

Paul's "Body" Metaphor in the books of Romans and 1 Corinthians and its relevance to Churches in Nigeria

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INTRODUCTION

One of the prominent figures of speech that Pauline corpus is saturated with is the use of metaphor.⁸³ It is difficult to think of any metaphor Paul uses to describe the Church, with the possible exception of the metaphor of the Church as the bride of Christ, which has captured the imagination of Christians over the centuries more completely than the image of the Church as the "body of Christ."

One is at the verge of questing for the usage of the body metaphor in the New Testament. When the New Testament calls the church "*the body of Christ*" are we to understand the church is the literal physical flesh and blood body of Jesus Christ, or the metaphorical (representative) body of Christ? Even when Jesus says "*I am the door*" are we to understand He is a literal wooden carved door or is He a metaphorical door to heaven?⁸⁴ The failure to distinguish the literal from the metaphorical and properly understand what is a metaphor, and how metaphors are to be properly used has produced confusion and false doctrines. The major problem this research seeks to address in this work is the misinterpretation of the "use of body

⁸³ Philipp Scot, *The Figures of Speech in the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987), 36.

⁸⁴ Stephen Carvy, *New Testament: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1959), 25.

metaphor” in the writings of Paul and to relate it to the current state of the church.

In Pauline theology, the vacuum or space that metaphoric expressions occupied cannot be sidetracked. The concern of this succinct work is to look into the “body metaphor” in 1 Corinthians and Romans and how it affects the church of God in Nigerian shore. However, the researcher selects some passages of the two books to enhance adequate and concise handling of the work. In view of this, it is cardinal to explain the figure of speech used as J.B Lawal opines that definition gives clarity to statements.⁸⁵

Metaphor Explained

E.W. Bullinger defines a metaphor by comparing it to a simile: The simile says, “All we like sheep” while the metaphor declares that “we are the sheep of his pasture.” While, therefore the word “resembles” marks the simile: “represents” is the word that marks the metaphor.⁸⁶ The simile conveys resemblance whereas the metaphor conveys representation. The term “body” is found often in Scripture. It usually refers to an actual body that is, a person physical body. But there are a few times when the term “body” does not refer to a person’s physical body, but is used in a metaphorical sense.

Olajide avers that Metaphor is not a mere matter of words, not just based on similarity, not just a feature of poetic or rhetorical language, and not deviant. Rather, metaphor is conceptual, not merely linguistic.⁸⁷ Congruent to this, Allen posits that metaphor (linguistically) depicts comparison this is opposite simile that uses

⁸⁵ J.B. Lawal, "Poverty and Hiv/Aids" *ETSI Journal* J.B. Lawal, (edt) Vol. 7 (Ilorin Nigeria: Amazing Grace Press, 2012), 2.

⁸⁶ E.W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (London : SMC Press, 1993), 733.

⁸⁷ Michael ‘deji Olajide, *The Use of Metaphor in Pauline Theology in Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* www.iiste.org, Vol.5, No.14, 2015, 51.

‘like and has.’⁸⁸ To buttress further, Webster puts it thus; “it is a figure of speech in which a word of a phrase is used for another of which it is an image.⁸⁹ In the same vein, Benjamin Keach from another perspective looks at metaphor to be a “trope,” when a word is translated in from the proper and genuine signification to another less proper.⁹⁰ “Trope” here has to do with a word or phrase used in the figurative sense. The afore enunciated are iota of many scholarly definitions of the term metaphor in general.

Bullinger defines the restrictions placed upon metaphorical representations when he says,

Let it then be clearly understood that a metaphor is confined to a distinct affirmation that one thing is another thing, owing to some association or connection in the uses or effects of anything expressed or understood. The two nouns themselves must both be mentioned, and are always to be taken in their absolute literal sense, or else no one can tell what they mean.⁹¹

From the above, it is evident that, metaphor bothers on comparison and comparison takes place when there are two things whether animate or inanimate.

The Body Metaphor Passages

It is of great importance to explicitly look into passages that the “body metaphor” run through. Though the major emphasis here is on “body metaphor”; here is a need to mention some of the passages in the Pauline letters (generally) as said earlier. As far as research reveals,

⁸⁸ Charles Allen, *Metaphoric Expressions in Pauline Letters* (London: SMC Press, 1989), 25.

⁸⁹ Geddes & Grosset, *Webster’s Universal Dictionary & Thesaurus* (Glasgow : Geddes and Grosset Publishers, 2003), 307.

⁹⁰ Benjamin Keach, *Preaching from the Types and Metaphors of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1972), 36.

⁹¹ Bullinger, 735.

these are the verses or passages in which the term “body” is used in that metaphorical sense.

Romans 12:4-5	Ephesians 5:23
1 Corinthians 10:16-17	Ephesians 5:30
1 Corinthians 11:27-29	Colossians 1:18
1 Corinthians 12:12-27	Colossians 1:24
Ephesians 1:23	Colossians 2:19
Ephesians 3:6	Colossians 3:15
Ephesians 4:4-16	Hebrews 13:3

The word “body” is used many times in Scripture, often referring to a physical body.⁹² In this paper, the place of interest of the researcher is in those metaphorical usages of the term “body” those times when we usually refer to it as “the body of Christ” even if the “of Christ” is not actually part of the passage. However, it is limited to the book of Romans and 1 Corinthians.

The terms “body of Christ” have but two clear applications in the New Testament; (1) the literal physical body of Christ; and (2) the church as the figurative/metaphorical or *representative* body of Christ. The Greek word of ‘body’ is σῶμα which means σῶμα which originally has the connotation of a human being or animal. It could mean either a dead body, corpse (Matt. 27:32, Luk. 17:37, Acts 9:4). This could also mean a living body (Matt. 5:29, 6:25, Mk. 14:22).⁹³

According to Paul, there are various kinds of bodies especially in 1 Corinthians 15:35, 37). He metaphorically used the body to represent or picture the church; in other words, Christ’s body. Obviously, the church is not the literal body of Christ but only represents it. The use of the body metaphor runs through the listed Pauline Epistles listed above.

⁹² Ralph D. Winter and Roberta H. Winter, *The Word Study New Testament* (Wheaton: Tyndale Publishers, n.d.), 102.

⁹³ Bibleworks 8.

In other words, this means the characteristics being transferred figuratively from the first to the second noun are those qualities that literally characterize the first noun. For example, “the body of Christ” refers to the physical body of Jesus Christ and those qualities that literally characterize that body.⁹⁴ One needs to ask that what are some literal characteristics found in his physical body that can be transferred metaphorically to the church? The physical body of Christ is visible and local and it is composed of a diversity of members performing diverse functions but all working in unity under the direction/authority of the head.⁹⁵ It can convey all these things as well as organization and harmony. However, such characteristics as universality or invisibility are not qualities that literally characterize his physical body and therefore cannot be metaphorically conveyed or transferred to the church as the metaphorical “*body*” of Christ.

Although there are metaphors such as “*wind*” and “*invisible*” that express invisibility, and there are terms such as “*whole world*” “*heaven and earth*” that express universality, however, such terms are never once used to describe the church or used as a metaphor for the church. Every single term and metaphor used in Scripture for the church is by nature without the ability to convey either universality or invisibility. Every single one! These facts should be regarded as quite strange if the true nature of the church was invisible and universal! However, if the true nature of the church is local and visible then these things are very supportive facts.

There is need to refer the fact that Apostle Paul was not just a mere personality in Judaism but a figure to reference.⁹⁶ His distinctive usage of figurative expression is of great acknowledgement. His original use of the image of the Church as a body is, of course, a good

⁹⁴ Charles L. Hunt, *The Body of Christ: Separating Myth from Metaphor* (New York : Grace Baptist Church Printing Outreach, Florence, 2006), 750.

⁹⁵ J.J.S. Perowne (edt), *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Cambridge : University Press, 1907), 34.

⁹⁶ Richard N. Longnecker, *The Ministry and Message of Paul* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), 42.

deal simpler than the corporate theory the western Church erected on the Pauline foundation.⁹⁷ The Church, as argued by Paul, is a body with many members, whose spiritual gifts and structure have been determined by God.⁹⁸ No member or gift, however lowly, is dispensable; each member and gift is dependent on the gifts and graces of the whole community. If one member suffers, the whole body suffers; if one member rejoices, the whole body rejoices.⁹⁹

Body Metaphor in Romans

There is need to quickly establish the fact that the origin of the church in Rome is historically hidden or obscure.¹⁰⁰ This fact is supported by Bruce in his book *Romans: An Introduction and Commentary* where he said it emphatically that Paul was not the founder of the church.¹⁰¹ Also, Barrett puts it that the Roman church fell outside the scope of the apostle's apostolic labour.¹⁰² Thus, one could hold tenaciously to the obscurity of the origin of the church in Rome based on several scholars' argument. However, his epistle to the Romans made a great wave in that dispensation.¹⁰³ The church had been established before the epistle was written. According to Hoyt, the first instance (in canonical order) of the metaphorical use of "body"¹⁰⁴ is found in Romans 12, within a passage in which Paul is writing about spiritual gifts:

⁹⁷ Ibid, 45.

⁹⁸ F.F. Bruce, *Paul : Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids : W. B. E. Publishing Company, 1981), 74.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 74.

¹⁰⁰ James M. Stifler, *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary Logical and Historical* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1960), 11.

¹⁰¹ F.F. Bruce, *Romans: An Introduction and Commentary* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1971), 11.

¹⁰² C.K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1957), 6.

¹⁰³ C.K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1971), 1.

¹⁰⁴ Herman A. Hoyt, *Romans : The Gospel of God's Grace* (Chicago : Moody Press, 1973), 32.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. (Romans 12:3-8 ESV).

Here, Paul's first mention of this great doctrine of the body of Christ, a doctrine which he alone, among the apostles, sets forth, he being the one chosen "minister of the church" as to its real, heavenly, corporate character.¹⁰⁵ He made a direct comparison of our human bodies having many members; so we are in Christ. Each has different function as do the members of the literal human body.¹⁰⁶

Some have taken this passage literal, but Paul does not actually refer to a "body of Christ" (that is, "Christ's body") in this passage. Instead, he says that we are a body "in Christ," which is different. According to Paul, he and his readers are a "body" together because they are all in Christ together. So, this appears to be a more general metaphorical use of "body," much like we find in other literature of

¹⁰⁵ W.R. Newell, *Roman : Verse by Verse* (Chicago : Moody Press, 1938), 459.

¹⁰⁶ Kenneth, S. Wuest, *Romans in the Greek New Testament for the English Reader* (Grand Rapids : W.M.B. Eerdmans, 1956), 209-210.

the same time period. “Body,” in this case, refers to a “community” or “corporate personality.”¹⁰⁷

As a matter of fact, there is no suggestion in this passage of Jesus’ relationship to the “body.” Paul does not refer to Jesus as the head of the body, which he will state in other passages. Instead, he only says that the body exists because “we” are “in Christ.” In this passage, then, the “body” metaphor reminds the readers of their connection to one another because they are “in Christ.” The focus is on their unity with one another and their connection to one another. Similarly, Paul uses the “body” metaphor in this passage to remind his reader that their unity is made of a collection of diverse (different) parts. Philip Strach notes that ‘their diversity does not damage or deny their unity.’¹⁰⁸ It is conspicuous and we will find that Paul often uses the “body” metaphor to reinforce this idea of unity with diversity. The body in this sense connotes oneness of believers (Christians). This is what Wilson called harmony of the body of Christ.¹⁰⁹

Consequently, in Romans 12:4-5, Paul uses the “body” metaphor to remind his readers that they are a corporate unity or community in Christ with one another even though they are different (specifically, even though they have been given different gifts).

Body Metaphor in 1 Corinthians

C.K. Barrett opines that there is no epistle in all of his writings which he (Paul) did not deal with the issue of deviation or perversion of Christian faith save Philemon.¹¹⁰ Thus, the discussion on the unity of

¹⁰⁷ Robert Kirt, *The Body Metaphor in Paul: Familiar and Yet unique* (London : SMC Press, 1988), 25.

¹⁰⁸ Philip Strach, *The Body of Christ* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2007), 57.

¹⁰⁹ Geoffrey B. Wilson, *Romans : A Diggest of Reformed Comment* (Edinburg: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 1976), 201.

¹¹⁰ C.K. Barrett, *Essay on Paul* (London: SPCK, 1982), 1.

the body of Christ is of prominent importance. The next instance (in canonical order) of a metaphorical use of “body” is found in,

1 Corinthians 10:16-17 – The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. (1 Corinthians 10:16-17 ESV).

According to Strobel, the term translated “participation” above (twice) is the same term often translated “fellowship” or “sharing,”¹¹¹ and it is a very important term in this context. In this section of his letter, Paul is distinguishing between fellowship with Christ and fellowship with idols/demons. While the first use of the term “body” above (in 1 Corinthians 10:16) could refer to either Christ’s physical body (paralleled with “blood”), or it could refer to a corporate unity or community as we saw in Romans 12:4-5. However, the second occurrence of the term (in 1 Corinthians 10:17) seems to refer to the corporate unity or community.

Again, there is a focus on the “many” and “one” characteristic of the Christian community, which is associated with the sharing of the body/blood of Christ. Without going into detail (which he will do in chapter 12), Paul still recognizes the diversity among the parts of the community, even though he also recognizes that they are unified – one.

The next occurrences of the term “body” are found in,

1 Corinthians 11 – Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of

¹¹¹ Lee Strobel, *New Testament Message* (Italy: Fortress Publications, 1987), 48.

the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. (1 Corinthians 11:27-29 ESV).

Both of the instances of the term “body” above could refer to the physical body of Jesus (paralleled with “blood” again). However, it is also possible that the second occurrence refers to the community in Christ, since the focus in the passage is the relationships (or lack thereof) among the believers in Corinth. However, either way, this passage does not give us much new information about metaphorical use of the term “body.”¹¹² Once again, though, we do not see Paul referring to a “body of Christ” as he buttress later in some other passages. Instead, if the term is used metaphorically in these passages (1 Corinthians 10-11), it is once again referring to the community of believers who are both diverse and also unified because of their participation in (fellowship with) Christ.

In addition, 1 Corinthians 12 contains the most extensive and most descriptive use of the “body” metaphor yet:

“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. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the

¹¹² Ibid, 52.

members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (1 Corinthians 12:12-27 ESV).

Of a truth, this passage is very interesting, jumping back and forth between referring to a physical body and a metaphorical body. In the previously considered section, Paul had been talking about the diversity of spiritual gifts and the unity of purpose in God. He begins the body references in 1 Corinthians 12:12 to illustrate this diversity in unity. In that verse, Paul refers to a physical body and the members of that physical body. Then, at the end of 1 Corinthians 12:12 ("And so it is with Christ"), Paul transitioned into the metaphorical use of "body" in 1 Corinthians 12:13. The Spirit baptizes (immerses) people into a body, referring once again to a corporate unity / community as before.

Beginning in 1 Corinthians 12:14 through 1 Corinthians 12:26, Paul again returns to the physical body illustration, further explaining what he meant in 1 Corinthians 12. In this long passage, he discusses the relationships to physical parts of a body to other physical parts of a body, and their mutual relationship to the body itself. Then, in 1

Corinthians 12:27, Paul returns to the metaphorical use of the term “body” calling the Corinthians by the phrase “body of Christ.” Thus, the descriptions previously of the relationships of physical members to a physical body were given in order to help the Corinthians understand their relationship to each other in Christ. Every member of the body is of unique and distinctive importance.¹¹³

So, most of the usages of the term “body” in this passage are not metaphorical but instead refer to a physical body for purposes of illustration. Only the occurrences of the term “body” in 1 Corinthians 12:13 and 1 Corinthians 12:27 refer to a metaphorical “body,” i.e., a community or corporate unity. The physical body illustration, however, are important in understanding the relationships among those who make up the community / corporate unity.

Although Paul uses the term “head” in 1 Corinthians 12:22, he does not use it in the sense of Christ being the “head of the body.” Instead, in this passage, “head” is simply used as another example of a member of the body, along with the hand, eye, ear, foot, etc. So, while this metaphorical body (community / corporate unity) is created by the Spirit and belongs to Christ (“body of Christ”), the metaphor is primarily used to indicate the relationship between the various members to one another and to the group as a whole. Nothing else is said about the members’ relationship to Jesus Christ or to the community’s relationship to Jesus Christ.

Consequently, in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, while we find out that the community is created by the Spirit and belongs to Christ, the “body” metaphor is once again primarily used to indicate how the individuals should relate to one another as a community (i.e., diversity in unity). Though many but must be united. This does not connote uniformity but unity.

¹¹³ Jerome Murphy- O’Connor, *1 Corinthians: New Testament Message* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier Publications, 1979), 38.

Conclusion

Base on the researcher's overview on "body metaphor", here are some of the things deduced:

1. The metaphorical use of "body" is primarily a Pauline metaphor (perhaps only a Pauline metaphor).
2. "Body" as used by Apostle Paul primarily refers to a group of believers as a community or corporate unity.
3. Typically, the "body" metaphor is used to emphasize the "unity" of a group in spite of the "diversity."
4. The "body" metaphor is often used during a discussion of spiritual gifts, which is related to the diversity/unity aspects of the group.
5. The heady/body relationship (i.e. "Christ is head of the body") is only used in a couple of instances when the author is illustrating Christ's rule or source for the body. (In the "body" metaphor, "head" does not always refer to Jesus Christ.)
6. In a couple of instances, the "body" metaphor is used to focus on close association and the sharing of suffering, joy, etc.
7. Also, in a couple of instances, the "body" metaphor illustrates how different people rely on one another (like parts of a body rely on the other parts). In other words, it indicates interconnectedness and interdependence of believers.
8. As with other metaphors (such as "yeast" or "lion"), it appears that the meaning if the "body" metaphor changes based on what the author is trying to communicate, illustrate, or emphasize. (Although the idea of a "community" seems to be consistent through each usage of the term "body.")

The Relevance of Paul's Body Metaphor to the Nigerian Churches

In the New Testament the term “body” is used metaphorically to refer to several different aspects of the Christian community. Paul attempts to forestall both pride and envy by stressing how vital each part of the body is to its proper functioning. An eye may seem more important than a foot until one needs to flee a burning building. A hand may seem more important than an ear until one attends a program (visual). All arguments about greater and lesser dignity, greater and lesser importance, are beside the point.

The eye has a function to fulfill that can be fulfilled by no other organ; but so does the foot. Every part of the body is essential to the whole and makes its own unique and irreplaceable contribution. One part is not superior to the other but corroborates another. Kwesi Brew a renowned novelist to this effect says “Christ’s body (church) must be saturated with love which is the most vital.”¹¹⁴ Mbiti opines that “I am because you are and because you are, I am.”¹¹⁵ No one can be an island. Jensen in the same trend emphasizes the importance of verse 5; “we are one body in Christ and individually, we are members of one another” which conveys the ideology of diversity in unity and unity in diversity.¹¹⁶ We cannot be independent of one another. The ‘body of Christ’ is like a ‘car’. Every part of the car is of significant importance. If the engine is good but has bad tyres, the car will not move. If the engine and the tyres are okay without fuel, no movement will be possible. Even if every other part of the car are in good condition and the minute part which is the plug is not fixed, the car’s ‘stability’ is marred.

¹¹⁴ Kwesi Brew, *Centralized Livelihood* (Italy : Fortress Press, 1989), 20.

¹¹⁵ John S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books Doubleday and Company, n.d.), 105.

¹¹⁶ Irving L. Jensen, *Do-it-Yourself Bible Studies: Romans* (California: San Bernardino, 1977), 90.

Consequently, no iota part of the body can efficiently function independent of the other. The researcher wishes to round this succinct work up with the Yoruba adage that says “igi kan kii da igbo se” meaning a tree does not make a forest. In relation to the “church” as Christ’s body, everyone is equal, and everyone must seek the betterment of others and for the glorification of the Head of the body which is Jesus. We need to note that it is the gift (and not the labored product of our own moral resolution) that unites us to Christ (as body) and so indissolubly to each other.

The “body of Christ” suggests “interdependence” in the church of God. Unfortunately today, most ecumenical pursue denominational goals even when it is at the detriment of the entire “body of Christ.” Majority of the 21st Century Christians especially in the Nigerian shore do not feel “injury to a member of the body of Christ as injury to all.” Perhaps because of little or no understanding of what the body metaphor used by Apostle Paul actually mean. There is a need to go back to the praxis aspect of theology not just the orthodoxy. We all have a volitional obligation to do what the Bible teaches. Christianity goes beyond studying; the application or the doing aspect of theology is very crucial (James 1:22).

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