

The Church Part 10: The Body Gathered as One Covenant Nation

Isaiah 56:6-8; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ephesians 4:11-16

© Rev. Nollie Malabuyo, September 3, 2023 (Big Springs Community Church)

Dear congregation of Christ: Nearing the end of this series on The Church, let us again review the nine lessons we have studied thus far. If we refer to The Church as a metaphorical place or structure, we may think of the Garden of Eden, the Ark that Noah built, the temple at Mount Zion, and the Lord's Vineyard. But if we think of The Church as a people, we recall Adam and Eve; Noah and His Family; Foreigners and Strangers like Abraham and His household; the Israelites as Redeemed from Slavery in Egypt, and as Wilderness Pilgrims; God's Holy Nation in the Promised Land; and the Flock of the Good Shepherd.

Today, we will meditate on one of the most familiar metaphors for the church: the Body of Christ. But before we embark on this study, let me tell a Reformation event that most of you probably never heard of. And this will also boost our confidence in the Reformed doctrine of the Lord's Supper which we will administer today.

In 1553, 15-year-old King Edward VI of English died with no heir to the throne. The most powerful man after the king was the king's chief minister, John Dudley, a Protestant. Who would then ascend to the throne? The next in line was Catholic Mary Tudor, daughter of Queen Catherine of Aragon, Henry VIII's first wife. But the Protestant John Dudley wanted to preserve England for the Protestants, so he arranged for his daughter-in-law, Lady Jane Grey, to become queen. If only for her intellect and classical education—she was fluent in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Italian—she was most qualified to be queen. So, on July 10, 1553, Lady Jane was crowned queen, but she became known as “The Nine Days' Queen.” Why? The Privy Council and the majority of the people supported Mary Tudor because she was the rightful heir to the throne. So, just nine days after Queen Jane was crowned, the Privy Council proclaimed Mary Tudor queen and imprisoned Lady Jane Grey. Mary then persecuted Protestants, executing 275, so she became known as “Bloody Mary.”

Before Lady Jane was beheaded, Mary sent her trusted Catholic adviser, John of Feckenham to the Tower of London to persuade her to recant her Protestant faith, and her rejection of the Catholic doctrine of the Lord's Supper. The Catholic church taught—and still teaches—that the bread and wine are mystically *transformed* into the body and blood of Christ. But the Reformers taught two main doctrines on this sacrament. One is the *memorial* view, held by most evangelicals today—that the Lord's Supper is merely a remembrance of the broken body and shed blood of Christ. The other one is the *real presence* view—that Christ is really present in the Lord's Supper, not physically, but spiritually by faith, and that the bread and wine actually *nourishes* us spiritually, again by faith. Here's part of the conversation between 17-year-old Lady Jane and John Feckenham:

Feckenham: What do you receive in that sacrament? Do you not receive the very body and blood of Christ?

Lady Jane: No, surely, I do not so believe. I think that at the supper I neither receive flesh nor blood, but bread and wine.

Feckenham: Why, did not Christ speak these words, “Take, eat, this is my body”?

Lady Jane: I grant he said so; and so he said, ‘I am the vine, I am the door’: but he is never the more the door nor the vine.

Feckenham: Why, is it not as possible that Christ by his power could make his body both to be eaten and broken, and to be born of a woman without man, as to walk upon the sea...?

Lady Jane: Yes truly. But where was Christ when he said, “Take, eat, this is my body”? Was he not at the table when he said so? He was at that time alive, and suffered not till the next day. What did he take but bread? What did he break but bread? Look, what he took he broke, and look, what he broke he gave, and look, what he gave they did eat; and yet, all this time he himself was alive, and at supper before his disciples, or else they were deceived.

Does this conversation remind you of another conversation? Though not as astonishing as 12-year-old Jesus discussing things of God with the Jewish teachers of the Law, 17-year-old Lady Jane Grey had more Biblical knowledge and wisdom than the Catholic adviser to the queen!

When we partake of the Lord’s Supper, we remember Paul’s words, *“Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread”* (1 Cor 10:17). We know that there is no direct connection between the body of Christ in the Lord’s Supper and the Body of Christ as the Church; only that we are united by faith in the one Bread from heaven. However, the church is the Body of Christ (Eph 1:22-23; 5:23; Col 1:24), and that this one Body is united in one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God (Eph 2:16; 3:6; 4:3-6). From the beginning, this Body is also united into one holy covenanted nation gathered by God. Therefore, our theme today is, **The Church Part 10: The Body Gathered as One Covenant Nation**, under two headings.

The Body Gathered as One Nation in an Earthly Promised Land

The whole Bible is the progressive revelation of God’s plan of salvation to all those whom he had chosen before the creation of the world. How did he reveal this plan? It was through his covenants with man: with Adam, to Noah, to Abraham, to Moses, to David, and finally with Christ.

In the beginning, at Paradise, God gathered Adam and Eve before him and covenanted with them. On the day they ate of the fruit of the forbidden tree, they will die. The converse is implied: if they passed this covenant test, they would attain eternal life. But they failed their probation and invoked God’s eternal wrath on them and all humankind. So God revealed to them right there in his holy garden his eternal plan to save some of their descendants whom he had chosen as his covenant people: a Son of the woman would crush Satan’s head by being himself “wounded” by that ancient serpent (Gen 3:15; Rev 12:9).

From Genesis Chapter 3, we turn to Chapters 6-9, where we learn that man descended into such wickedness that God decided to wipe out the whole human race by a flood. But there was a man, Noah, who was righteous and blameless before God. So God revealed his coming wrath to him, and his plan to save his family of eight through an ark that would withstand the coming deluge. After the flood, God covenanted with Noah with the same commandment to Adam to fill and tend the earth, and promising to never again destroy the earth by flood.

Turning to Chapters 12-17, we read about God calling a man named Abram to leave his home in a place called Ur of the Chaldees and go to a place unknown to him. By faith, Abram obeyed God, bringing his whole household to Canaan, where he lived in tents with his son Isaac and grandson Jacob and their households. God then covenanted with Abraham, promising him a multitude of descendants and their inheritance of the same land where he sojourned. Then in Genesis 37-50, we read about Jacob's family migrating to Egypt because there was a severe famine in Canaan. His son Joseph, because of his godly wisdom, then rose to become Pharaoh's vice-regent.

Fast forward to the book of Exodus, when 400 years later, the Israelites became slaves in Egypt. God then called Moses to lead his people the Israelites from slavery in Egypt to Mount Sinai. Before the mountain, God gathered the twelve tribes of Israel and covenanted with them, declaring them to be his "*treasured possession... a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*" (Exo 19:5-6). After 40 years of wilderness wanderings, they finally entered, conquered, and settled in the Promised Land, as God has promised their forefather Abraham.

However, for over eight centuries, from the days of the judges, to the kings, and to the prophets, Israel repeatedly fell into grievous sins and faithlessness. In the end, God's patience with his chosen nation ran out, so he sent the Babylonians to destroy the land and its temple. The conquerors then brought the most prominent Jewish citizens to Babylon as slaves.

For forty years before this destruction, the prophet Jeremiah warned Israel to repent of their covenant law-breaking and turn back to God, but all in vain. But all is not bad, for he also had good news. In Chapters 30-33, God revealed to him that he would make a new covenant with his broken people, and bring them back to the Promised Land. God promised the restoration of his people under a new covenant, a covenant unlike the old covenant that Israel broke. In this covenant, God would write his law on his people's hearts so they would remain faithful and obedient before him (Jer 31:31-34).

Jeremiah and the Jews then understood these covenant promises only in their near context—70 years in exile—after which God would restore them back to Canaan, "*Behold, I will gather them from all the countries to which I drove them in my anger and my wrath and in great indignation. I will bring them back to this place, and I will make them dwell in safety*" (Jer 32:37). And under Cyrus king of Persia, they were finally allowed to return to their homeland (Ezra 1:1-4).

But this *near fulfillment* of the regathering of the Jews back to their earthly Promised Land is merely a foretaste of a *far fulfillment* of another regathering.

The Body Regathered as One Nation in a Heavenly Promised Land

The prophet Jeremiah wrote that before he was even conceived in his mother's womb, the Lord already appointed him to be "*a prophet to the nations*" (Jer 1:5). So if we turn to Chapters 46-51, we read Jeremiah's prophecies of judgment against Egypt (46), Philistia (47), Moab (48), Ammon (49), the whole earth (49), and Babylon (50-51). They would be judged because of their violence against Israel. Therefore, from out of these nations, the Lord will gather his dispersed people once more.

God's purpose in creation was to dwell with his people and be their God right there in the garden. From the day that Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden, God set out to save and regather

his people into one holy nation. God gathered Noah and his family into the ark; Abraham and his household in Canaan; Moses and the Israelites at Mount Sinai; David in his kingdom; and finally, the Body of Christ in her pilgrimage to heaven. In all these regatherings, God made a covenant with the heads of the Body of Christ: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Christ himself.

Isaiah prophesied that *“foreigners would join themselves to the LORD.”* These aliens would serve him, love him, keep the Sabbath and the new covenant, and pray and worship joyfully in the house of the LORD (56:6-7). He would gather them in his “holy mountain,” his temple, his church. Who are these “foreigners”? The LORD says, *“I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered”* (56:8). These are Gentiles—peoples and nations—who were formerly alienated from and outside of God’s people, the Jews, whom God had already gathered in the old covenant with Israel.

Jeremiah prophesied that God would make a new covenant with his people. In this new covenant, God would write his law on their hearts, unlike in the old covenant with Israel when God wrote his law on stone tablets. Since the Law was not written on their hearts, the Jews continually broke the Law (31:31-34). Ezekiel also prophesied that the Holy Spirit would indwell God’s people. These two acts by God would enable his people to be faithful and obedient to him (Ezk 36:26-28). The LORD also promised his new covenant people, *“I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land”* (36:24).

How would God fulfill and accomplish all these promises to his people? He would send his Son Jesus Christ, the head and mediator of the new covenant, to cleanse them of their sins by his once-for-all sacrifice on the cross. From his First Coming to his Second Coming, he is regathering his Body, the Church, as one people made up of both Jews and Gentiles from all nations, tribes, and languages (Eph 3:6; Rev 5:9). This is why the Church is also called the Body of Christ, Christ himself being the Head (Eph 1:22-23; 5:23; Col 1:24). Therefore, the church is Christ’s church—not anyone else’s church—his own treasured possession.

All true believers are members of his body, all equally important to the overall health of the body. No member of his body can think or say that he is more useful or important than other members (1 Cor 12; Eph 4:15-16). In fact, God calls the church to give greater honor to those who are considered of less honor or value (1 Cor 12:22-26). Therefore, the church is called to be united in one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God the Father of all (Eph 4:1-4). The outcome of this spiritual unity is joy in Christ, whether in suffering or in good things.

Beloved Body of Christ: Paul calls us to have *“the same mind... [and] the same love, and to do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others”* (Phil 2:2-4). We are to be humble in our relationships in the Body of Christ, just as Christ humbled himself all the way to his death on the cross.

As we partake of the Holy Communion as the Body of Christ, let us remember the symbolism of partaking one bread broken into small pieces. We are members of this one Body of Christ, *“Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread”* (1 Cor 10:27).