

**Body theology, the body politic, and the upside-down kingdom**  
**--Phil Stoltzfus**  
**Faith Mennonite Church, July 27, 2008**

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Ephesians 4:1-16

I Corinthians 12:12-26

Today we have beautiful texts that fit in with our continuing theme this summer on “the things that make for peace.” For all his emphasis on grace and the spiritual nature of Christian life, Paul sure does like to talk about bodies quite a bit. Our bodies are God’s temple, he writes earlier in I Corinthians. They are holy and we should glorify God in our bodies by taking care of them and living lives of authenticity. The church is also a body. We are advised to be accountable to one another, to “discern the body” before celebrating communion, and to think of the church body as reflective of the risen body of Christ.

In today’s passages, Paul’s body theology becomes a parable for the diversity of gifts in the body of Christ. There are so many divisions and walls that could divide us as a community, as a congregation. But one way that we can enhance our solidarity with one another is to appreciate our differences. We don’t all have to be expert at singing in four parts, or picking strawberries, or visiting people, or making food, or working with kids, or serving on committees. We don’t even all have to agree on every little detail of our mission, our confession of faith, our theology, our ethics, our spirituality, or our particular form of discipleship. Such differences, in fact, make us a stronger and more mature body—a body able to grow just like a living organism.

Furthermore, I think Paul is right in arguing that this broad, liberal policy of diversity is possible for us to hold precisely because of his theology of one-ness. The Early Church is not to have a lot of different gods, different centers of value; rather, there is one God that whom we worship, one savior Jesus Christ, one ritual of baptism we all hold in common, one sense of the wholeness and unity of all creation, which came from God and which will be gathered back up into God in the fullness of time, through the Spirit and the bond of peace. This is a wonderful passage, a beautiful analogy and wise advice for encouraging us to maintain the virtues of humility, gentleness, patience, love, and peace among one another in our interpersonal and corporate relationships, especially when the going gets tough.

But I’m troubled today by something in this passage from Ephesians. I want to tell you about some of my thoughts on it because maybe some of you have wondered about it, too. In 4:16, the writer starts getting too “heady” for me: “we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” who promotes the growth of the whole body. I can see why, for a Greek audience, you’d want to emphasize the head, the seat of intellect and reason and soul, which can make decisions for and keep control over the rest of the lower parts of the body. But if you read ahead in chapters five and six, this head theme becomes “wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord, for the husband is head of the wife just as Christ is head of the church, the body of which he is the savior.” And similarly, children are to obey parents and slaves obey their masters.

So a hierarchical Christology of the headship of the body becomes a justification in Ephesians for conventional, hierarchical, aristocratic modes of sexism and classism in the Greco-Roman Empire.

Now I can understand why the writer of Ephesians might want to emphasize a high, even hierarchical Christology. The Ephesians are worshipping all sorts of other gods, spirits, mysteries, principalities, powers, and dominions. Against this, chapter one states that Christ has been seated in the heavenly places far above all of these other powers. Christ holds the ultimate power and we are to be empowered in Christ as we, in chapter six, take up our spiritual armor in the task of bringing to fulfillment the gospel of peace. But if you just look at this text at face value, it seems as though the author has gone too far with the headship idea, projecting it out as a relationship model for our economic life, our family life, and, presumably, our congregational life as well. Our congregational body, familial body, and body politic are fashioned, so the argument goes, in a hierarchical command-and-control structure. You need to find your “place” in the structure and get in line. Obey. Because that’s what will keep the body healthy. Right?

Well, the parallel passage about body theology and spiritual gifts back in I Corinthians 12 isn’t “heady” at all. It doesn’t say anything about heads or headship or Christ as the head. As a matter of fact, the point of the passage is to highly qualify all hierarchical talk. “Those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our [by the values of the world] less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.” So the main point of the body theology here in Corinthians, of using the body metaphor to talk about the things that make for peace, is roughly the opposite of the point in Ephesians. Instead of a vertical chain of command, we have here an interdependent corporate structure that favors those at the “bottom” in order to ensure that all are cared for equally.

Now scholars will tell us that the earliest manuscripts we have of Ephesians don’t contain the first verse of chapter one, which is the one with Paul’s name on it, and that the language of the letter is more reflective of a generation later than Paul, around the end of the first century. But regardless of whether this is the authentic voice of Paul reflecting the earliest house churches, or a later writer in the style of Paul reflecting a more hierarchical outlook, the book is still sacred scripture, and authoritative for us. So perhaps the way to say this is that the “head” or Christ element in our body is precisely that which, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians, lifts up what society tells us is the least among us—what the Empire thinks is least honorable or respectable. We want to care for one another equally in our community, and that means we much give particular attention to those who have for whatever reason been left out or are on the margins of society. Our body is the upside-down kingdom, the upside-down empire. Why? Because that’s the model that Jesus left for us about how to be in the world, about how to be recipients of the gift of God’s grace and to use our gifts to be leaders in changing the world from the bottom up, as Jesus did.

Now I want to ask you a question. I need some body work, and maybe you can help me with it. Does the image of the body of Christ *only refer to the church*? Is it only looking inward? Paul and the writer of Ephesians give us a cosmic, universal perspective

when talking about the body. All things—*ta panta* in the Greek—will be brought into the kingdom, and God will be all in all. So when we look at the entirety of our body politic, the entirety of the new creation that is coming into being through Christ, *who are the “weaker,” “dishonored,” and “disrespected” members of our community?*

Last month I taught a class at United Theological Seminary in the Twin Cities called “Globalization at Our Doorstep.” As part of this class we went on a weekend retreat to Shalom Hill Farm, a retreat center located on a farmstead in Windom, Minnesota, which is near Worthington. The director, Mark Yackel-Jeuleen, helped us learn about rural ministry, about how corporate globalization affects our agriculture and trade policies, and about immigration in rural Minnesota. We learned that the homestead, being near Mountain Lake, had originally been settled by a Mennonite from the Ukraine. It was tough at that time working the land from nothing—in fact, he had to sell the farm after only a few years. And it was evidently quite a multicultural experience to live in Minnesota then, with people from many different countries, speaking different languages, living here.

We learned that it is still a multicultural reality. Mark took us to a meat-packing plant in Windom, and we looked through a window at a large warehouse space in which some 200 people were working cutting beef carcasses apart. The carcasses would come in one by one, hooked to an overhead chain. Workers with chainsaw-like equipment would cut the big pieces off, then there were long conveyor belts, and workers stood shoulder to shoulder feverously working to cut apart the pieces, package them up in white paper, and send them on to the grocery stores. And almost all the workers that I saw were evidently foreigners, from Mexico, Guatemala, the Philippines, East Africa, and so on. We learned that a plant similar to this in Postville, IA, a larger plant but one that, like in Windom, produced some kosher beef, had been raided back in May by the federal government. 390 workers were arrested and held in the cattle yard in Waterloo—it was the largest immigration raid in US history. People come here to Minnesota to do this kind of backbreaking work at wages considerably lower than what we would have been paying US citizens to do the same work 25 years ago. They pay today around \$9 per hour, without medical or other benefits. There are thousands of foreign workers, many of them undocumented, that keep afloat our food processing industries. This is the structure that we have in place here in Minnesota that allows me to go buy and enjoy affordable food from my local grocery store, to keep my body healthy. But is the larger body politic, the larger body of Christ, truly healthy with this going on? What would Paul say? You can draw your own conclusions.

Brothers and sisters, we need to do some body work. In our congregation, *and* in our larger, interconnected global community. We need to continually ask, What part of our body is being neglected? Not because we can then adopt some sort of heroic, patronizing, servanthood attitude toward “helping people.” No. We ask this question because it is precisely those parts of our body needing attention that show us the location where God is at work, that show us where Christ is present, and that show us where the renewing movement of the Spirit is alive among us. Amen.