



MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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A Biblical Perspective on Church Relationships, Part 5

The Church Portrayed in Scripture

It is fascinating to study how the church is pictured in the Bible. For example, it is described as:

- Ephesians 2:20-22, as a Building.
 - Mark 2:18-20, as a Bride.
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- John 15:1-6, as a Vineyard.
- 1 Corinthians 3:9, as a Field.
- John 10:1-6, as a Flock.
- John 1:12, as a Family.
- Romans 14:17, as a Kingdom.
- 1 Peter 2:5, 9, as a Priesthood.

Yet the image that is most applicable to our study is that of a BODY.

1 Corinthians 12:12: "For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ." (cf. vv. 12-27)

Truly, the church is a body, which isn't just a metaphor! Paul is describing the church as it really is; it is the BODY of Christ and so a living thing! It was founded upon the Living Lord. It is engifted by the Holy Spirit who is living and abiding in our presence. It grows... and can also decline!

And because of this, the church is appropriately called AN ORGANISM! Think of it!

- It has needs for its welfare: physical, emotional, and spiritual.
- Without a clear understanding of its purpose, it can lapse into spiritual depression or even retrogression! It can also be anxious!
- And when one part of the body suffers, all of its parts suffer, 1 Corinthians 12:26.

Now as an organism, it can be more or less healthy! As a body can be in shape, so can be a church. And as a body can catch a cold or virus, so also can the church. In fact, one of the illnesses to which the church can be subject is unhealthy relationships amongst its people. Show me a church where:

- Sinners are left un-confronted, and I'll show you a sick church!
- People are not allowed to express doubt...
- Its members do not get along...
- There is division and strife, and I'll show you an unhealthy church!

What is the medicine for the church that is sick? An understanding of what God wants the church to be, and the implementing of these truths on the part of God's people!

1 Thessalonians 5 deals with the first part of this. Paul is discussing Biblical Church Relationships. How should the people in a church relate to each other? What are the responsibilities every child of God has to the community?

God's people must endeavor to counsel one another, v. 14a. This is a dynamic calling which

involves confrontation when a brother or sister stands in rebellion. And yet, when obvious rebellion is not present, it involves listening, asking questions, and so laboring to help another when the consequences of rebellion are reaped in their lives!

God's people must also encourage one another, v 14b. When it comes to ministry, we must endeavor to lighten the weight that oft-time accompanies physical ailment, emotional difficulty, or spiritual depression.

For any church to be a healthy, thriving family of God, God's people must cleave to one another.

1 Thessalonians 5:14, "and we urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak..."

The word for "help" is an imprecise rendering of the Greek word ἀντέχω (*antechō*) which is a compound word consisting of ἀντί (*anti*) which means "over" or "against" and ἔχω (*echō*) meaning "to have." Together, the word carries the idea of "holding against all odds" and translates as "to have against," "to hold against" and so "to support," "to hold firmly," or "to cling to." It is used in the LXX in such passages as these:

Deuteronomy 32:41a< (speaking of God), "If I sharpen My flashing sword, and My hand takes hold on justice, I will render vengeance on My adversaries..."

How strongly does God hold on to justice? That is the word used here! Speaking of the idolatry of the people of God as they exhumed the bodies of the fallen saints we read:

Jeremiah 8:2a, "And they will spread them out to the sun, the moon, and to all the host of heaven, which they have loved, and which they have served, and which they have gone after, and which they have sought, and which they have worshiped...."

The idolatry pictured here reflects a commitment and an attachment that verged on the maniacal; digging up the bodies of the dead and arranging their bones before the host of heaven in worship! Again we get the nuance of the word here... it refers to an unwavering, unceasing holding on to something!

In Proverbs it is used to speak of the importance of "wisdom" for the child of God:

Proverbs 3:18, "She is a tree of life to those who take hold of her [who grab on to wisdom with the intent of never letting go]..."

That is the idea! "Helping" speaks of core devotion which, like the Energizer Bunny, keeps going and going and going. It is beautifully illustrated in Proverbs:

Proverbs 18:24, "A man of *many* friends *comes* to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks

closer than a brother.”

This reflects a devotion and so a commitment to another that transcends the contingencies of life: illness, sickness, disease, anger, rebellion, hurt feelings, offense, rudeness, and the like. That is the essence of true friendship... and that is the connotation of our word. It is reflected in:

- Baruch’s faithful service alongside Jeremiah, Jeremiah 36:4, 10, 14-15, 32; 43:3, 6! When Jeremiah was threatened, so was Baruch!
- Luke who wouldn’t leave Paul even when he was in the Mamertine Prison in Rome (which when filled, it was emptied by diverting the sewage of Rome into its cells¹), 2 Timothy 4:11!
- Abraham’s servant, Eliezer, who though set to inherit Abraham’s wealth in the event that the patriarch didn’t have an heir, nevertheless labored to find a bride for Isaac, Genesis 15:2; 24:2!
- Aaron’s commitment to Moses by which he not only spoke on behalf of the prophet, but accompanied his brother in and through all things, Exodus 4:14-16!

I hope you see it. The word Paul used for “help” here speaks of a strong commitment to the welfare and so benefit of another... notably here, “the weak.” The word for “weak” is ἀσθενής (*asthenēs*) which is the word σθενής (*sthenēs*) which means “strong” and the alpha-privative (ἀ) which negates it. This word is used in the Bible, as well as in the ancient world, in reference to those who are down and out and/or undesirable. It first was used of “physical weakness” which in the ancient world was tantamount to sin.

Hebrews 4:15, “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses [notice the contrast], but One who has been tempted in all things as we *are*, yet without sin.” (cf. also Heb. 7:28; Romans 5:6)

As we’ll see in a moment, physical weakness was believed in the ancient to be the result of sin! Secondly, it was used in reference to sickness (John 5:5; Luke 10:9; Matthew 10:8). In this regard, it also referenced disease which in the ancient world were deforming, stinky, messy, and so repulsive. When Paul’s identity as a prophet and as a servant of God was secured on Malta, we read this:

Acts 28:9, “And after this had happened, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases [that’s out word] were coming to him and getting cured.”

These are the very people who in Christ’s ministry were spoken to and touched by the Lord-*ones whom society had all but abandoned!*

Thirdly, the word was used of any who suffered with “inner poverty” and so any mental incapacity or mental illness. And lastly, it was used to refer to the begging poor!

From all of this you must see that the word speaks NOT of the desirable of society or those easiest to get along with (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:26-29). In Paul's day (as in our own) the "weak" always came with baggage which means interaction with them will always be a burden, always cost, always be taxing- which is why in the ancient world the "weak" were opposed, persecuted, attacked, mocked and neglected.

John 9:2, "And as [Jesus] passed by, He saw a man blind from birth [the epitome of weakness in that day]. And His disciples asked Him, saying, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?'"

As I just referenced, it was understood in the ancient world that "weak" people had no one to blame for their condition but themselves. As such, there was little pity given to them! In this regard, we read of a rather amazing passage in Galatians where Paul speaks of his own ailment where oozing puss would flow from his eyes:

Galatians 4:14, "And that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not despise or loathe [*~you didn't spit at me or throw rocks at me*], but you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus *Himself*."

Let me share with you a snap-shot of what it means to "help the weak" in the body of Christ:

Years ago, there were janitors who could be seen throughout the day working at their jobs in the school. One such janitor was an old man who was dirty, smelly, and not very nice. From outward appearance it was clearly evident he had had a hard life. He spent many hours occupied with his own thoughts as he was alone in this world; which probably explained his dress and demeanor.

One spring during track season, in the early evening, the old janitor was in the school cleaning the locker room and all seemed well. When the boys returned an hour or so later the students returned to the locker room only to find on the ground the unconscious janitor. The amazing thing was that one of the boys rushed to his side, tilted his head back, cleared out the chewing tobacco from his mouth, and began performing CPR by compressing his chest and placing his lips on the dirty, smelly janitor's mouth and blowing. And this student kept at it until the paramedics arrived!

While this was a one-time act, nevertheless combine it over the course of a life-time and that is what it means to "help the weak." It is entering into their world (chewing tobacco and all), dirtying yourself on account of their struggle (not morally), and laboring to lift them up, help them, and so grow them in grace!

Now it is this very group of people in the body of Christ that Paul calls the rest of the body to cling to; "to help!" How is that? Because *spiritually* that is what we were prior to Christ, and

yet God took hold of us so strongly that He'll never let go! The standard God set for His people is found in Deuteronomy 10:

Deuteronomy 10:19, "So show your love for the alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt [*'and I loved you'* that is the nuance here, cf. v. 18]."

This is such a commitment, bond, and love must be that which characterizes the body of Christ (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:22-25)!

Every church has its "weak" people? In some way, each and every one of us are weak! The Question is this: Will you today minister to those who are easy, clean, and so a quick fix? Or will you be in it for the long haul? When it is NOT

- Convenient?
- Pain-free?
- Clean?
- Of low demand on your time or talents?

Let me tell you, this is what church membership is all about! It is clinging to a group of people through thick and thin and so laboring to grow them in the grace of God!

Notice Paul's fourth exhortation is God's people must be patient with one another.

1 Thessalonians 5:14, "and we urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all men."

The word for "patient" is μακροθυμέω (*makrothumeō*) which like the rest of Paul's exhortations here is a compound of two words: μακρός (*makros*) which means "long" or "far distant" AND θυμός (*thumos*) which references one's passion and so is translated as "anger," "fierce," or "rage." Combined the word means to suffer-long on account of a difficult situation or a difficult person.² We are talking NOT of the undesirables in a body (that was the focus of the last point), but those who have done you harm! Gordon Fee noting the distinction between this word and another common word for "patience" in the Bible, ὑπομονή (*hupomonē*), wrote this:

...in contrast to *hupomonē*, this verb (*makrothymeite*) carries the sense of 'suffering long' with regard to someone else. It is therefore the appropriate word to use regarding human relationships, while *hupomonē* moves in the direction of enduring difficult situations. (Fee, 2009, p. 211)

The word used here, μακροθυμέω (*makrothumeō*), references that quality of self-restraint that does not abandon a person in difficult circumstances or give up on a person under trial. It is the ability to be inconvenienced or taken advantage of over and over again and yet not

becoming upset or angry! Chrysostom, the early church Father, said:

It is a word which is used of the man who is wronged and who has it easily in his power to avenge himself but will never do it. (MacArthur, 1984, p. 338)

With the coming of Christ, this was a calling and virtue only found in the Kingdom of God and so only amongst God's people. For, get this: in the Greco-Roman world, self-sacrifice and non-avenging patience were considered weaknesses, unworthy of the noble man or woman. In fact, Aristotle spoke of vengeance as if it were a virtue!³ Yet we must see, "patience" is the opposite of this. Its primary concern is for the welfare of others, not itself. As such, it is more willing to be taken advantage of than to take advantage, much less to avenge. In this regard, we see it exemplified by:

1. Paul, 2 Corinthians 6:6.
2. Stephen, toward his persecutors as he took his last breath, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" (Acts 7:60)

This is amazing! As he lay dying under the painful, crushing blows of the stones, Stephen's concern was for his murderers rather than for himself! He suffered-long with those who attacked him! In fact, what better example could there be than that of Christ

3. Our Lord! Although He is God and so sustains the world by the word of His power (and so could have snuffed it out simply by speaking a word), nevertheless He subjected Himself to its cruel mockery, staged trial, taunts and jeers, and ultimately crucifixion! Yet what do we read? We read of Peter speaking of the patience of Paul;

1 Peter 2:20b-23. "...If when you do what is right and suffer *for it* you patiently endure it, this *finds* favor with God. For you have been called for this purpose [one of the reasons you were saved was so that you could patiently endure all things! Why?], since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting *Himself* to Him who judges righteously." - what an example for the body of Christ!

This is what Kingdom living looks like! In fact, we see it in God Himself! From the time Adam and Eve disobeyed Him, God has been continually wronged and rejected by those He made in His own image. Even in the face of mocking rebellion, God withholds His punishment until the time! In this regard, I love the interaction between Robert Ingersoll and Theodore Parker. Robert Ingersoll, the well-known atheist of the nineteenth century, often would stop in the middle of his lectures against God and say, "I'll give God five minutes to strike me dead for the things I've said." He then would use the fact that he was not struck dead as proof that God did not exist. Theodore Parker said of Ingersoll's claim, "And did the gentleman think he could exhaust the patience of the eternal God in five minutes?" (MacArthur, 1984, p. 338)

If our holy Creator is patient with such sinful creatures, how much more should His unholy creatures be patient with each other? Notice how Paul focuses our passage: “Be patient with all men.” It is tempting to take this in reference to everyone in our path; yet that is NOT the reference here. Though it could easily have referenced all men (we are called to exercise this love to all), nevertheless in our current context Paul is NOT talking about those outside the body of Christ, BUT those inside the body (he doesn’t discuss the Thessalonian’s calling to outsiders until the end of v. 15)! As that is the case, “all men” therefore must reference all-kinds of men and women in the body of Christ:

- The sinning.
- The rude.
- The selfish.
- The idle.
- The fainthearted.
- The weak.

The call here is NOT to allow the rebellion or negative circumstances of brother or sister to exhaust our love and care. RATHER, we are to exhibit compassion and love for them! Imagine how the church would be transformed if we exemplified this as a church body toward one another!

One of Abraham Lincoln’s earliest political enemies was Edwin M. Stanton. He called Lincoln a “low cunning clown” and “the original gorilla” (it sounds like someone we know in the political realm today)! He would say, “It was ridiculous for people to go to Africa to see a gorilla when they could find one easily in Springfield, Illinois.” Lincoln never responded to the slander, but when, as president, he needed a secretary of war, he chose Stanton! When his incredulous friends asked why, Lincoln replied, “Because he is the best man.”

Years later, as the slain president’s body lay in state, Stanton looked into the coffin and said through his tears, *“There lies the greatest ruler of men the world has ever seen.”* Stanton’s animosity was defeated by Lincoln’s long-suffering spirit! (McGee, 2016)

God can and will do the same in any church body that gives itself to the Lord! In fact, it should be no surprise to discover that the exhortations we have seen this morning are extensions of the Fruit of the Spirit.

Galatians 5:22-23, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.”

Paul is very clear here... if we are going to manifest the fruit of the spirit- and so exercise “patience” and “kindness” to one another- two things must be true of us.

Galatians 5:24, “Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”

We must be ones whose “flesh has been crucified with its passions and desires” - which speaks NOT ONLY of salvation, BUT a growing dependence upon Christ and His word whereby we die to self and live to Christ! This brings us to a second prerequisite:

Galatians 5:25, “If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.”

This reflects the daily practice of submitting ourselves to the word of God with a view to having it drive us in our thinking, desiring, and doing! This involves

- Reading and understanding the word of God!
- Contemplating the impact that a particular truth or verse ought to have in our lives.
- Repenting of whatever sinful desire, motive, or inclination that may be tripping us up!
- Praying for God to effect a word-driven change in our lives!
- And going out with full purpose of walking with Christ according to His word!

Truly, we will not embody the exhortation of this passage in our own strength! We can and will only be able to do it by the grace of God and the strengthening of the Holy Spirit!

Works Cited

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End Note(s)

¹ Cf. John MacArthur, *Romans*, MNTC, p. 35.

² Its opposite is *oxothymeō* translated as “short tempered.”

³ MacArthur wrote, “Aristotle, for example, taught that the great Greek virtue was refusal to tolerate insult or injury and to strike back in retaliation for the slightest offense. Vengeance was a virtue.” (*1 Corinthians*, MNTC, p. 338)