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W. R. Sorley

Excerpt

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I

LIFE

For as we have many members in one body,
and all members have not the same office:
so we, being many, are one body in Christ,
and every one members one of another.

Rom. xii. 4, 5.

“WE, being many, are one body.” The Apostle was writing to men whom he had never seen—to the members of the small Christian community at Rome—and he said that he and they together formed one body. This comparison of a society of men to the living body of an animal, with its various parts and organs, was not new even when he wrote, and it is so common now that we are apt to miss its meaning. There are controversies as to how far the analogy carries us when it is applied to any community—to the family, the township, the State, or the Church. With these controversies most of us do not concern ourselves. But we are familiar with the phrase “the body politic” to describe the State, and we let it pass

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without thinking; and we have even come to use the word “body” as simply a noun of multitude, signifying many, for any collection or aggregate, so that we are accustomed to speak of a “body of men” when we are referring only to some haphazard gathering of human beings.

We are thus in danger of overlooking the meaning of the phrase through familiarity with the words. But, when St Paul said “We, being many, are one body,” he meant exactly what he said, neither more nor less. How fraught with significance his utterance was may be seen from the words which go before it and from those which follow it. It is the centre of his whole doctrine of the Christian Church and of the Christian life. How deeply the thought had struck its roots into his mind is shown from its occurrence in his letters not to Rome only but to the Christian communities elsewhere—at Corinth, at Ephesus, and at Colosse. Let us attempt then to recover some fragments of his meaning and see whether it applies to our own time as well as to his.

The analogy had been used before to describe the nature of a political society or State; but he was the first to use it of the Christian society or

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Church, and in doing so he gave it a new depth of meaning. He has made it distinctively Pauline. It does not appear to have been used by the other New Testament writers. It is also absent from the reported sayings of our Lord. Perhaps his parables show a preference for illustrating the kingdom of heaven by analogies drawn from life rather than from inanimate things. But all the familiar experiences of daily routine are put under contribution by him: most of all the human relationships of family and business and neighbourhood; also the life of the fields and of the sea—the mustard-seed, the vine and figtree and the fishes; and again the lifeless things that minister to men's wants—the garment, the piece of silver, the pearl of great price.

As long as the Master was with them, the disciples did not need any elaborate explanation of the new community which was being formed. He was there, their leader and guide, to direct each step and answer every question as it arose. When his bodily presence was withdrawn how was the void to be filled? It was of the very essence of his mission that he could have no successor as an earthly monarch has, or as other religious teachers

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such as Mahomet have left behind them. When the shepherd was gone how were the flock to be led? One result seems to have been that the members of the orphaned church were drawn more closely together. They shared their worldly goods with one another, had all things in common, and waited for the second coming of the Lord from heaven. Thus the disciples were made to feel that they were indeed members one of another, and were prepared to receive the words of St Paul that they, being many, were yet one body.

St Paul does not discard other illustrations of the truth which he has in view. In particular he often uses the old analogy of a building. "Ye are God's building¹," he tells the Corinthians; and to the Ephesians he says that they "are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord²." This was the old and approved comparison sanctioned by the Old Testament writers: "Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a

¹ 1 Cor. iii. 9.² Eph. ii. 20.

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sure foundation¹." The comparison suited a people for whom Jerusalem was the city of promise and whose worship centred in the Temple. It was used by our Lord in the parable of the house built upon a rock; and we find it again in the "city which hath foundations²" of the Epistle to the Hebrews, and in the imaginative description of the New Jerusalem, the holy city descending out of heaven from God, given in the Revelation of St John. But our Lord's death made a break with Judaism; the Temple could no longer be the shrine of the disciples' worship; even Jerusalem ceased to be the home to which they must look to return. These things remained a memory and they became an ideal: Christians were to fashion themselves into a spiritual temple; a new Jerusalem was to come down from heaven. And so it is that St Paul's language overruns the old analogy: he speaks of the Church *growing* into a holy temple in the Lord. Now an analogy must never be pressed beyond the point which it illustrates. When the Church is spoken of as a building, the emphasis is usually on its stability, and hence the stress laid on the foundation, the corner stone,

¹ Isaiah xxviii. 16.² Heb. xi. 10.

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in so many passages. The building is also a unity of many parts and may be taken as the symbol of the household or community which it shelters. But the analogy conveys nothing as to the life of the community; and so, when we speak of its growth, our thought is really seeking out another and deeper analogy—the analogy with the living body.

Life can be likened only to life. If we are looking for an image whereto to compare the life of a community whether civil or religious we can only find it in some other thing which is also living—in the plant, or the animal, or the man. The building can at most bring before us the shell, the skeleton, or the material vesture of that which lives. Even a machine, however cunningly devised, cannot do more than indicate how parts are put together and what sort of work they can turn out. You can take a machine to pieces and put it together again; but you cannot do that with the living organism. If one part is worn or broken you can replace it by another like part made at a factory; but it is not so with the animal body. There the hurt of one member is the hurt of the whole: it cannot be scrapped and replaced by a

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new member of the same kind. The life comes from within and lives in every member, so that the hurt of one is the hurt of all and the health of the whole body is the health of each part. As St Paul said in his earlier and fuller discourse on this topic in the first Epistle to the Corinthians, “whether one member suffer all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured all the members rejoice with it¹.” And the same holds of the life of the community. If one member suffer all the members suffer with it; in the honour of one member all the members share. The more truly a number of men form a community, and not a mere chance collection of individuals or battle-ground of selfish interests, the more fully is the doctrine verified. We realise it better now in these critical days of war, than we did before in the piping times of peace, when men thought that as things had been so they would continue to be and when each strove to lay up goods for himself for many years. Now we know that we stand or fall together: the suffering of one part is felt by all; the success of any is the triumph of all.

¹ 1 Cor. xii. 26.

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There is but one task for all—
For each one life to give.
Who stands if freedom fall?
Who dies if England live?

And the crisis often forces us to put to ourselves the question, Who lives if England die? Most perhaps would be inclined to answer that in such a case life would have nothing of value to offer. With this country crushed and a calculated ruthlessness supreme in the world, we should not care to go on living, because something had been killed in the soul of England, and in our own souls—the best thing which is its and ours—the heritage of freedom and the hope of a nobler future for the spirit of man. These are spiritual things; and if the spirit is dead, in man or in society, the life has gone out.

Here we touch the central point of St Paul's teaching. It is the common life which makes the body a unity of many members. Each member has its own work to do; but they all serve one body and are sustained by a single life. "The eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee; nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you¹"; but each should have the same care one

¹ 1 Cor. xii. 21.

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of another so that there “be no schism in the body¹.” It is the same in the Church: there are “diversities of gifts,” “differences of administrations,” “diversities of operations².” And to each his own duty: “whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; or ministry, let us wait on our ministering; or he that teacheth, on teaching; or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness³.” The work is manifold, as the members are many; but they all spring out of one spiritual life. For “all these worketh that one and the self-same Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will⁴.” In this spirit is the common life and energy that animate the whole community, so that through it diversities of gifts and operations conspire to the common good: “we, being many, are one body in Christ.”

The spirit which was to achieve the unity and prove the power of the Christian community was simply the spirit of Christ. Whatever the differences between the members of the Church, that

¹ 1 Cor. xii. 25.² 1 Cor. xii. 4–6.³ Rom. xii. 6–8.⁴ 1 Cor. xii. 11.

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spirit held them together by a common memory and sustained them by a common hope. The memory was the earthly life and death and resurrection of Jesus; the hope was the expectation of his second coming in the clouds from heaven. What must have been their feelings as year after year disappointed this hope and the Lord still delayed his coming? This we cannot tell. But we know that the hope in its old form, as the early disciples held it, has faded and died away with the lapse of centuries. We know also that, as it disappeared in this form, the deeper elements of St Paul's teaching made their way into men's minds, and they became aware of a spiritual force that might regenerate the world and establish on earth the kingdom of heaven.

This spiritual hope has never died out in the Church, and it has never entirely deserted mankind. Sometimes it has lain dormant, usually in periods of external comfort, when the easy ways of the world obscured it; and it has needed the shock of danger or of disaster to awaken it anew. In the world's day-light it has been a pillar of cloud which men could easily disregard, but in the gloom of some great calamity it has often shone