

Metaphor or Reality?

John R Gavazzoni

Scripture, hymns, gospel songs, worship choruses and literature in general abound with metaphors; a metaphor being "a figure of speech in which a term or phrase is applied to something to which it is not literally applicable, in order to suggest a resemblance, as A Mighty Fortress is our God" (The American College Dictionary).

I once was involved, via the internet, in a lively--do not infer hostile--dialogue with an evangelical scholar who, in turn, was deeply involved in ecumenical dialogue with Roman Catholics even at the Bishop-level. He shared with me, in detail, much of what he was experiencing as he interacted with layman, priests and at least one R.C. bishop and it served to stimulate a very dynamic exchange of perspectives between the two of us.

As we discussed fellowship among believers across denominational lines, of course the subject of the body of Christ came up and all that might be implied by the Apostle Paul's references to the same. In the course of our cyberspace communication, I attempted to convince him that in the Apostle Paul's references to the body of Christ, he had in mind a real body, whereas my theologian-friend, a dear, mostly open-hearted brother, insisted that Paul was speaking metaphorically.

I understood him to mean that Paul simply found that the human body with its structure and workings was a handy illustration of how the members of the universal fellowship of believers ought to relate to their Lord and to one another.

I'm sure that he believed that the body of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, was a real body, the body that touched and healed the multitudes and bore our sins on Calvary's cross. No one recognized as an evangelical scholar would dare to suggest otherwise. We need not go any further than the apostolic testimony, "Who His own self bore our sins in His own body on the tree..." Actual body; actual tree (cross). Enough said, subject closed, unless one views the whole

record of the historical Jesus as a mythological allegory rife with metaphors and similes.

But it probably is very common within the ranks of evangelical scholars, as it was in the case of my friend, to think of the body of Christ, corporately speaking, as one of the many metaphors used to describe spiritual characteristics of God, Christ, and the people of God. And most certainly many metaphors were employed by the Spirit in inspiring the writers of scripture. We do not really believe, for instance, that the people of God are, literally, salt, as in, "ye are the salt of the earth," nor do we think of Christ as a literal door and His disciples, as literal sheep, grazing on literal grass, as in, "I am the Door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved and shall go in and out, and find pasture."

But references to the body of Christ---well, there we have an entirely different matter. Jesus Christ was not a door, and we, his disciples are not salt, nor are we sheep who graze on grass in pastures. But Jesus Christ lived an actual bodily life. In Him, dwells the fulness of Deity BODILY and His church is "...His body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all." When scripture speaks of us, for instance, as the temple of God, there is clearly a metaphorical element for we are not a tabernacle composed of wood, gold, animal skins, etc., or a temple made of stone.

But Jesus, in drawing away attention and preoccupation from the stone temple which was a mere shadow of the reality, drew attention to the temple which WAS His body. It was not His body which was a shadow of reality, it was the stone temple, that could be called a non-verbal metaphor for the real temple, His own bodily Person.

So I raise the question: If we can agree that the body of Christ, in the corporate sense, is as real a body as body of the Lord Jesus, then are we to understand that the body of Jesus that arose from the dead is generically distinct from the corporate body of Christ.

In other words, we know that the resurrected Jesus came forth from the tomb and went on to be glorified, that is, glorified completely in spirit, soul and body. What is the relationship between that glorified

body and the corporate entity that we Christians refer to as the body of Christ? In a word, are there two bodies of Christ?

It is my firm conviction, that the apostle Paul answers that question in Ephesians when he writes, "There is one body...."

Allow me at this point to rehearse with you what I believe to be at the heart of the economy of God: In the incarnation of Christ we see God's complete solidarity with mankind, including physical identity and solidarity, He being the totality of humanity, as the Son of Man, as He is the fulness of Deity as the Son of God. He, enduring the entire scope and depth of the human experience with and for us, became in the eon, God's perfect Manhood, translating the eternal perfection of His Personhood into the eon.

The ministry of the Holy Spirit is to show, declare, reveal and transmit to us in this world, the Reality of Christ in all His glorious perfection. I encourage my reader's to study the 14th thru 17th chapters of the Gospel of John to find the truth of which I write. Christ is all that God has to give to us, and He has been and is given to us in and by the Spirit, so that we can enjoy Christ as our life on earth in time as He reigns now eternally above all the heavens, since He has come to us in the Holy Spirit. John, in his epistle, extrapolates the implications of what he recorded in his gospel, saying, "As He is, so are we in this world."

But you might say, "I can't see the perfection of connectedness and relationship of the members of the church, Christ's body, as folks could see Christ's Jesus- body" Please, understand that when He singularly walked on earth, it was, as it were, in seed-form. He was the Seed that was to bring forth that quantitatively greater, but generically and qualitatively identical body, the church. Though I have pleaded with you to see this reality, it will be the Spirit of Truth who shall, without fail, cause us to see, to discern, the body of Christ so that it will no longer be said of us, that we are "not discerning the Lord's body."

Possibly in my next article we can consider whether or not there is anything metaphorical in the biblical phrase, "born of God." Does God really give birth? Does "Son of God" merely speak of a wonderfully close, intimate relationship with God in a merely metaphorical way?

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