

The Church

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A Myrtlefield House Transcript



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This text has been edited from a transcript of two talks given by David Gooding in Scrabo Hall, Newtownards (N. Ireland) in 1996.

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Published by The Myrtlefield Trust

PO Box 2216

Belfast

BT1 9YR

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e: info@myrtlefieldhouse.com

Myrtlefield catalogue no: cch.004/bh

Why have a Church?

Our English word church is in fact a Greek word, *kyriakon*, which originally meant the Lord's. It was associated with another Greek word, *dōma*. So *kyriakon dōma* meant the Lord's house. When people talked about the Lord's house they imagined a big building of some sort. If you were walking down the street and someone asked you what the buildings were, you would say, 'That is the town hall; that is the fire station; this is the school; and that is the Lord's house.' The Scots did not call it a church, they called it a kirk; but it was the same Greek word, *kyriakon*—the Lord's house. That was understandable, perhaps. But it was a pity, because it led the people to think that the church was a material building of brick and stone and wood.

That was very much the idea of the Lord's house in the Old Testament. If you had been in Jerusalem in Solomon's day and had asked, 'Where is the Lord's house?' they would have taken you down the streets, up to the temple mount and shown you Solomon's temple, built of stone and brick and wood and gold. That, to them, was the Lord's house.

The interesting thing in the New Testament is that the Lord's house is something far more wonderful than Solomon's temple ever was, or even the biggest cathedral you could ever see. The Lord's house in the New Testament is a building, but it is a spiritual building and it is made, not of stone like granite but of living stones. That is obviously superior to granite.

When I am travelling I love to go round ancient buildings and cathedrals and have a look at all the history. On the walls they have memorials to men and women who were absolutely perfect! I love to go along to the walls and tap on the brick and say, 'You must have seen some marvellous things here down the centuries; now do tell me what you know of God!' The poor old bricks cannot say much; they are the same today as they were last century.

Since the idea of a literal house such as he had in the Old Testament, God has moved on to something much more interesting and bigger. It is a spiritual house, but it is made of living stones—of people. If you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, saved by his grace, you are one of those living stones in that building! That is what it means to be in the church today.

When the great Apostle Peter was converted, Christ said to him, 'Your name is Simon, but I am going to call you Peter [i.e., a stone]' (John 1:42). So when Peter came to Christ, Christ changed him into a living stone. He would be one of the big stones in this spiritual house that God was going to build. Talking to his fellow Christians later, Peter said, 'Christ took me, and made me a living stone in his spiritual house' and, "You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 2:5).

You can see the advantage of that at once. I can tap on your head, and say 'Hello, you spiritual stone! Tell me something of what you have found out about God, and about the

Saviour.’ And you could begin to tell me all sorts of marvellous things about Christ and what he means to you. I suspect you would end up by telling me that Christ has not only forgiven your sins but he is living in your heart! You have become a dwelling place of God through the Spirit.

So we began with the English word church. But now I have to tell you something else about the English word church. When they translated our English Bible, they took this word church and used it for a different Greek word—*ekklēsia*. It is a completely different word. Normally in the New Testament when you read the word church it is not referring to a building. The meaning behind it is this: an *ekklēsia* is a gathering of people. Not the kind of gathering that you might find when there has been an accident. Mrs Smith and Mrs Jones and Mr Brown have come to a standstill and there is a great crowd that just happened to be there, looking together at this accident.

The Greeks used it of an assembly of people that were gathered together; they knew what they were there for and had a job of work to do. So they used this word of the great Greek political assembly in Athens that met on certain days, when all the males in Athens above a certain age would meet together in the colossal open-air theatre as an assembly. They were there for political purposes and the gathering was called the *ekklēsia*.

So then, when we read this word church in the New Testament that is normally what it is talking about. Not a building, but a whole gathering of people brought together by the Lord Jesus for a purpose. If we have that straight in our minds, then we ask the question:

Why have a church at all?

The question is not so stupid as you may think! Abraham was a great saint of God in the Old Testament. You will never read that he went to meetings on a Sunday—morning or afternoon—nor mid-week either. You won’t read anything about Abraham going to meetings, or ‘going to church’ as people say. So why does God ask us to meet as gatherings of people and form churches nowadays?

In his letter to the Ephesians the Apostle Paul brings before us three reasons why God has invented the church.

1. To form a dwelling place within his own creation

And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. (Eph 1:22–23)

For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (Eph 2:18–22)

2. So that Jesus Christ, the ascended Lord, might have a body through which he shall be able to administer the great universe to come

To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory. (Eph 3:8–13)

3. Because our blessed Lord is looking for the church, like a young man looks for a bride: to have somebody on whom he may spend his love, and who may return his love again

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. (Eph 5:25–32)

1. To form a dwelling place for God within his creation

To see the importance and the wonder of it, I want to take you briefly to prison! Not to a prison here in your town of course, but down some back street in Rome where the prison is. We are going to visit the Apostle Paul, that great Christian missionary and founder of many Christian churches, and we are going to have a word in his ear. We knock on the door and the jailer opens. We enquire if they have a man named Paul. 'Yes,' he says, 'he is in the inner guard. Why do you want to see him?' 'He is a friend,' we say. So he opens the prison door (it's a bit smelly inside) and we go through and see Paul sitting at a table.

'How are you?' we ask.

'Tremendous!' he replies.

'In this filthy old jail! And what are you doing?' we enquire.

'I am writing a letter to my converts in Ephesus,' says Paul.

In that magnificent city there was a colossal temple to the goddess Diana—Artemis of the Ephesians—one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. They had a bit of rock in there (we think it was a meteorite of some kind). They thought it was a god, so they built a magnificent temple and the people worshipped this bit of rock. When Paul came along he preached that the Lord God doesn't dwell in temples made with hands. Many of the people of Ephesus didn't like him, the businessmen got together and formed a riot, until nearly the whole city was aflame and Paul had to depart (see Acts 19).

'I am writing to the converts in that city. It will be a bit tough for them, now that they don't go to the temple any more. If they hear that I am in prison they might get the idea that Christianity is not worth very much and that the God I serve must be a pretty poor God if he lets his servants be put into prison. They might begin to get ashamed of Christianity, and not want their neighbours to know that the great preacher who led them to Christ is now in prison. So I am writing them a letter. I want them to get hold of the tremendous truth that fills my soul. I am here in this prison because God has given me the unspeakable joy of preaching to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ. God has given me the amazing task of speaking of this fabulous wealth' (see Eph 3:8).

'What wealth?'

'First of all, God's scheme. He is building himself a place to dwell in—a dwelling place for God by the Spirit' (see Eph 2:22).

'What is there to get excited about there, Paul?'

'If you should think like that, you just don't know who God is! Doesn't that very notion fill your heart with awe? The almighty God, Creator of heaven and earth, has this insistent desire that he shall come inside his creation and have a dwelling place where he can dwell with and among his people!'

That is an extraordinary thing! God Almighty, in that sense, is outside his creation. There was a day when our little earth did not exist, and the universe around us didn't exist. God existed, by definition, outside his creation. The Bible tells us that God not only made this vast universe, but ever since he made it he has had this desire to come inside it and dwell with us, his creatures.

He had Solomon build him a temple where he might come and dwell. When Solomon had built this glorious house and made it as beautiful as he could, then he lifted up his heart in prayer to God and said, 'But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!' (1 Kgs 8:27). Solomon already had some beginnings of a concept of the vastness and wonder of almighty God. It will help us in our study of the church if we can grasp that it is built as a temple, as a dwelling place for God.

Our universe is a big place. Would you like to tame the sun? Could you drag it down to your back garden? If you could, how long do you think you would exist? What will you say about the Creator? That sun is but one medium-sized star amongst multi-millions of stars that form galaxies: billions of galaxies. The scientists tell us that somewhere in our own galaxy there is some vast object, so big it is pulling the sun and all the planets towards itself at one million kilometres an hour. Just imagine the colossal size of it!

And as the prophet Isaiah would say, that is just the dust in the balance, as far as almighty God is concerned (see Isa 40:15)! Can you believe it—he should not only want to have a dwelling place within his creation, but he chose us? It staggered Solomon when God came down and dwelt in his temple. But that was only a prototype, like a doll's house that a child would play with it—a few bits of wood and some gold and things and dolls.

God had another kind of temple, and what a magnificent temple it was! It was the body of our Lord Jesus Christ. When he came, the Bible says, 'In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily' (Col 2:9).

The fullness of the Godhead dwelt in him bodily! I love to think of those days when the almighty God, maker of heaven and earth, stepped down to be born of Mary and was laid in a manger. As he walked about our earth, all the fullness of the Godhead dwelt in him. The little children could come and sit on his knee; fallen, sinful men and women could come and touch him, yet Almighty God dwelt in him.

Before he was crucified he said to his contemporaries, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up' (John 2:19). He spoke of the temple of his body, v. 21. For our sakes, 'His appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind' (Isa 52:14). The glorious news is that the third day God raised him. He still had a human body, but now a glorified human body, magnificent in its wonder. It could suddenly appear and then disappear. Then, on the fortieth day, the apostles saw that glorified human body ascend into heaven. God has his man in heaven—Jesus, the perfect dwelling place of almighty God.

And now I have to add a bit that you will find almost incredible! God has not been content just to have the man, Jesus, as his dwelling place. The scheme is this: every man, woman, boy and girl that comes in repentance and faith to the Saviour, becomes, in Christ, part of that great dwelling place of God! Do you think about that when you come together as a church? The point of your coming was, in practice, to give God a dwelling place!

As we listen to Paul in his prison cell, the thing that gets him excited is that the Gentiles are part of this scheme. When we read that, we might think that Paul is a bit of a snob! Why shouldn't we Gentiles be part of the scheme? Being brought up on the national health system and the welfare system, we have an idea in our heads that we have a right to every blessing that's going! We find it a bit offensive if we are told that once upon a time we had nothing to do with God's great house. We were sinners of the Gentiles, afar off, with no claim on God at all—it is a fact!

This business about God having a dwelling place is very special. Abraham was saved (see Rom. 4:3), but he knew nothing of God's dwelling place. When God came down to earth and had Solomon build him a house it was a very special thing. It wasn't saying, 'God is everywhere, so we shall build him a little place here as well.' No! It was saying that almighty God, who fills the universe, has chosen to come and dwell in this place—nowhere else. So Solomon built the temple. God was very strict about it. The men who should come and serve in it were specially handpicked, they had to be purified and the presence of God was veiled with heavy curtains. Only these chosen men were allowed to come near.

That isn't to say that there were not people elsewhere who were saved. Of course there were! The Queen of Sheba got converted, perhaps, but she wasn't allowed to come into that temple. How easily we think of just meandering inside church. We lose the awe and the wonder of it. Sometimes we think no more of coming to church than we do of going to the supermarket! It would help us if we could get hold of the wonder of being allowed, not only to visit the dwelling place of God, but to *be* that dwelling place! And now, since Christ, it has been open to everybody—Jew and Gentile—through faith in Christ to form the great dwelling place of God.

Now Paul is going to astound us! He tells us that God is constructing this dwelling place out of men and women that have been saved through Christ and redeemed through his

precious blood. He says that now his purpose, amongst other things, is this: 'So that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places' (Eph 3:10).

Why have a church? To put it in simple terms: God has a church, a dwelling place, so that through the church he might educate the angels. 'Is that not removed from daily life now?' you say. Well, it is not my idea; it is here in Scripture! I find the idea exciting. God has been educating the angels all down the vast centuries. What a lesson it has been to all God's great executives—the angels and the archangels, the seraphim and the cherubim, the thrones and the dominions!

I would like to have been there when God set about the work of creation. All was formless and void; Michael and Gabriel were looking on, wondering what he was going to do. He spoke the word and here comes our planet!

'It's nothing like heaven,' says Michael to Gabriel; 'I wonder what he will do next.'

Then God began inventing the giraffes and the buffaloes and the monkeys, and then human beings! Can you imagine the wonder of it? Imagine seeing a butterfly for the first time, and a lion!

'Clap, Michael!' said Gabriel. 'Well done, God!' they said.

Imagine the variety of creation—the variegated wisdom of God. That was Lesson Number One, perhaps, for the great principalities and powers.

But I wonder what Gabriel and Michael said when they saw the blessed Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, take that tremendous step down and be born of the virgin Mary and laid in a manger.

Did the seraphim say to the cherubim, 'What is God doing now?'

Did Michael nudge Gabriel and say, 'How can this be? These human beings are lower than us; how can the blessed Son lower himself to become lower than us angels?'

That was an amazing lesson for the principalities and powers to learn.

God has such plans that you never know what he is going to do next! What did they say when they saw that same Son of God taken by brutal men, scourged, lacerated, crowned with thorns, languishing, nailed on a cross?

Did Michael say to Gabriel, 'Surely God has gone too far now. Isn't this weakness? Why hasn't God intervened to save his Son? Isn't this bordering on folly?'

I don't know what Michael made out of it when he learned the answer. What would he have said if the answer had been told him, 'God has done this to save a sinner called Gooding?'

Have you got over the wonder yet of that scene, which has the mightiest angels in glory still stopping their breath, when he gave his Son to redeem us? Why would he bother to redeem us? Why didn't he pitch us into hell and start again? Through that, the angels have learned a staggering lesson.

It was a novel thing—they had never seen the like of it before—when on the fortieth day after the resurrection the blessed Lord Jesus ascended, and entered into the very presence of God.

'Whatever next?' says Gabriel—as the angels parted to allow the blessed Son of God come through the portals of heaven and sit at the right hand of God—'a human being, and elevated above us!'

God sat him down at his right hand, far above all principalities and powers—a man! God's wonders have not finished. The angels, we are told, are busy investigating it. They discovered that not only is the man, Jesus Christ, seated above all principalities and powers, might and dominions, but you are as well. If you have got over the wonder of it, the angels have not!

Can you imagine Gabriel whispering to Michael, 'Are we meant to serve them? Are they going to command us now? We knew some of them when they were on earth!'

And Michael says, 'They have been bought by the blood of Christ: they are so valuable to God that we shall willingly serve them!'

To this present day the angels are watching this marvellous thing. Think of God's plan down the long centuries. What has it all been about? It has been about his great scheme of redeeming men and women, joining them to Christ, seating them above all rulers and authorities, as the church of God—to form God a habitation through the Spirit.

If you don't get so excited about that, I will tell you how you could. The scheme is this: God is going to have this eternal dwelling place and one day the great city, the New Jerusalem, shall come down out of heaven; and the voice shall proclaim: 'the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people and God himself will be with them as their God' (Rev 21:3). But the process has already begun. The Bible says that the building commenced at Pentecost and it is still going on. Here and there God is building the pieces that eventually will form this tremendous dwelling place of God.

But we don't have to wait until the great eternity dawns. Here on earth, as you meet as a church, God by his Spirit comes and dwells among you. We are being prepared for our great glory and tasks in eternity. What is more, so that we shall grasp it, Paul prays like this for his fellow believers, 'That according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith' (Eph 3:16–17). Doesn't he dwell in all our hearts as believers? Yes, he does. But he wants to have more room in your heart—to dwell in every nook and cranny, in every department of your life. He wants life to be an ongoing, ever more vivid experience of Christ dwelling in your heart. This is what Paul was praying for the Ephesians in his prison, and he was also praying it for us today.

What will that do to us? First of all, it will root and ground us in the love of God. The more the Saviour dwells in our hearts, the more secure we are in the face of life's storms. Instead of the storms blowing us over, we will be rooted and grounded in his love.

And it has another effect. If the Lord Jesus comes and dwells in our hearts like that, it will change our outlook on life.

The next thing it will do is to make us aware that, just as he is dwelling in our hearts, he is dwelling in our brothers' and sisters' hearts. He is dwelling in the hearts of all who trust the Saviour. And it is the same Lord dwelling in you as in all of us. So we can say that, together with all the saints, we are forming God a dwelling place by his Spirit. It comes down to practical things and one of the great goals for which we should pray every day is that Christ might increasingly dwell in our hearts by faith.

2. So that the ascended Lord might have a body through which he shall be able to administer the great universe to come

Why have a church? The Bible says that the church is the body of Christ. To help us understand that, Paul reminds us of Christ's relationship to the great universe. Christ made it and it was made in him. That is, it was his idea to start with; he was the agent. He made it for himself: it exists for him. But since our Lord was here on earth there has been a new thing. 'He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent' (Col 1:18).

So our great universe has seen two stages. First, there was the making of the universe and our little planet and all physical things and people on it. Christ was the head of that. And to administer that vast universe he made angels, the principalities, powers, mights and dominions. Can you imagine what it takes to keep a galaxy in place, and keep it working! God has a lot of angels to do that. Colossal intelligences they are, and enormously powerful. They are God's civil service; they serve the Creator who made them to run this gigantic universe.

But since then God has fulfilled another idea. This creation went wrong, some angels rebelled and human beings also rebelled. He sent his Son so that we might be redeemed and restored. The Lord Jesus suffered at Calvary, arose from the dead and ascended into heaven. Instead of just having angels to be his civil service and executives, Christ now has a new scheme. He has a body!

Let's think about our body. Which part is 'me'—is it all 'me'? Is one bit more important than the other? The 'me' that resides in my head is most important—it is my head that controls my arms and feet. If I want to kick something I command my foot to do it, and if I want to pat somebody on the head I command my right hand to do it. Your body is the executive civil service of your head. You are not too pleased if some of the fingers don't do exactly what you want them to do!

So Christ has created this new executive division. He has a body; it is different and better than angels. Angels are mere one-off productions, he just said the word and they existed. A body is different, for it is part of him and joined to him. Just like your hand is a part of your body and under the control of your head, so the body of Christ is made up of all those who have trusted the Saviour. He has taken them into himself and made them members of himself, so that his life runs through them. That is why it says we are seated with Christ above the principalities and powers, for they are not members of his body. They are simply his servants, whereas we who trust Christ are members of the Saviour's body.

Why have a church? The church is that body! Every believer is in the body of Christ, but the trouble is that some of us haven't yet grown up.

Have you ever watched a little chap about eighteen months old? He is alive, but he hasn't grown yet and he has a lot to learn. He goes to grab something and he can't quite get hold of it. He has not yet learned co-ordination with the brain and the brain hasn't quite got control over his hand. The infant will have to grow up, so that his hand will be able to do exactly what his head wants it to do.

We have to grow up and that is why we have a church. It is his body and in the church God has made provision so that we can grow up as members of Christ. In the church God has

put gifts: apostles, prophets, teachers and evangelists. What for? So that they can help the rest of us to grow up and be able to carry out the commands of the Head, so that the whole thing might be beautifully coordinated (Eph 4:11–16). That is why we ‘come to church.’ We need to come so that we might take advantage of the great gifts that God has put in the church, learn and grow up.

Satan himself doesn’t like God’s schemes! Paul warns us that Satan has his ‘soldiers’ all around us to distract the believer and fill his mind with all sorts of untruths, silly and dangerous doctrines. Satan wants to get believers confused and wandering all over the place, so that the Head cannot control them as he wants to do. To stop that happening, the risen Lord has put gifts in the church. He uses each one of the members of the body to help each other, so that we might grow together as a coordinated body to be Christ’s executives within his universe.

So it involves a lot more than which hymnbook to have! It could be that what I have said sounds strange to some of you. If it does, I suggest that you go away and read the epistle to the Ephesians again and say to the Lord in your prayers that you want to understand it and grow, so that you can function well as part of his church.

3. To form the Bride of Christ

Why have a church? Our blessed Lord is looking for the church like a young man looks for a bride: to have somebody on whom he may spend his love, and who may return his love again. Forgive the metaphor; you should come to church to do a bit of courting! I don’t mean to get a husband, although the church is a good place to get your husband. (Better there than at a disco.) I am talking about another kind of courting. Christ has redeemed us and placed us in the church that we might form his bride. When we come together as a group of believers, it is a time for Christ to come and court us and for us to court the Saviour.

I am told that when a young man chooses a young lady as his wife, he mustn’t try to change her. I can tell you something about the heavenly bridegroom. He loves you and died for you; He loves you as you are and he will never let you go. But he will constantly be changing you, simply because he loves you! He notices the blots and blemishes on our character and he wants to get rid of them. The church is God’s beauty parlour where Christ is preparing his people for the great day when glory dawns and the Saviour will come and take all his believing people home. He will present the church to himself, and then to the Father, as the triumph of his grace and love—‘a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish’ (Eph 5:27).

May God provoke within us a sense of the wonder of what it means to be part of the church of God.

The Church—His Body

It has been suggested that we should think a little more about the subject of the Body of Christ, so we shall study three things about this topic:

1. We will refresh our minds about what the body of Christ is; what it is for; and the size of this scheme that God has in his heart.
2. We shall think of how the body of Christ is formed; who is in it; how they get into it; and what they are meant to do when they are inside it.
3. Finally, we shall think of what is the most pressing need at present for the members of the body of Christ. That will lead us to think about our responsibility and may help us to rethink our sense of proportions of what we are meant to be doing as we go through life as the people of God.

1. What is the body of Christ?

God's Word is one of the means that he uses by which he, the head, may fill us, his members, and bring us to fullness of understanding, character, and performance.

Giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. (Col 1:12-18)

This portion of scripture is in two parts. It talks, in the first place, of God's magnificent creation. The vast universe that we see around us: the earth, its plants, its animals, human beings; and then the heavens, the stars and the galaxies; and the unseen part of the universe inhabited by the angels of God in their serried ranks.

Then it tells us that Christ is the head of it all! Born in a manger though he was, the meek and lowly Jesus, let us grasp again in our hearts who this Jesus Christ is. We are told that he is the head of the creation around us. It is his world! Sinners invaded it, but let us be careful of our attitude to the world around us.

When I was a young man I had a few half-baked ideas in my head! I was taught that 'this world is a wilderness wide, with nothing to desire or choose,' and the sooner it is burnt up the better; we are going to a fairer land. I know what they were trying to tell me: this world

has been marred by sin and because of sin we groan within ourselves with all our sundry complaints. Then we lament and sorrow at the vast cruelties of the world that are still being played out on the stage of Europe and elsewhere. We long for home and for the new heavens and the new earth, wherein dwells righteousness.

But we must not let that lead us to think that there was something originally bad with this earth. God made it and it is his world still. And we were told that this world was made in Christ, just like a big factory! If you ask, 'Where did such and such a factory begin?' someone will say, 'It began on Tuesday, January the twenty-second, when they laid the foundation!' No, it didn't begin then—it began in somebody's mind! It began in him, in his brain, his heart and his mind. So the universe began in Christ. It was his idea; he conceived it. He had all kinds of plans in his head as to what he could do with a universe and he had all sorts of ideas in his head about us too! We are his idea—he thought us up. He already had in his head what he would do with us.

And it was made through him. The person who first thinks of a factory usually gets a builder to build it. When Christ thought up the universe he himself made it. Amongst all the millions of things he ever made he made me. That is a great comfort to my heart: he really meant me to be and he meant you to be, too! You may find it difficult to believe that, amongst the billions of human beings that have ever lived on this earth, you are as significant as the Bible says you are. Christ made you—he really wanted you to be.

What did he make it for? It was made for him. Ultimately elephants are for him—they were made for him. If you ask what the galaxies are there for, they are there for him.

It is good to be interested in creation. I go into all sorts of people's homes around this world and I find all sorts of things! Sometimes you find a set of drums. I remember going into a home—the man was middle aged and he appeared to be a very sober type. There in a corner of the room was a set of drums! I didn't say, 'What on earth have you got these for?' One day he asked me if ever I had heard drums and I asked him for a demonstration. He found tremendous delight in them. It would have been rude of me to say that I was not interested in these things! In another place you find this lady who has an interest in ceramics. She has an oven in her home, and she paints these plates and things and puts them into this oven. She knows how long to leave them in and out they come as beautiful pieces of ceramic. She is interested in it. You are her guest, so you have to show an interest in it too. It would be positively rude not to.

If the universe was made by Christ, through him and for him, common decency and etiquette would suggest that we ought to be interested in it for his sake. Of course, he made us for him: that is our purpose. Our blessed Lord made also the rulers and authorities. They are the names and work-descriptions of the vast spiritual intelligences who, under God, run the universe for God. Notice the work-descriptions: thrones, principalities, powers, mights and dominions. That is their job.

The Bible indicates that this present order of creation has been made subject to angels; and, under Christ the Lord, they run it. He made them, he is the head over all things and he made them as well. He is not one of them; they are but creatures. Though they excel in strength they are but his servants.

The verses also go on to tell us what we know too well. Rebellion has broken out in God's universe, and human beings have been infected by that spirit of revolt. As the Bible puts it, 'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way' (Isa 53:6). That is the seriousness of the situation. Sin is not only murder; there is a more serious thing than that. And that is, to have been made for Christ and then to ignore it and go our own way with our own set of ambitions in life. That is what the Bible calls 'carrying out the desires of the body and the mind' (Eph 2:3).

Some people say the desires of the flesh are in being attracted to all sorts of dirty and horrible things. They are interested in music—would you call that a desire of the mind? Music is a wonderful thing, but it is not meant to be my goal. The purpose for which I was made was to be for Christ and to do his will. If I am a true subject I am obliged to lay all the creaturely gifts he has given me at his feet, and say, 'Lord, how would you have me use them for your glory? What ambitions have you, Lord, for me in my life? Why did you make me?'

So the first creation has gone wrong, what now? The next part of Colossians tells us a magnificent thing. It announces that there has come a new beginning. Christ is that beginning, because he is the firstborn from the dead. This is a breath-taking thing! When God sent his Son to redeem the world he came as a man, a genuine human being, born of a human mother, born in genuine human form. He was without sin; he bore our sins in his body on the tree, died and was put in the grave.

What did God do then? Did he say, 'Let's scrap all that idea of human beings having human bodies and start afresh with something new'? No! He took the body of Jesus that lay dead in the grave because of our sins and raised it from the dead. God has started again inside his own universe. It isn't merely that there is going to be new heavens and earth one day; the beginning has already started! And with the resurrection of Christ, God has continued on with the old. Christ still has a body, but it is a new kind of a body—an all glorified body.

It is God beginning again and the beginning is the beginning of a vast restoration. The Bible talks of a day that is coming when God shall restore all things. God has not been defeated by sin; he never intends to be. He will never admit that his schemes were failures, scrap them and start again. He will never be defeated. The resurrection of Christ tells us that God has begun the great work of restoration; Jesus has risen from the dead and is in Glory.

Because he is the first, he is the head of the body, the firstborn from the dead: that in all things he might be first. He was first in the original stage of the creation, he is first in the second stage of God's great universe. Because that is so, it invites our comparison. In the first he was head of thrones, principalities, mights, dominions; in the second he is still head of those things, but he is head of the body that is the church. So God will impress upon our hearts how colossal is the concept of the body of Christ. Christ is the head of it; he has to be first in everything.

It is the body of Christ that is going to hold the central, supreme position in God's restored universe. Let us get hold of this. We are members of this body—see what it means! Christ was head of all the vast powers in the first creation, but the body of Christ is going to replace them and be above them. The body of Christ, in fact, is going to be the vehicle by which Christ administers the eternal heavens and earth.

Now it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking. It has been testified somewhere, 'What is man, that you are mindful of him, or the son of man, that you care for him? You made him for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned him with glory and honour, putting everything in subjection under his feet.' (Heb 2:5-8)

Not angels then—man is going to be the centre of the whole administration of the eternal heavens and earth. What man? In the first place our blessed Lord Jesus, who is now exalted and one day coming again. In that day it will not just be Jesus himself alone, but Jesus and all his people. In other words, Christ and his body. You are in the body of Christ. This is what the body of Christ is and what it is designed for. When we think of the body of Christ, it is not just merely saying, 'As a local gathering of Christians we all have our part to play, we act as if we are a body.' That is part of the preparatory scheme; but the ultimate purpose is that Christ and his body shall administer the whole of the universe for God. That is what we are being trained for.

When we go home to glory the body of Christ won't be scrapped. You say, 'Hold on, Mr Preacher, don't spoil our ideas of heaven! On earth we are meant to work for the Lord, but we won't have to work when we get home to heaven, shall we? Heaven is a marvellous retirement home, a summer holiday camp where you never have to go back to school or work. When we go to heaven we shall all sit in heavenly sofas and put our feet up on heavenly foot rests. Singing hymns will be the nearest we shall ever come to having to work again!'

Yes we shall sing hymns, but if you are going to enjoy heaven you will have to get used to the idea that God loves working. He doesn't have to work for a living, so why did he make all the stars? He loves making things and he has schemes galore for the unfolding ages of eternity. As each scheme unfolds before us, the Bible soberly tells us that he will show us the exceeding riches of his grace towards us. It will take all eternity to do it. Of course we shall be working, as we have never worked before! So it will be good for us to get used to working as the body of Christ and its many members now.

2. How do you get into the body of Christ?

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Cor 12:12-13)

How is the body of Christ formed? Verse 13 is the definitive answer. This is how the body of Christ is formed: 'In one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.' You will observe that in that verse two processes are mentioned, not just one. The first process: 'In one Spirit we were all baptized into one body.' The second process: 'And all were made to drink of one Spirit.' These two processes are two sides of one and the same coin (if I may mix my metaphors). If you are baptised in the Spirit, you go into the Spirit; if you are made to drink of the Spirit, the Spirit goes into you.

John the Baptist told people that he baptised in water, but after him would come someone who would baptise in the Holy Spirit. So when John baptised people, he put them in the water.

What will Christ do? He will baptise you in the Holy Spirit. Just as John put them in water, Christ will put you into his Holy Spirit. We are talking about how the body of Christ is formed. The first process is, we are put in the Holy Spirit by the Lord Jesus. If I am baptised in water, I go into the water; but if I drink the water, the water goes into me. And so the body of Christ is formed by this double process; we are put into the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit is put into us.

That may be true; but what has that got to do with the body and the formation of the body? Let us take the example of a human body, for that is what Paul does in v. 12. He says, 'Just as the (human) body is one . . . so it is with Christ.' Paul uses the analogy of the human body to help us to think about the great body of Christ.

Look at the human body: one body, but fingers and thumbs, etc. What keeps all these members together to form one body? Is it all the bones, muscles, ligaments etc.? In a sense that is right, but fundamentally not completely right. If you were to shoot me through the head and lie me down on the floor and come back in about 60 years, you would find that some of my members had fallen off—in spite of the bones and the ligaments and the muscles! So what keeps them together? The answer is this: my body is in the air and the air is in me. That is vital—the air contains the oxygen without which I can't live. For me to live and keep together, two things have to be simultaneously true: I have to be in the air and the air has to be in me. There's no good having one without the other. I can be in the air, but if you put your hands round my throat and throttle me I can't get any air. I am in the air, but the air can't get into me. So what happens? I fall down dead!

You can try the converse: set me on top of a rocket and send me off into space. I take an enormous great breath, so the air is in me. But when I get out there I am no longer in the air. So what happens? I go pop, or something! You can't have one without the other. So it is with the body of Christ. To have the body of Christ with all the members joined together, two things have to be simultaneously true: each member has to be in the Spirit and the Spirit in each member.

How do you get into the Spirit? The answer is: everyone who comes to Christ, Christ puts them in. He does the baptising and, whether you know it or not, when you come in genuine repentance and faith to Christ, he puts you in his Spirit.

How do you drink of the Spirit? Christ gives you to drink of the Spirit. He said to the Samaritan woman, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink," you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water' (John 4:10). He gives to us to drink of his Holy Spirit and puts his Holy Spirit within us. What a marvellous thing that is! The Holy Spirit is not some nebulous idea, the Holy Spirit is God! He is the great power that brooded upon the dark waters at the beginning of creation, so that at God's commanding fiat, 'Let there be light', there was light.

This is the new stage of creation about which we have been talking. The marvellous thing is, when we come to Christ he not only forgives our past, he puts us in the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit in us. Thus are we incorporated into Christ and become one with him. But how can we be one with him, when he is in heaven and we are on earth?

Let's take an analogy of the human body. Where are your feet? On the ground! Where is your head? About six feet above your feet! Is it all you? Yes, it is the same life running through you from your toes to your head.

What a magnificent thing (let us ask the Holy Spirit now to help us to realise it)—that between the blessed Lord Jesus and you (between the Head and one of his members) there flows incessantly that divine life which is his Spirit. You will then find out what gift you have as you grow. When a little baby is born you can easily see what its hands are for, tiny though they are. They will have to grow to be much use, but you can see what they are for. Whether the child will grow to have musical ability, or painting ability, or engineering ability, or housewife ability, you won't know until it grows older. So as we grow spiritually, it becomes evident what gift the Lord has given us. So you can be assured that if you are a member of Christ you have a gift. You are a part, a member of the body. All believers are members—you don't have to be a preacher to be a part of the body of Christ.

When we think of the great purpose that God has of redeeming sinners, and baptising them, and giving them to drink of the Spirit, and putting them in the body of Christ—married women in particular have a tremendously important role. If women didn't get married and have children there wouldn't be anybody in heaven! What a thing it is to be a mother and, under God, to bring forth children that they might grow up and meet the Saviour and be incorporated into his Body. What an ambition for a mother! Whatever our gifts are, we can discover them and develop them as we grow.

3. What is the most pressing need for the Body of Christ currently?

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says 'When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.' (In saying, 'He ascended', what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Eph 4:7-16)

We can scarce read that passage from Paul's inspired pen without seeing at once what is, according to Paul, the most pressing need for members of the body of Christ. It is that each member shall grow! It is important that we do some work for the Lord (and we will come to that); but what work we do will depend on whether we grow!

A little baby is in his cot and all the friends come around. Some say he is like his father. He has got all the potential, but everybody hopes he is going to grow. What a tragedy it would

be if he didn't grow. Through the early years, through the teenage years, and even when you are over seventy, you will have to grow.

Why is it so important? We have to grow up so that the body may match the head! Grow up to the full stature. How do you measure it? The measurement is Christ. We have to grow so that the whole body will be fully grown in all its members to match the head. Some growing! But it is the most pressing need.

It is not only growing in bulk; but it is growing 'until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God.' If we are going to function as members in his body, then it is of number one importance that we get an ever-enlarged and more correct concept of who the head is.

The head is that same Son of God through whom the universe was planned and made. The head is that same one who made the principalities, powers, mights and dominions. He is the same one who shared a meal with Martha and Mary and his heart is still the same. When the Apostle John, who leaned on his breast at the last supper, saw him in his glorified state, temporarily he fell at his feet as dead. The Lord had to lay his right hand on him and say, 'Fear not, John'. His heart is still the same, and what will it be to see him in his glory! Listen to what Paul says: 'For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison' (2 Cor 4:17). We need to grow up! We have to bear in the eternity-to-come a colossal weight of glory.

I have no desire to be the Queen! She can't come to a function like the State Opening of Parliament just any old way. She had to learn how to behave. And then there are all those State papers! When an ambassador visits she has to know all about him. If you were invited to meet Her Majesty you would find out that she knows all about you. She has taken the trouble to read the papers so that she can talk to you. What a lot she has to know!

Just imagine being in the body of the Son of God! We need some notion in our heads and hearts of who this Son of God is. He is the great Son of God for whom the universe was made. He has chosen to make us part of his body; not treating us like slaves, giving us commands, but graciously sharing his very life. With his life within us, under the power of that life, we respond to the head. We will need to grow up to get to know the head, so that he might operate efficiently within us.

That doesn't mean merely theoretical knowledge. I once heard a famous doctor tell how he had taught a Chief of some man-eating tribe to read. The man had become a Christian. He was so grateful that he came and put his great arm around the doctor's neck and said, 'I am so grateful that you have taught me to read. What can I do for you? Is there anybody around here that I could kill for you!' I'm not suggesting you take it that far, but God expects us to respond practically to his amazing grace.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. His international teaching ministry is marked by fresh and careful expositions of both testaments. He has published scholarly studies on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John 13–17, Acts, Hebrews and the New Testament's use of the Old Testament.