

The Whole Body on Earth

Sometimes in Scripture the word “body,” referring to the body of Christ, is used to describe something on earth that does not mean the local assembly and does not include saints who are with the Lord above. And, while the word “assembly” is often used of something that is local, this word also is used to describe something on earth that is larger than the local assembly but which does not include saints now with the Lord. These Scripture uses of the word “body” and “assembly” is denied by some who are committed to the erroneous doctrine of independency of local assemblies. In truth, however, Scripture uses the designation “assembly of God” not only of the local gathering in a place but also of the assembly of God on earth, of which the local assembly is the expression of the whole, in the place where it is. The fact that the local assembly is an expression of the whole assembly on earth indicates that the assembly of God on earth is not viewed as an aggregate of the local assemblies. Observe that in Scripture the word “members” is always used in connection with the body and the Head. There is no such thing as local membership found in Scripture. We will review here some points in connection with these truths.

Matt. 16:18. Matt. 16:18 is usually acknowledged by all as a passage that refers to what Christ does and therefore speaks about what is true, and does not include untrue profession of Christianity. Presently, part of His assembly is on earth and part is in heaven. It is objected that Scripture does not speak in that way, namely, that part is in heaven and part is on earth. But do not be hasty. First, we see from this passage that the believers on earth are in this assembly spoken of here. Second, it leaves room for what we shall see below, that Scripture most certainly does present a view of the assembly as on earth.

Matt. 18:20. This Scripture has the local assembly in view. But it has a bearing on more than what is local, though that is not our subject just now.

1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13.

I have persecuted the assembly of God (1 Cor. 15:9).

. . . I excessively persecuted the assembly of God, and ravaged it” (Gal. 1:13).

What was the thing that Paul ravaged? He said that it was “the assembly of God.” This persecution Paul carried on in many places (Acts 26:11). The words “the assembly of God” are being used here of something that is more than a local assembly, something that is larger than a local assembly, but does not include saints in heaven.. Some Christians were dead already (so, they were already in heaven) when Paul was carrying out the persecution of “the assembly of God.” Those already in heaven were not being persecuted there in heaven. So the Word of God does, in fact, use the expression “the assembly of God” to describe something that is not the local assembly, and which Paul persecuted on earth, though some Christians were already dead and in heaven, where they could not be persecuted. But what if someone should make the following objections, as has been done:

You make the point that Paul could not persecute Christians that were in heaven. That is not scriptural for Christ, Himself, said to Paul on the Damascus road, “Why persecutest thou me?” Christ was in heaven when He said Paul was persecuting Him. What did He mean? We know that He will say in a coming day to those at the judgment of the nations, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren ye have done it unto me” (Matt. 25:40, 45). Anyone who persecutes a Christian persecutes Christ and since all believers are members of His body anyone who persecutes one Christian persecutes them all. That is the truth of the unity of the body. It cannot be divided, if one member suffers all the members suffer with it (1 Cor. 12:26). It is in that sense that Paul said he persecuted the church (the body). It would not be reasonable to conjecture that

Paul said he persecuted every single Christian that was living at the time. When he wrote 1 Cor. 15:9 and Gal. 1:13, he understood clearly that the body was a unity and that when he was persecuting one member he was persecuting the whole body. Whether any particular member was on earth or in heaven or not even saved [yet] was inconsequential.

The reader should carefully consider the way in which the attempt to circumvent the truth is carried on. To such arguments, the following replies may be made:

Sheep, goats and brethren of the King imply nothing about how a body works. Matt. 25:31ff has reference to the judgment of living nations prior to the millennium and the “brethren” there are the believing remnant of Israel. Christ’s relationship to the remnant of Israel is not that of Head to members of one body.

Christ was in heaven when Paul persecuted the assembly of God, but the question at hand is where was the assembly located that Paul persecuted, not where was the Head. Where Christ was is not directly relevant to that question. Scripture affirms that the Head is persecuted when the members on earth are persecuted, but nowhere says that members in heaven (i.e., not the Head) are persecuted when members on earth are persecuted.

When Paul was persecuting one member, he was persecuting the whole body viewed as something on earth larger than the local assembly but not including saints already in heaven. Is it not astonishing to see how the objection involves one in what is so false, namely, that Paul persecuted the saints in heaven? And why does the objector make this absurd claim? It is because this matter would otherwise mean that there was something on earth that is called “the assembly of God” which is larger than a local assembly. And these objections are required in order to deny this great fact. Note also how 1 Cor. 12:26 is brought in to bolster the false view. Does not the above quoted objection really bring together Paul’s persecution of “the assembly of God” (implicitly acknowledging that this is larger than a local assembly), and connecting that with 1 Cor. 12:26, that “if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it,” thus implying that they are suffering in heaven?

The last sentence quoted above uses the word “inconsequential.” In reality, it is most consequential that saints in heaven are neither persecuted nor suffering. The consequence of this is that we have presented in Scripture something on earth that is larger than a local assembly, and this great fact is at war with the erroneous doctrine of independency of assemblies.

1 Cor. 12:26. Of particular importance is 1 Cor. 12:26. Does this verse apply to members of the body in heaven? In other words, when Paul wrote that if one member on earth is suffering, then ALL the members suffer, was the martyr Stephen suffering in heaven? To this question, the author of the objections quoted above responded as follows:

The scripture does not say that and we have no right to infer that. The passage in 1 Cor. 12:26 is distinct from verse 27-31. The verses 14 to 26 are a discussion of the human body and its members. The truth relating to the members of the human body are only applied in principle to the spiritual body of Christ. Without stating specifically how the members in heaven respond to the members on earth we can assume, I suppose, that the principle is true. In the spiritual realm things are quite different than in the physical. I would have no problem with the thought that believers in heaven are concerned about believers on earth or vice versa. It is difficult for us earth bound creatures to enter into spiritual phenomenon with any degree of confidence. Certainly we know that God, who is spirit, is intimately concerned about His people’s cares on earth. We are enjoined, on

the other hand, to take into account what angels think about the way things are done in an assembly on earth (1 Cor. 11:11). We know that no believers in heaven are suffering but they certainly are quite capable of suffering empathetically, I am sure. We are told that when a sinner repents on earth there is joy in the presence of the angels and I would expect that that means that saints in heaven rejoice at sinners being saved on earth.

Here are more examples of what is required to get rid of the unwanted facts of Scripture. What this adds up to is the assertion that “persecuted the church” corresponds to “suffering empathetically.” He has invented two kinds of suffering for 1 Cor. 12:26. In the human body, when one member suffers injury, then the whole body may suffer much more than merely empathetically: fevers, chills, sweats, cessation of normal functions far from the site of injury, etc. Rejoicing in sinners being saved, being concerned like angels in how things are done elsewhere, empathy, etc. do not add up to “suffering” in heaven. This is acknowledged even by the author of the above objections, who wrote:

No, I did not say that if a member on earth suffers the members in heaven likewise suffer.

But this was certainly implied in the very first quotation. To claim that 1 Cor. 12:26 cannot mean the body on earth (“the whole body” of Eph. 4:16) distorts 1 Cor. 12:26, which does have in view the body on earth. The truth is that if one member suffers, then ALL the members do indeed suffer with it. It is clearly “all” because the verse states so. Hence, this suffering is not in heaven, but on earth. The implication is that there is a view that Scripture presents of the body here on earth in activity.

1 Cor. 12:28. In the same passage (1 Cor. 12) where we have seen a plain indication that there is presented a view in Scripture of the body here on earth (1 Cor. 11:26), Scripture also presents to us a view of the church on earth:

And God has set certain in the assembly: first, apostles; secondarily, prophets; thirdly, teachers; then miraculous powers; then gifts of healings; helps; governments; kinds of tongues (1 Cor. 12:28).

So 1 Cor. 12:28 brings before us the assembly on earth in which God has set apostles, prophets, teachers, etc., and that this reference to the church is neither to a local assembly nor to something that includes those in heaven. It is the assembly on earth; indeed, “the assembly of God” that Paul persecuted -- and this is a teaching of Scripture that is often not acceptable.

Eph. 4:16.

... from whom the whole body, fitted together, and connected by every joint of supply, according to [the] working in its measure of each one part, works for itself the increase of the body to its self-building up in love” (Eph. 4:16).

The force of the words, “the whole body,” tells us that each one part of that whole body is working for the increase of the body. Like the Scriptures cited above, Eph. 4:16 refers to something on earth in busy activity, namely the body on earth. The immediately obvious truth of this verse contradicts the denial that the assembly of God may be viewed as one whole body on earth, not including the saints in heaven already. Its plain statement is not an interpretation added to Scripture. Here is what the objector wrote whom we have quoted above:

A careful reading of the verse will reveal that the point of the whole passage is that the body is to develop in Love. I do not think that the saints in heaven have reached the

ultimate in that regard. They are growing in love still. The only difference between them and us is that they do not have the flesh to contend with as we do . . .

Here again is another example of the mental processing of Scripture. He is determined to get the saints in heaven into this just as in the case of the saints suffering, and “the assembly of God” being persecuted by Paul. We see the text of the verse read through the eyes of one who supports independency of assemblies so as to make the verse agree with his ideas at any cost. He seeks to dull the sharp edge by which it cuts through the system of independency of assemblies. The passage states “the whole body” and he wants to get the saints in heaven into this, or else the verse will mean, as is clearly true, the body on earth! The verse is about “every joint of supply” in activity “according to [the] working in its measure of every one part.” This is the working body, every part of it. This is not interpretation, but what the text states. We either accept what it states or we try to explain it away. It is obvious on the face of it that the verse means the “working in its measure of each one part” here on earth, not in heaven.

How simple it is, really, to see that 1 Cor. 12:26 relates to this: “If one member suffer all the members suffer with [it] . . .” It is that same body on earth. None of this contradicts that there is another true view of the body seen in its completeness, in glory. Every Scripture is perfect in its place. These Scriptures we have been discussing have their bearing and application also -- and they require that we seek to practice them in spite of our failure, not explain them away.

Thus is the Christ (1 Cor. 12:12). The subject before us is very large but the object is to keep this paper short. But we should glance at one more Scripture before passing on.

For even as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of the body, being many, are one body, so also [is] the Christ (1 Cor. 12:12).

This is the same body that we learn in 1 Cor. 12:26 suffers. It is not about saints in heaven. It is the body on earth and the Head in heaven, viewed as “the Christ.” The Scripture does not view the saints in heaven as in the present activity of the body. The Scripture does present a view of the body in its activity here, and this has a bearing on our responsibility in giving expression to the truth of God in our practice.

Laodicea and Thyatira. And finally, regarding Laodicea and Thyatira, the objector quoted above was asked the following question: Since Laodicea was “a true local assembly,” as shown, you say, by the call to repent, then that would mean that Thyatira was a true local assembly also, as called upon to repent. Would you use letters of commendation to and from such assemblies as Laodicea and Thyatira if they were in neighboring towns where you live? He replied:

Definitely we would, I hope, receive commended persons from either. Their reception might be with some conditions attached such as not being permitted to preach false doctrine.

This unfaithfulness in reception is consistent with the independency-of-assemblies system. Such would recognize letters of commendation from Thyatira and Laodicea as valid letters coming from assemblies regarded as being gathered to Christ’s name. They know that there is evil doctrine tolerated at Thyatira, yet they would receive a letter of commendation and the person commended - with the caveat, perhaps, that they not be permitted to teach false doctrine. And it follows that the person was not leavened by being in the assembly at Thyatira. Such hold the doctrine of Bethesda. See *Precious Truth Revived and Defended Through J. N. Darby*, vol. 2, 1845-1850. They hold that a person is not leavened by breaking bread with leavened persons. They hold that an assembly cannot be leavened until every person in it has personally imbibed the leaven. These things are the result of their views and denying these consequences

of their views will not change the fact that their doctrines do have such consequences, at least for those who have eyes to see the evil of this. Independency is a system that mitigates and/or eliminates the responsibility for evil associations. There are some groupings of those who hold to independency, and there are some variations in views of how to handle the subject of leaven leavening the lump; but the end result is the same, whatever exact way some may prefer concerning how to arrive there.

Rev. 2 and 3 are used by independent brethrenism to support independency, which has resultant consequences and we may appreciate the above candid response about Thyatira and Laodicea. It would be beyond the scope of this short paper to take up that entire subject at this time. J. N. Darby wrote in his masterful examination of B. W. Newton's Thoughts on the Apocalypse in 1845:

And if He was walking among the candlesticks judging, it was clear it was not the candlesticks as the divine type of what they were in God's mind that He would judge. The candlesticks were God's idea of them. The report is of things that are -- what man had actually made of them here below. Christ judicially brought what the Spirit saw to bear on what man had produced (Collected Writings 8:25).

Summary. In order to appear to have Scripture support for rejecting the truth that Scripture presents a view of the body on earth, and also of the assembly on earth, the following tack was used:

1. Matt. 25:40, 45 was dragged into the discussion, which has to do with the Jewish remnant. And this was used in an effort to rebut the statement that Paul did not persecute Christians in heaven (cp. 1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13). There was failure to show that Paul persecuted Christians in heaven though it was said, "You make the point that Paul could not persecute Christians that were in heaven. That is not scriptural for Christ, Himself, said to Paul on the Damascus road Why persecutest thou me?" It was not shown that because the Head feels it, the saints in heaven were persecuted by Paul. The thing Paul persecuted is "the assembly of God," and obviously, that is on earth. Of course, that fact is destructive of independency.

2. Then a "empathetic suffering" of saints in heaven was brought forth to parry the force of "if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it" as meaning on earth only. This implicitly acknowledges that it is not the local assembly, or a local body, that is meant (there is no such thing as a local body) -- but this is needed to get rid of the fact that this is only on earth, because otherwise it means that Scripture does present a view of the body as on earth. And that fact also is destructive of independency.

3. I Cor. 12:28 also speaks to this matter because the gifts are not set in heaven nor in a local assembly. God set them in the assembly on earth.

4. Next, since Eph. 4:16 speaks of "the whole body," and in spite of the fact that it speaks of each one part working, showing that "the whole body" as contemplated by this Scripture means here on earth, the system of independency of assemblies requires circumventing the meaning. So the text is studied more and the result of such study is to bring into this the notion of the saints growing in love in heaven, so as to bring them into what is meant by "the whole body." And thus Christians satisfy themselves that they have gotten rid of the thought of "the whole body" in activity, working, on earth. The fact is, the truth of this is destructive of independency.

5. Finally, views on Laodicea and Thyatira show the practical outworking of independency dealing with (or rather refusing to deal with) evil associations.

The Scriptures teach local responsibility, not local independency.

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