LOOKING AT THE METAPHOR OF CHRIST’S BODY IN
1 CORINTHIANS 12

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Introduction

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul draws an analogy between the members of a physical body and the church, which also has many members, but nevertheless constitutes the single Body of Christ. He sets out the basis for this correspondence between the physical body and Christ in v. 12:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so also is the Christ.

There is an ongoing debate as to whether Paul’s words, οὐτὸς καὶ ὁ Χριστός, introduce the notion of the body of Christ as a metaphor for the church, or whether Paul here is making an ontological statement to the effect that the church is the earthly body of the risen Lord. Robinson is wary of using the term “metaphor” with reference to the body of Christ because Christians “are in literal fact the risen organism of Christ’s person in all its concrete reality.” Käsemann, too, denies that Paul was simply using a beautiful metaphor: “the exalted Christ really has an earthly body, and believers with their whole being are actually incorporated into it and have therefore to behave accordingly.”

1 Earlier drafts of this paper were presented at New Testament Seminars in the London School of Theology and at the University of Oxford; I am grateful to members of both groups for their comments.


On the other hand, there is no denying that the metaphor of the body politic was well-known in the ancient world, the best-known example being the tale of Menenius Agrippa, in which the members of the body conspire together to withhold food from the stomach, because they are fed up with the stomach taking from them all the time and apparently giving nothing back. When the hand refuses to pass food to the mouth and the mouth refuses to open to accept it and the teeth refuse to chew the food so that it can be digested, the effect on the body is that all the members become weak and exhausted, not having realised that the stomach played its vital part in processing the food it received to invigorate the blood. Agrippa’s tale was designed to show the masses that the ruling classes, who appeared to be taking from them all the time, were in fact essential to the wellbeing of society, and the telling of this tale averted a revolt.

Mitchell draws attention to parallels in ancient political writings and concludes that, in 1 Corinthians 12, Paul reworks a common political metaphor and applies it to the church in Corinth. Yet, although there is no denying that the metaphor of the body politic was commonly used in the ancient world, that in itself does not conclusively demonstrate that Paul’s language is metaphorical in 1 Corinthians 12: on the basis of an analysis of the metaphor in Stoic writings, Lee concludes that,

Paul moves beyond the use of analogy of the body as a way of describing the function of believers to a statement of the Corinthians’ identity as the body of their Lord.

However, the ensuing verses point away from reading v. 12c as an ontological statement: the metaphorical reading is to be preferred because it is the visual image of the body that is developed in vv. 14–26. As Perriman puts it,