, is composed of human beings who take their impulse for life and action from Christ. Christ is the creator and ruler of all things, and God has exalted Him to be the ruler and final judge of all. Christ's direction and control takes special form, however, in His people, the assembly of Christians and saints drawn apart from the world and called into one body, His body. St. Paul summarizes this concept to the Colossians in words which incorporate the process of the atonement through the Cross, and the ministry of the Word of the Cross by which men are brought into the body and kept there:

He is . . . the head of the body, the church. He is its origin, the first to return from the dead, to be in all things alone supreme. For in Him the complete being of God, by God's own choice, came to dwell. Through Him God chose to reconcile the whole universe to Himself, making peace through the shedding of his blood upon the cross—to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven, through Him alone. Formerly you were yourselves estranged from God; you were His enemies in heart and mind, and your deeds were evil. But now by Christ's death in His body of flesh and blood God has reconciled you to Himself, so that He may present you before Himself as dedicated men, without blemish and innocent in His sight. Only you must continue in your faith, firm on your foundations, never to be dislodged from the hope offered in the gospel which you heard. This is the gospel which has been proclaimed in the whole creation under heaven; and I, Paul, have

become its minister. It is now my happiness to suffer for you. This is my way of helping to complete, in my poor human flesh, the full tale of Christ's afflictions still to be endured, for the sake of His body which is the church. I became its servant by virtue of the task assigned to me by God for your benefit: to deliver His message in full; to announce the secret hidden for long ages and through many generations, but now disclosed to God's people, to whom it was His will to make it known—to make known how rich and glorious it is among all nations. The secret is this: Christ in you, the hope of a glory to come. (Col. 1:18-27 NEB)

The body of Christ, the church, is the aim and result of the atoning work of Jesus which was completed on the cross and attested by the resurrection. The Gospel, the proclamation of Jesus' redeeming work, is the tool which God bids His servants in the church employ in order to attach new members to the body of Christ. This is likewise the function of holy Baptism, Paul tells the Corinthians:

For Christ is like a single body with its many limbs and organs, which, many as they are, together make up one body. For indeed we were all brought into one body by baptism, in the one Spirit, whether we are Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free men, and that one Holy Spirit was poured out for all of us to drink. (1 Cor. 12: 12, 13 NEB)

The significance of this entrance into the body of Christ is that other rules and other allegiances are rejected.

It is in Christ that the complete being of the Godhead dwells embodied, and in Him you have been brought to completion. Every power and authority in the universe is subject to Him as Head. In Him also you were circumcised, not in

a physical sense, but by being divested of the lower nature [literally: of the body of the flesh]; this is Christ's way of circumcision. For in baptism you were buried with Him, in baptism also you were raised to life with Him through your faith in the active power of God who raised Him from the dead. (Col. 2:9-13 NEB)

The way of the prechurch Gentiles is in contrast to the life of the man under the rule of Christ.

They walk in the vanity of their mind, having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart. (Eph. 4:17, 18)

The church of Christ is composed of people who show that they have come under a new rule, not merely in token of their individual moralities, but as a body of people set apart to be visibly the dwelling place of God.

Surely you know that you are God's temple, where the Spirit of God dwells. Anyone who destroys God's temple will himself be destroyed by God, because the temple of God is holy; and that temple you are. (1 Cor. 3:16, 17 NEB)

In Him the whole building is bonded together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you too are being built with all the rest into a spiritual dwelling for God. (Eph. 2:21, 22 NEB)

"Holy" does not merely mean perfect, or unbesmirched by wrong, but set apart, put to work for special purposes of God, playing the role to which the atonement of Christ on the cross, the calling by the Father, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, equips them.

II

The body of Christ is composed of individuals who, through the redeeming work of Christ and His Word, are attached to one another in unity by love.

St. Paul's picture of the body of Christ is useful for impressing the fact that its members belong to it altogether because of Christ the Head, and that they are preserved in that relation through His Word and Spirit. The picture is especially important, however, in keeping clear the fact that the members of the body, under the headship of Christ, are related to one another. The fact that they have become members of the body, the process by which the members of the body remain under Christ and mutually profit each other, constitutes a dimension to which the Scriptures assign the term "fellowship" or sharing. The members of the body of Christ ceaselessly minister to each other so that the entire body is in a state of unity.

As the body is one and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we are all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free, and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many. (1 Cor. 12:12-14 KJV)

Thus St. Paul begins the largest single discussion in his epistles concerning the church as the body of Christ.

God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honor 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. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or

one member be honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular. (1 Cor. 12:24-27 AV; "now you are Christ's body, and each of you a limb or organ of it," NEB)

The unity of the holy Christian church is not simply that its members are together, or that they are equal to each other; but by virtue of their membership in Jesus Christ, and by virtue of their activities in supporting one another, they are literally one body.

You have put on the new nature, which is being constantly renewed in the image of its Creator and brought to know God. There is no question here of Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, freeman, slave; but Christ is all, and is in all. Then put on the garments that suit God's chosen people, his own, his beloved: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience. Be forbearing with one another, and forgiving, where any of you has cause for complaint; you must forgive as the Lord forgave you. To crown all, there must be love, to bind all together and complete the whole. Let Christ's peace be arbiter in your hearts; to this peace you were called as members of a single body. (Col. 3:10-15 NEB)

The operation of preserving the unity into which Christians have been planted by the atonement and by baptism is an unceasing one:

I entreat you, then—I, a prisoner for the Lord's sake: as God has called you, live up to your calling. Be humble always and gentle, and patient too. Be forbearing with one another and charitable. Spare no effort to make fast with bonds of peace the unity which the Spirit gives. There is one body and one Spirit, as there is also one hope held out in God's call to you; one

Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Eph. 4:1-6 NEB)

The unity of the Christian church is achieved not simply by scanning the lists of virtues appropriate to unity. But it has been purchased at the unspeakably great cost of the atonement through Christ and is the result of Christ's own quickening work in our hearts. Thus St. Paul writes to a Christian group split by the prejudices of racial barriers:

He is Himself our peace. Gentiles and Jews, He has made the two one, and in His own body of flesh and blood has broken down the enmity which stood like a dividing wall between them; for He annulled the law with its rules and regulations, so as to create out of the two a single new humanity in Himself, thereby making peace. This was His purpose, to reconcile the two in a single body to God through the cross, on which He killed the enmity. So he came and proclaimed the good news: peace to you who were far off, and peace to those who were near by; for through him we both alike have access to the Father in the one Spirit. (Eph. 2: 14-18 NEB)

The process by which God's men preserve this unity with one another is love, the self-sacrificial determination to serve the brother by which every barrier in him is cast aside and his needs under God are met. St. Paul describes Christian love as the highest gift of the Spirit for building up and preserving the members of the church in unity toward one another, one which will retain its proportions also in the life to come, for also beyond the grave God's people will be a company glorifying God and preserving their unity before Him. (1 Cor. 12:31—13:13)

Of supreme importance is the preservation of unity against the threats to its survival. One such threat menaces the connection with the head.

You are not to be disqualified by the decision of people who go in for self-mortification and angel-worship, and try to enter into some vision of their own. Such people, bursting with the futile conceit of worldly minds, lose hold upon the Head; yet it is from the Head that the whole body, with all its joints and ligaments, receives its supplies, and thus knit together grows according to God's design. (Col. 2:18, 19 NEB)

Another threat to the unity of the church comes when the ties that bind Christians to one another and keep them fulfilling their responsibilities toward one another are tampered with. The covering word in the New Testament for this problem is "division," amputation of a limb from the body of Christ.

I am told that when you meet as a congregation you fall into sharply divided groups; and I believe there is some truth in it (for dissensions are necessary if only to show which of your members are sound). (1 Cor. 11:18, 19 NEB; KJV has "heresies" instead of "dissensions.")

In Corinth the factionalism and class rivalry threatened the accord at the Lord's Supper and rendered it a pagan rather than Christian observance; hence St. Paul gave the counsel:

It follows that anyone who eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will be guilty of desecrating the body and blood of the Lord. A man must test himself before eating his share of the bread and drinking from the cup. For he who eats and drinks eats and drinks judgment on himself if he does not discern the Body. (1 Cor. 11:27-30 NEB)

Many think that in this context the apostle is thinking not merely of the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the sacrament, but also of the presence of the body of Christ which the communicants actually are; "eat with due discrimination concerning the body of Christ lest you receive it to your incrimination," we might paraphrase St. Paul's play on words.

The horrible failure to discharge the basic responsibility of member to member is described by St. Paul to the Romans:

I implore you, my friends, keep your eye on those who stir up quarrels and lead others astray, contrary to the teaching you received. Avoid them, for such people are servants not of Christ our Lord but of their own appetites, and they seduce the minds of innocent people with smooth and specious words. The fame of your obedience has spread everywhere. This makes me happy about you; yet I should wish you to be experts in goodness but simpletons in evil. (Rom. 16:17-20 NEB)

In His forecast of the Last Judgment our Lord comes as close as anywhere in His sayings to employ the picture of the body of Christ; of carelessness for the needs of fellow-Christians while on earth He says: "Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me" (Matt. 25:45). This is reminiscent of St. Paul to Timothy: "But if any provide not for his own and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith and is worse than an infidel." (1 Tim. 5:8)

III

As members of the body of Christ Christians are to employ their spiritual gifts toward each other for mutual edification and ultimate victory.

The unity in which the members of the body of Christ are bound together is not mystical or imaginary; it is not statistical or simple "togetherness"; but it is dynamic, impelling to mutual service and the self-sacrifice of love. Just as "body of Christ" is uniquely a Pauline picture for the church, so Paul uses a term rare outside his vocabulary to describe the mutual activity of members in the body. It is "edification."

Actually the term already involves a mixing of two metaphors which St. Paul frequently correlated, a building whose stones have to be set firmly and kept in place through the position of the other stones; and the body. He calls the service that each Christian should render every other one, in order to maintain the unity of the faith and the common experience of the presence of the Son of God, a function by which the entire church is made into a "perfect man":

And these were His gifts . . . to equip God's people for work in His service, to the building up of the body of Christ. So shall we all at last attain to the unity inherent in our faith and our knowledge of the Son of God—to mature manhood, measured by nothing less than the full stature of Christ. We are no longer to be children, tossed by the waves and whirled about by every fresh gust of teaching, dupes of crafty rogues and their deceitful schemes. No, let us speak the truth in love; so shall we fully grow up into Christ. He is the head, and on Him the whole body depends. Bonded and knit together by every constituent joint, the whole frame goes through the due activity of each part and builds itself up in love. (Eph. 4: 12-16 NEB)

A synonym for the program of edifica-

tion is "speaking the truth in love," actually put into a single verb, "to truth." Truth is not factuality in general, but it is in Ephesians as in John the faithfulness of God, conceived before the foundation of the world and promised to the people of the Old Testament, faithfully brought to pass in Christ, "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6; Eph. 1:13). The affirming that God has wrought our peace with Him through Jesus Christ is like a piece of armor into which Christians strap one another for their spiritual warfare (Eph. 6:14); it is a constant element in their conversation with one another (Eph. 4: 21, 25). Just as St. Paul accomplished everything that he could do for people by knowing "nothing save Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2), so Christians build one another up and keep supplying spiritual life to each other by helping one another remember God's redeeming love in Jesus Christ. Subsequent portions of Ephesians describe the activity in personal conversation (4:29), mutual admonition in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (5:18-21), communication in the family (5:23—6:4). This is the same program to which our Lord referred when He described the process of forgiveness of sins essential to the life and meaning of the church. (Matt. 18:15-22)

The mutual edification in love is described with special explicitness in the chapter on the body of Christ, 1 Cor. 12. Each Christian shares with his fellows his particular gift of the Spirit of God, whether of service, teaching, exhorting, healing, directing into tasks, welfare. These gifts are not what we would term "talents," although training and experience in special abilities obviously play a part; but they

are all services rendered to others, activities and the putting to work of power given by the Spirit. Each is the Spirit's gift so that the entire body is benefited (vv. 4-11). The apostle is especially concerned that no Christian should withhold his edifying gift from the good of the entire group, and he lists the professional workers along with the rest (28-30). All must be used with love, the will to benefit the next person (1 Cor. 13); but among all of them, the importance of testifying in words to the goodness of God for the sake of the brother Christian is paramount.

Put love first; but there are other gifts of the Spirit at which you should aim also, and above all prophecy . . . when a man prophesies, he is talking to men, and his words have power to build; they stimulate and they encourage. The language of ecstasy is good for the speaker himself, but it is prophecy that builds up a Christian community. (1 Cor. 14:1-5 NEB)

St. Paul develops this principle at great length, concluding: "All must aim at one thing: to build up the church" (1 Cor. 14:27 NEB). Jesus evaluates the life of Christians in their mutual care for one another in the saying: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." (Matt. 25:40)

IV

In the body of Christ pastors and teachers fulfill their purpose as gifts of Christ to the church by equipping Christians for the ministry of mutual edification.

In 1 Cor. 12 St. Paul twice speaks of apostles, prophets, and teachers as possessing the gifts of the Spirit for the good of the whole church. In Ephesians 4:12 he adds the term "pastors" to the designation

of teachers. Along with pastors and teachers, St. Paul also lists himself as one of the gifts of Christ to the church:

It is now my happiness to suffer for you. This is my way of helping to complete, in my poor human flesh, the full tale of Christ's afflictions still to be endured, for the sake of His body which is the church. I became its servant by virtue of the task assigned to me by God for your benefit: to deliver His message in full; to announce the secret hidden for long ages and through many generations, but now disclosed to God's people. (Col. 1:24-27 NEB)

In Ephesians St. Paul defines the relation of pastor and teacher to the body of Christ more precisely. Together with the apostle, prophet, and evangelist he is a gift of Christ to the church. His specific task is to equip the saints, to perfect them for their ministry (4:12). Training and practice, under circumstances of suffering and difficulty (1 Peter 5:10) enter into the program. The method of training is interestingly set out in St. Paul's address to the elders of Ephesus:

Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has given you charge, as shepherds of the church of the Lord, which He won for Himself by His own blood . . . Be on the alert; remember how for three years, night and day, I never ceased to counsel each of you, and how I wept over you. (Acts 20:28, 31 NEB)

The watching, oversight, was always in danger of degenerating into a status and prestige. Yet even in the Pastoral Epistles, which some see as reflecting the trend to hierarchy, the process of putting the helpful word and truth to work is paramount:

My son, take strength from the grace of

God which is ours in Christ Jesus. You heard my teaching in the presence of many witnesses; put that teaching into the charge of men you can trust, such men as will be competent to teach others. (2 Tim. 2:1, 2 NEB)

The work of pastor and teacher in the church is not a status, but a service; not a post of power, but a privilege compounded of labor and of suffering, empowered by the Holy Ghost, centering in the sharing of the Word of the Gospel and the forgiveness of sins to God's people.

Seeing then that we have been entrusted with this commission, which we owe entirely to God's mercy, we never lose heart. We have renounced the deeds that men hide for very shame; we neither practice cunning nor distort the Word of God; only by declaring the truth openly do we recommend ourselves, and then it is to the common conscience of our fellowmen and in the sight of God. And if indeed our gospel be found veiled, the only people who find it so are those on the way to perdition. Their unbelieving minds are so blinded by the god of this passing age, that the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the very image of God, cannot dawn upon them and bring them light. It is not ourselves that we proclaim; we proclaim Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your servants, for Jesus' sake. (2 Cor. 4:1-5 NEB)

Only in that sense is it possible to say with St. Paul: "If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work." (1 Tim. 3:1)

V

In the body of Christ Christians share every structure of their lives for mutual edification through Word and sacrament.

In the body of Christ people work to-

ward one another in practical and useful ways, for building each other's spiritual life. But this also implies that every group of Christians functioning toward one another is the body of Christ and the church in that place. "Now ye are the body of Christ and members in particular" (1 Cor. 12:27). "Let the peace of God rule in your hearts to the which ye also are called in one body" (Col. 3:15). Hence St. Paul thinks also of the household, husband and wife, parents and children, masters and servants, whom he terms the church in the house. (Acts 16:15; Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philemon 2)

One of the most precise instances in the use of the picture of the body of Christ is St. Paul's discussion of Christian marriage.

No one ever hated his own body; on the contrary, he provides and cares for it; and that is how Christ treats the church, because it is His body, of which we are living parts. Thus it is that (in the words of Scripture) "a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become a single body." It is a great truth that is hidden here. I for my part refer it to Christ and to the church, but it applies also individually. (Eph. 5:29-32 NEB)

This structure of husband and wife in Christian marriage suspends from the general principle of Christians together "submitting to one another" (Eph. 5:21; cf. also 1 Peter 3:1-9). This submitting is not a giving in or yielding, "adapting one's self" (so Phillips), but it is mutual care and concern, "the mind of Christ" (Phil. 2:3-8). The husband gives himself for the wife as Christ for the church, the wife serves the husband as the church serves Christ. But this is more than an analogy;

it is the condition for it, and we might translate its introductory word *καθώς* "inasmuch as." (See Friedrich Blass and Albert Debrunner, *Grammatik des neutestamentlichen Griechisch*, 5th—10th ed. [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1921—1958], par. 453 (2); 9th—10th German ed. trans. Robert W. Funk [University of Chicago Press, 1961], par. 453 (2), p. 236. Reference is to the use of *καθώς* in Rom. 1:28; 1 Cor. 1:6; 5:7; Eph. 1:4; Phil. 1:7). Also to their children parents are to live in a sustaining relation; "the admonition of the Lord" in Eph. 6:4 is not simply correction, but upbuilding and maturing of spiritual life (*νοουθεσία*).

The term "body of Christ" is frequently coupled with the concept of temple, the place where God is worshiped. Mutual building and edification in the church is achieved most directly and constantly through the acts of worship in which Christians engage, not just in their families or situations of friendship, but notably in the meetings set apart specifically for the purpose. In the age of the apostles, before there were special church buildings, such meetings most frequently took place in private homes, and the distinction between church in the house and church in "church," as in our custom, did not arise. Since Christians are called into one body, they are to let the word of Christ dwell in them richly in all wisdom (Col. 3:15, 16). Particularly in the postscript to the "body" chapter of 1 Cor. 12, on worship, in 1 Cor. 14, St. Paul has much to say about the mutual edification of the church in worship.

When you meet for worship, each of you contributes a hymn, some instruction, a revelation, an ecstatic utterance, or the interpretation of such an utterance. All of

these must aim at one thing: to build up the church. . . . Be eager to prophesy; do not forbid ecstatic utterance; but let all be done decently and in order. (1 Cor. 14:26, 39 NEB)

Twice St. Paul describes what goes on in a service, small or large, of common worship:

Speak to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Eph. 5:19, 20; cf. Col. 3:16, 17)

Holy Communion is the unique nurture of the body of Christ. There we are one body as we partake of the one bread (1 Cor. 10:17). There not only one preacher but every communicant "proclaims the death of the Lord, till He comes" (1 Cor. 11:27 NEB). Many Christians prize the opportunity for the sense of personal thanksgiving, self-consecration, and commitment in the ceremony of the Holy Communion. But our Lord and His apostles stress particularly the reach down to the communicant of the forgiveness of sins, which now each Christian shares in the receiving of the very body and blood of Christ with the other, thus becoming one body (1 Cor. 10:16; it is more than just "means of sharing" [NEB], it is the actual sharing).

This picture of the inwardly nourished, mutually nourishing body of Christ the church is basic to the New Testament strategy for the reach of the church into the world and its mission expansion.

He hath put all things under His feet and gave Him to be the head over all things to the church which is His body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all. (Eph. 1:22, 23)

This suggests not merely that Christ pervades all things in majesty, but that through the church He proposes to make His most signal reach through the world into the hearts of men. To the Philippians St. Paul wrote:

It is God who works in you inspiring both the will and the deed, for His own chosen purpose. Do all you have to do without complaint or wrangling. Show yourselves guileless and above reproach, faultless children of God in a warped and crooked generation, in which you shine like stars in a dark world and proffer the word of life. (Phil. 2:13-16 NEB)

Actually one Christian may have oppor-

tunity to sow only a quick word of Gospel into a human heart, and another has to water and reap it, and the reaper and sower as members of Christ's body both rejoice in their roles. St. Paul draws the conclusion to this fact, "We are laborers together with God; ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building." (1 Cor. 3:4-15; v. 9)

"The gates of hell shall not prevail against the church" (Matt. 16:18) because it is alive and throbbing with the forgiveness of sins, which is its life and its truth from Jesus Christ, its Lord and Savior.

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