

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

Title: "What is the Body of Christ?"

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 2/28/2010

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Introduction

In our last message we began looking at Colossians chapter one, verse twenty-four. And if you've been following these messages you'll remember that we have now moved into a section of Colossians chapter one, where the Apostle Paul declares and demonstrates that Jesus Christ is preeminent in genuine ministry. As Christians, we have the right – and the responsibility – to ask a very Biblical question about any ministry. This is true for the ministry of any preacher, for the ministry of any church, or for the ministry of any organization such as TeachingTheWord Ministries that works alongside the church and assists the church.

The question we must ask is this: According to the standard of God's Word, is it a genuine Gospel ministry? The Bible tells us that there is one primary test. Is Jesus Christ preeminent in that ministry? Does He have first place in it? Does His Word, holy Scripture, have first place in it? If so, then it passes the primary test of a genuine Gospel ministry, and it is a ministry that God's people should be associated with. If not – if something or something other than Jesus Christ and His infallible Word has first place, has the preeminence – then true Bible-believing Christians should not be associated with it.

Now in Colossians chapter one, verse twenty-four, Paul says this: "I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church." In our last message we looked at exactly what it means to "fill up...what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ." It

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does not have to do with adding anything to the sufferings of Christ for our salvation. True salvation is Christ plus nothing. It is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

But Paul is saying that because we are Christians, we are going to experience the same kinds of afflictions in this life that Christ experienced. We are going to endure various kinds of trials and afflictions in this world, simply because we are now aliens in this world. This world is no longer our home. Our citizenship is in heaven. We are now in enemy territory, and for that very reason, the world is going to oppose us and deal unfairly with us.

Those afflictions, Paul says elsewhere here in Colossians, those afflictions are going to help to bring us to maturity in Christ. So that is what Paul is talking about when, in chapter one verse twenty-four, he says that we “fill up...what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ.” In the original language, he says, literally, that we “take our turn in filling up” those afflictions.

Today I want to focus our attention on the last part of verse twenty-four. Paul says that these afflictions, and the resulting maturing process, are “for the sake of [Christ’s] body, which is the church.”

The church is Christ’s body. Paul has already introduced this doctrine back at verse eighteen. He says there that Christ “is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.” Now, thus far in our study of the book of Colossians, we haven’t

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really focused on the doctrine of the church as the Body of Christ. Before we leave verse twenty-four, I want to do that today. And I want to point you to some other passages in the New Testament that also tell us about the Body of Christ. And I want to talk about what the doctrine of the church as the Body of Christ means for you as a Christian, how it should affect your life and your thinking. So if you're in a position to do so today, I hope you'll take your Bible and follow along.

I want to put this before you in the form of five main propositions. Let me list them all for you first, and then we'll come back and consider each one individually.

- 1.) The Body of Christ consists of all who place their faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior from sin.
- 2.) The Body of Christ consists of all believers of all time.
- 3.) The Body of Christ is the true spiritual Israel.
- 4.) The Body of Christ is the general assembly of the called-out ones.
- 5.) The Body of Christ, meeting principally as local assemblies, is God's primary vehicle for the propagation of the Gospel and the maturing of believers.

Let's now look at the Biblical foundation for each of these propositions.

The Sole Qualification for Membership

- 1.) The Body of Christ consists of all who place their faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior from sin. That is the sole membership qualification that is given to us in the
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Word of God. Whenever anyone comes to saving faith in Jesus Christ, God the Holy Spirit immediately places that person into one united spiritual body, the Body of Christ. You immediately become a member of the one, true, universal Body of Christ. Let me cite just two of the many passages that support this:

In Acts 2:47 we read that “the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.” Becoming a part of the Body of Christ is the Lord’s doing. You do not become a member of Christ’s body by joining a local church, by becoming a formal member of a local church.

In 1 Corinthians 12:12-13 we read this: "For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free — and have all been made to drink into one Spirit."

Christians should associate themselves with a local church, and I’ll be talking more about the nature of the local church in a few moments. But that is a different matter. Here we are talking about your membership in the Body of Christ, and that is an integral part of your salvation in Christ.

So that’s proposition number one: The Body of Christ consists of all who place their faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior from sin. That is the qualification for membership in the body.

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The Time Scope of Membership

That brings us to our second proposition, and this one has to do with the scope of the membership of the Body of Christ. Our second proposition is that the Body of Christ consists of all believers of all time, from among all nations. From Adam and Eve in Genesis chapter three, all the way to the last saint who will be added to the kingdom before the final judgment of the Book of Revelation. All without exception.

Let me give you one among the several key passages in the Word of God upon which this second proposition is grounded. Turn with me, please to Ephesians chapter two, beginning at verse eleven, and I'm going to read down through chapter three, verse seven:

"Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh — who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands [that is, ethnic Jews] — that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

“For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that

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He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.

“Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

“For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles — if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed [that it, to the extent that it has now been revealed] by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the Gospel, of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power.” (Ephesians 2:11-3:7)

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The one Body of Christ is built, Paul says, on the foundation of the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles. He speaks of them all – Old Testament believers and New Testament believers – as the saints of God. Jew and Gentile are one in Christ. They are all members of the same body.

Hebrews chapter four, verse two, tells us that the same Gospel was preached both to Israel in the Old Testament, and to both Jew and Gentile in the New Testament. The Gospel in the Old Testament looked forward to redemption in the Messiah who would come, and the Gospel in the New Testament looks back upon the finished redemptive work of Jesus, the Messiah who has come.

The preaching of the same Gospel throughout all of time places all true believers in the same Body of Christ. The sole membership qualification is saving faith, and the scope of membership covers all of time, from the beginning to the end. The Body of Christ consists of all believers of all time, from among all nations.

The Spiritual Nature of Membership

This brings us to our third proposition. This one has to do with the spiritual nature of membership in the Body of Christ: The Body of Christ is the true spiritual Israel, "the Israel of God," as Paul calls it in Galatians 6:26. The Bible teaches that true spiritual Israel, and ethnic or national Israel, are not one and the same, although some Jews are members of both. The Body of Christ is not ethnic in nature. It is spiritual in nature.

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I believe on the basis of Scripture that it is incorrect to speak of “the Gentile church” as though Jews were excluded from it. True spiritual Israel consists of both Jews and Gentiles who have that one qualification for membership that we spoke of a few moments ago – they, both Jews and Gentiles, are trusting in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior from sin. Paul says this, in Romans chapter nine, beginning at verse six:

“But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they are not all Israel who are of Israel [in other words, they are not all of national or ethnic Israel who are of spiritual Israel], nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, ‘In Isaac your seed shall be called.’ That is, those who are the children of the flesh [physical or ethnic Israel], these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise [spiritual Israel] are counted as the seed.” (Romans 9:6-8)

And then several verses later, at Romans chapter nine, beginning at verse twenty-three, Paul says that God has done this so that

“...He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles...As He says also in Hosea: ‘I will call them My people, who were not My people, and her beloved, who was not beloved.’ And it shall come to pass in the place where it was said to them, ‘You are not My people,’ there they shall be called sons of the living God. Isaiah also cries out concerning Israel:

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‘Though the number of the children of Israel [ethnic Israel] be as the sand of the sea, the remnant [those who are true believers in Christ] will be saved.’ ” (Romans 9:23-27)

The fact is, we find God in Scripture always working through remnants. It was almost always a remnant, a minority, among the nation of Israel who were true believers in the Old Testament.

In 1st Kings chapter 19, Elijah said to Jehovah, “Lord, they’ve killed all the prophets and I’m the only one left who still stands for You, and they’re out to kill me too.” And God said, “Elijah, don’t think you’re alone. I have yet reserved seven thousand in Israel who have not bowed the knee to Baal, seven thousand who are still true to me.”

And it was the same on the Day of Pentecost. There were only 120 people in the upper room, not thousands or tens of thousands. And when Peter preached that day, three thousand souls were converted. Now that sounds like a lot, and in one sense it is a lot. But archaeologists and Bible historians tell us that there were between half a million and a million people in Jerusalem on that day, perhaps more, for the Feast of Pentecost. Three thousand sounds like a large number until you put it into the context of half a million or a million or more. Three thousand becomes less than one percent, event less than a half of one percent.

Now, my intention is not take anything away from this. The saving of a single soul involves a powerful moving of God the Holy Spirit. The saving of three thousand

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souls is a much, much greater demonstration of the Spirit's power. I'm simply putting this in perspective of how God deals in the world and in the church. Those three thousand were still a remnant. The Body of Christ is always a remnant out of the entire mass of humanity, both Jew and Gentile. This is the true nature of the Body of Christ. It is a spiritual body, "the Israel of God."

A Body Both Universal and Local

This brings us to proposition number four about the Body of Christ. The Bible tells us that the Body of Christ is the general assembly of the called-out ones. Hebrews 12:23 calls the Body of Christ "the general assembly and church of the firstborn, who are written in Heaven."

The word that is translated "church" in that passage and elsewhere in the New Testament is the word *ecclesia*, which means, literally, "the called out ones." If you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ today, you are one of the "called-out ones." You, by the power of the Word of God and the Spirit of God, have been called out of the world of unsaved humanity to become one of the people of God in Christ.

This word *ecclesia* or church is used in two senses in the New Testament. It is used, first of all, to speak of the universal body of believers, the universal Body of Christ – all of those in all of time and out of all of humanity who meet that single membership qualification – saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul speaks of this in Romans 12:5 – "we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another."

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Also in Galatians 3:28 – “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Jesus said in Matthew chapter sixteen that upon the testimony that He is the Christ, the Son of the living God, upon the rock of that testimony He would build His church – the universal body of believers.

The word *ecclesia* or church is also used in a second sense, and this is the more frequent usage that we find in the New Testament. The Body of Christ is spoken of in a local way. Acts speaks of “the church which was at Jerusalem” (8:1), and of elders being ordained in every church (14:23). Paul in his epistles greets “the church of God which is at Corinth” (1 Corinthians 1:2) – “the churches of Galatia” (Galatians 1:2) – “the church of the Thessalonians” (1 Thessalonians 1:1) – the church in the house of Philemon (Philemon 2). In the early chapters of Revelation, John is instructed to write letters to the seven churches of Asia.

When Paul speaks, for example, of “the church of God which is at Corinth”, what He is really literally saying is, “that portion of the universal Body of Christ which is at Corinth.” The emphasis throughout the New Testament in particular is on the members of the Body of Christ meeting in local assemblies for the purposes of preaching the Gospel to the world, and building up the saints in the most holy faith.

And that brings us to our fifth proposition about the Body of Christ, which is where we are going to pick up our study next time. The Body of Christ, meeting principally as local assemblies, is God’s primary vehicle for the propagation of the

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Gospel throughout the world, and the maturing of believers in Christ. And so I hope you'll join us next time, as we further explore this rich doctrine of the church as the Body of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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