

The Corporate Christ

by David Orton

<http://lifemessenger.org/the-corporate-christ/>

... the church, which is his body the fullness of him ...

Ephesians 1:23

Unity is not what we think it is! And, for that matter, neither is the church.

We think that if we have cooperation between the churches we have unity. Or, if we tolerate the differences of the other group we are making great strides. But the unity of the Spirit is so much more than mere cooperation or tolerance (as good as they are).

When Jesus prayed for the unity of those who would believe in him he said to the Father, *"I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me ..."* (Jn 17:22,23). The 'oneness' that Jesus is interested in is totally impossible, and therefore, fully supernatural. It flows out of the *glory* of the Father and the Son, is experienced in the heart of the believer, expressed through the redeemed community, and manifest to the world.

In considering this unity, do the Father and the Son merely tolerate each other, or cooperate 'for the sake of the kids' — for the salvation of the world? Of course not! They have been 'getting it on' from eternity—they delight in each other. In fact, Proverbs shows us that the pre-incarnate Christ was constantly 'rejoicing' in the Father's presence (Pro 8:30). It is significant that the Hebrew for 'rejoicing' in this text means, "to laugh in pleasure, to play, or to sport".

What an awesome unveiling of the nature of the triune God. God is love. This necessitates a unity of three in oneness—the unity of a *lover* (the Father), a *beloved* (the Son), and a *spirit of love* (the Holy Spirit). God is not utilitarian—he doesn't just use people and processes to get a job done. Unity is *who* God is—not a strategy to save the world. He is a person—a social being – in whose image we are made – who enjoys intimacy and relationships.

My point is this: unity is not a humanly organised process or event. Nor is it the means of getting mission done—it is neither merely toleration, nor cooperation for the sake of mission. Rather, it is the overflow of the glory of God himself—of his own being and nature. When Christ ascended he returned to the Father and to the glory they enjoyed before the world began (see Jn 17:5). It is this glory – the oneness of the Father and the Son – that was poured out on the day of Pentecost and in every subsequent visitation of the Spirit to the church. We just happen to be the fortunate bystanders who have enjoyed the spill-over of their partying. But more than 'bystanders'—we have been called to be actual *"partakers of the divine nature"* (see 2 Pet 1:4).

And so, unity is not discovered in our puny programming, but in being filled with the very fullness of God himself. This is what marks the church—it's not our systems and our structures. The church is *"his body...the fullness of him..."* (Eph 1:23).

Therefore, the church you now see is not the church that will be. A currently underground, but emerging church is being prepared in obscurity. It does not yet enjoy the plaudits of men and positions of honour on the world stage. You don't read about it in the denominational magazines or ministry journals. The Christian media does not promote it. Why? Because it is largely invisible. The natural man looks for human organisation and systems; for an edifice and for leadership structures; for visible evidences of worldly success. But the thing God is doing is of a different nature: it is self-deprecating and supernatural. All over the world God has his people, both inside *and* outside the visible structures of the church. No man will be able to get a handle on the thing that God is about to do. It will be so extensive in reach and intensive in power that no one leader or organisation will be able to lay claim to it. The credit will all be God's.

So, what is the secret to this emerging church—to what I call the "corporate Christ"?

It is, *"Christ in you the hope of glory"* (Col 1:27). This may sound just too simplistic for some. They will exclaim, *"Come on! Look at the incredible complexities of contemporary church life—we've got to respond to massive social shifts and develop a new technology of church if we're to succeed"*.

But the greatest breakthroughs of science, art, and technology are usually 'simple' at the core. I'm convinced it is the same in the spirit. All our 'church technology' will amount to nothing, in fact, be found to be "wood, hay, and stubble" if we do not recover the foundational principle. And there is only one foundation that can be laid, according to the apostle, and that is Christ (see 1 Cor 3:11). And we're not only talking here about the doctrine of Christ, of his person and work – as foundational as that is – but also about the indwelling presence of Christ by the Spirit.

Again, in the high-priestly prayer of Christ he brings it down to this: he has given us the 'glory' that we may be one as they are one. But what is this 'glory'? It is "*Christ in you*"—or in Jesus' words, "*I in them and you in me*" (Jn 17:23).

Assuming we are settled on the propositional content of Scripture, it comes down to the subjective and the personal. There is nothing abstract about this—it is the concrete reality of a relationship with God. But I'm not talking about having your 'quiet-time' – as crucial as that is – or fulfilling some unwritten rule of what a relationship with God might look like. I'm talking about the actual invasion of your inner-man by the Spirit of God, filling you with all the fullness of who he is. This is the true apostolic burden:

16 that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Ephesians 3:16–19 ESV

Without being filled with the "fullness of God" any 'unity' we may claim will be a sham and a lie. It will not be the product of the Spirit of God. And will inevitably have at its core the dynamics of Babel. It will have a human hand on it and will serve to enhance someone's profile.

Now, while the fullness of God – at its heart – is personal and individual it is also corporate. The 'you' of "Christ in *you* the hope of glory" is plural in the Greek. What does this mean? It implies that the revelation of the indwelling Christ in the heart of the individual believer is the fountainhead of unity. Because God is a 'unity' – the oneness of the Father and the Son – to be filled with the fullness of God is to be filled with unity himself. This is why every outpouring of the Spirit in renewal and revival always produces an overwhelming sense of unity and love.

And so, unity and love is not a means to an end. It is not the methodology of some city-reaching strategy—rather, it is the by-product of a meeting with God. Only in this way will we truly become "*the church, which is his body the fullness of him*".

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