

*The Presence of Christ in the Church*

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## *Introduction*

The question of Jesus' presence on earth since his ascension has led to much reflection on the nature of the relation between Jesus Christ and his church. This relation will be examined in an attempt to clarify what we can say about the church with respect to Christ's presence on earth. The process through which the church becomes the people in which Christ is present will also be examined through the events of the incarnation, the atonement, and Pentecost.

At the end of the Gospels of Mark and Luke, and at the beginning of Acts, we are met with the Apostolic witness that testifies to the ascension of the risen and corporeal Jesus into heaven.<sup>1</sup> We are told that Jesus is now seated at the right hand of God.<sup>2</sup> This means that there has been a change in the nature of Christ's presence on earth. He is no longer present on the earth *in the same way* as he was in the time of his earthly ministry.

The eschatology presented to us in the New Testament is one which situates the church's place in history "in between the times", so to speak. Jesus Christ has lived, died, been raised, and has ascended to heaven. This "Christ event" has ushered in the age of the new creation, and has called into being the church which exists essentially as an eschatological movement,<sup>3</sup> a people that lives in the present moment in participatory anticipation of the future glory of the fully present kingdom of God. This future is often referred to as the Day of Judgement or the *parousia*. This is the appointed time when Christ will 'return' to the earth from out of heaven and set things right with the final consummation of the new creation.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 16.19; Luke 24.51; Acts 1.9ff

<sup>2</sup> Eph 1.20; Col 3.1; Heb 12:2

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Mangina, quoted in Christopher R. J. Holmes, "The Church and the Presence of Christ: Defending Actualist Ecclesiology." *Pro Ecclesia* 21, no. 3 (2012): 274.

With such an eschatology, we might be tempted to aver that Christ is not *now* present on the earth. We tend to think that he will “return” to judge the living and the dead. In human terms, one cannot go somewhere and still be present in the place they left, nor can one *return* to a place without first having left it.

The New Testament makes it clear that though Christ has ascended, he is not absent. The Gospel of Matthew ends with Jesus telling his disciples, “lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”<sup>4</sup> Jesus himself asserts that though he is going to heaven to be with the Father, he will continue to be with his disciples on earth.

The problematic we are tracing is as follows: Christ has ascended to heaven and will ‘return’ to earth, yet he is somehow still present on earth in and through the *ekklesia* (assembly, church) of his disciples. Some sort of account needs to be offered for these claims. What are the aspects of the person of Christ that enable us able to speak of his presence on earth? What precisely is the church’s relation to Christ such that it is said to be his body?

As we endeavor to answer these questions, it is important to be mindful of the fact that we are speaking of the presence of the second Person of the Triune God. The language that we use when we speak of *human* presence must be disciplined analogically in light of the who it is we are talking about. This means that when we speak of Christ’s presence, we are speaking of a way of being present that is fundamentally different than how ordinary humans are present.

### *Christ and His Body*

Throughout the epistles of the New Testament, the church is called a “body.”<sup>5</sup> To call a group of people a body means that there is some sort of unity, something that binds individuals

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<sup>4</sup> Mat 28.20b. All biblical quotations taken from the *NASB: New American Standard Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Cor 12.27; Eph 4:12; Col 3.15...

together, a common identity. The church's common identity is Christ. The very impetus for its existence is derived from Christ.<sup>6</sup> Christ is the one who binds the church together as one body *so that* it might manifest his presence on earth.

The question of the church's relation to Christ has been an enduring debate in the Church throughout its history. Is the church Christ on earth? Is it *fully* Christ? Is it an extension of the incarnation of Christ? What exactly does the term "body" encompass when we call the church the body of Christ? A Catholic perspective would be more inclined towards asserting an equivalence between the church and Christ and would be comfortable with calling the church "another Christ."<sup>7</sup>

We believe that the Reformed perspective on the matter is rightfully uncomfortable with such statements of equivalence between the church and Christ. The church is not Christ. Nor can the church be said to be "another Christ". This would imply a division in the person of Christ that simply does not exist. It separates the body from the head and unduly exalts the body *as* head. The church is the *body* of Christ, and it is the body of which Christ is the head.<sup>8</sup> This point must be kept in mind, since there is an "irreversible descent from the head to the body: the head rules the body, not the body the head."<sup>9</sup> This is also why we should be careful not to say that Christ exists *as* the church since such a claim ignores that the church exists in an *asymmetrical* relationship to Christ.<sup>10</sup> When the church loses sight of the precedence of Christ over the church as its head, it runs the perilous risk of ceasing to be a faithful body.

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<sup>6</sup> Holmes, 269.

<sup>7</sup> Pope Pius XII, *Mystici Corpus Christi*, par. 51, ET Catholic Truth Society 1944, 32. quoted in Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 72.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2009), 362.

<sup>9</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 72.

<sup>10</sup> Holmes, 269.

### *Incarnation, Atonement, Pentecost*

What shapes the relation between Christ and the church? How has he come to be bound to a human and historical community? Thomas F. Torrance has highlighted that the church's relation to Christ is determined by the events of the incarnation, the atonement, and Pentecost.<sup>11</sup> The incarnation sets the stage for the atonement and Pentecost, which are the works whereby the church is incorporate into Christ as his body. Though the incarnation "sets the stage" it is not subordinate in any way to the atonement and Pentecost, as Torrance asserts, "that the church is the body of Christ refers first to the fact that he has embodied himself in our humanity."<sup>12</sup> We will follow the three-fold movement in our exploration, but will proceed with the assertion that these "events" can further be specified as "works" of Christ (and of God).<sup>13</sup>

### *Incarnation*

The doctrine of the hypostatic union can here be used to shed some light on the relation between Christ and his church. This doctrine lays out how we speak of the union of the two complete natures of divinity and humanity in the incarnation of the Son of God. The Son is born both of God in eternity and of Mary, a Jewish virgin, in history. He takes on an earthly historical form, at the same time fully human and fully God. The divine nature and the human nature coexist in the one person of Jesus. Though he has two natures, the priority of our speech and thought about Jesus must be given to the unity of his person over and above the duality of his two natures so that we avoid the pitfall of subscribing to a "two Christs" christology. There is only *one* Christ and his two natures do not exist separately. The two

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<sup>11</sup> Torrance, 364.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 369.

<sup>13</sup> In accordance with the rules of trinitarian discourse.

natures can be distinguished *conceptually* so that we can say that Jesus can be *known* in two natures while existing as one unified hypostasis of the Triune God.<sup>14</sup>

In Jesus, deity and humanity are united in such a way that they cannot be separated from each other or confused with each other. It is the same when we speak of the church's union with Christ. Christ has bound himself to the church in such a way that they cannot be separated. Though they cannot be separated, they maintain their distinctiveness and ought not be confused.

While fully taking on the human condition, Jesus did not live as an 'ordinary' human. He lived the perfect life in that he was "in every respect been tested as we are, yet without sin."<sup>15</sup> He was *truly* human in the way we were created to be human, that is, without sin, because sin makes us less human.<sup>16</sup> In the hypostatic union of Jesus Christ, the *truly* human way of being human wins out, so to speak, in setting the agenda over and above the sinful human way of being human. When the Son of God took on sinful flesh and was incarnate, he took on a body which "he healed and sanctified it in the very act of his assumption, condemning sin in the flesh by his holiness."<sup>17</sup>

The same can be said of the church – that Christ heals and sanctifies it. Yet in the case of the church, healing and sanctification come from outside, from Christ who sanctifies it in its union with him and as it lives in ongoing repentance and obedience to him. The church cannot sanctify or heal itself. Only Christ can. Christ's union with the church is then a work of ongoing sanctification that he is performing on his body.

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<sup>14</sup> David Yeago, *Apostolic Faith, Part 1* (David S. Yeago Copyright, 2005), 215.

<sup>15</sup> Hebrews 4.15.

<sup>16</sup> Yeago, 243.

<sup>17</sup> Torrance, 371.

Another insight we can glean from the incarnation with respect to the church's union to Christ is that in both events the agency belongs to God. It is the Son of God who initiates the uniting of divinity and humanity. It is the Son of God who, "emptied himself, taking the form of a bond-servant and being made in the likeness of men."<sup>18</sup> So, as Holmes asserts, "Just as the Son of God is the active agent in the uniting of human essence to himself in the man Jesus, he too is the one who gives existence to his body, his earthly historical form without which he does not will to be himself." The church, as the earthly historical existence of Christ,<sup>19</sup> owes its being to the divine initiation of the Son of God to be enfleshed.

Christ is then the agent in the church's union with him. He is also the one who sanctifies it and heals it. He is the head of the body. The precedence of Christ over the church must not, however, obscure the fact that this is a relation of unity. A head needs a body, just as a body needs a head. Christ has willed himself to be bound to a people, the church, and has refused to exist in abstraction from it. It is part of the nature of the person of Christ that he generates and calls a people into being a community that witnesses to him.<sup>20</sup> One cannot, therefore, speak of Christ in his full sense without including the church.<sup>21</sup>

#### *Atonement*

The church is the body of Christ by virtue of its union to Christ. This union is not possible without the atoning work of Christ on the cross. Here we must make mention of the dissimilarity of the hypostatic union with the relation of the church to Christ. Where the hypostatic union is Christ's relation to himself, the church's relation to Christ is that between

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<sup>18</sup> Philippians 2.7.

<sup>19</sup> Holmes, 278.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 269.

<sup>21</sup> Moltmann. 72.

sinners and their Saviour.<sup>22</sup> All of humanity, of which the church is part, is fallen and sinful. The Son of God entered into history in flesh and wrought our redemption by taking our sin upon himself on the cross. Christ is ever our Saviour, who substituted himself for us, made atonement for us, and who incorporates us by pure grace into his resurrection and life.<sup>23</sup>

The church exists as a body that witnesses to Christ's work of atonement. "As the body of Christ the church is the place where that substitution is actualized within history, for only as it lets Christ take its place, only as it yields place to Christ, is it his body."<sup>24</sup> The actualization of the atonement happens in the sacrament of baptism where we are immersed into Christ's atoning death, dying to sin, and being raised into newness of life with the hope of our resurrection. The atonement is also actualized in the church in the sacrament of the eucharist. This is where the church persistently "takes shelter in the sacrifice of Christ as its only plea before God, and continues to deny itself, taking up Christ's cross until he come."<sup>25</sup>

### *Pentecost*

The relation of Christ's presence in the church is also rooted in the sending of the Holy Spirit upon the church at Pentecost. The Spirit was the gift that Jesus had promised his disciples at the last supper in the Gospel of John. He told them that he would ascend and send them the "Helper" who would guide them into truth, teach them, reveal things to them, and glorify Jesus by taking of what is Jesus' and disclosing it to them. The Spirit would also convict the world concerning sin and righteousness.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Torrance, 371.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 367.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, also Romans 5.21.

<sup>25</sup> Torrance, 371.

<sup>26</sup> John 14.16-18; 16.7-15.



Jesus' promise to send the Spirit is realized at Pentecost. The scattered disciples of Jesus undergo their rebirth and are transformed and unified into the body of Christ through their vivification and infilling of the Holy Spirit. T. F. Torrance calls this event the "rebirth" of the church because the church had already come into existence prior to Pentecost. This rebirth,<sup>27</sup> however, is what makes the church into the *body of Christ*.<sup>28</sup>

After Jesus, death, resurrection, and ascension, the church has been broken and humbled. Yes, Jesus had reappeared and spent time with the church, but he had "left" them again to be with the Father. As a continuation of the Christ's work on in the flesh and on the cross, he<sup>29</sup> sends the Spirit upon his church to animate it and seal its union with him as his body.<sup>30</sup> This union is both personal and corporate, as each member of the body must be reconciled to God in order to become part of the community of the reconciled.

On trinitarian terms alone, we can assert that the Spirit's presence within the church means that Christ is also present in it. But Scripture is clear to specify that the Spirit effects and seals our union with Christ, thereby offering a distinction between the Spirit's work and Christ's work in the church. The Spirit unites the church to Christ, glorifies Christ, and points the church to Christ.

Pentecost is what brings the church into being as an eschatological movement with a *living* hope. The church's hope is living because "the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us."<sup>31</sup> The reason we have something to

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<sup>27</sup> John 3.1–8.

<sup>28</sup> Torrance, 353–354.

<sup>29</sup> John 16.7b.

<sup>30</sup> 2 Corinthians 1.22; Ephesians 1.13.

<sup>31</sup> Romans 5.5.

hope for hope is because our union with Christ has not yet been consummated.<sup>32</sup> In light of this ‘not yet’ aspect, the church must be careful to look to Christ as its head.

### *The Question of Parousia(s)*

We have already highlighted that the church is essentially an eschatological movement that looks ahead to the consummation of Christ’s victory on the cross at the final Day of Judgement. An issue that can arise when we consider eschatological situation of the church pertains to the question of Christ’s *parousia*. *Parousia* a word often used to refer to the coming of Christ at the Day of Judgement. The word itself simply means “presence”, but it often takes on the connotation of some sort of ‘return’ of Christ at his “second coming”. This added nuance is applied to the detriment of our understanding of the nature of Christ’s presence in the past, present, and future.

It is a mistake to think that the ascension of Christ has robbed the earth of his presence until he “comes again.” As we reflect theologically on the *parousia* of Christ, we are better off thinking in terms of numerous *parousias*, which Jürgen Moltmann calls “temporal modes”: (1) he *came* in the flesh (incarnation), (2) he *comes* in the Spirit (Pentecost; body of Christ), and (3) he *will come* in glory (Day of Judgement).<sup>33</sup> In speaking this way about the *parousias* of Christ we avoid the mistake of falling into the error of thinking that Christ has no presence on the earth, when in reality we are in the time of his presence in the Spirit which baptizes believers into him and which calls the church into being as his body.

In addition to this clarification on the *parousias* of Christ, mention must be made of the contemporaneity of the Christ event in the church that is prevalent in Barth. Torrance has already helped us to see this in the actualization of the atonement of Christ through the

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<sup>32</sup> Torrance, 369.

<sup>33</sup> Moltmann, 130.

sacraments, but a very brief look at Barth's view of the history of Christ might help inform our perspective.

Barth maintains that it is inappropriate to say that the event of Christ's life, death, and resurrection is *past*. In light of what Christ did,

the old is past, the world of man, the world of disobedience and disorder, the world of misery, sin and death. Sin has been cancelled, death has been vanquished. Sin and death *did exist*, and the whole of world history, including that which ran its course *post Christum*, right down to our day, *existed*. All that is past in Christ; we can only think back on all that.<sup>34</sup>

Barth highlights for us that Jesus has begun a new, different time in which "His [Christ's] yesterday is also His to-day and His to-morrow."<sup>35</sup> Not only has Christ not "left" the earth to return again later, but he and his work is not confined to the past. He and his work are present and ongoing and operative in bringing more and more people into the life he has made available in his life, death, resurrection, and giving of the Holy Spirit.

### *The Word*

It must be mentioned, however briefly, that the locus of Christ's presence in the church is in Holy Scripture.<sup>36</sup> What we have been saying all along about Christ's work of bringing the church into union with him through incarnation, atonement, and Pentecost, happens because of the incarnate Word meets us through the written word of Scripture. Scripture is where we meet Christ through the story of his life, death, and resurrection. Holy Scripture's role in the

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<sup>34</sup> Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 129.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 130.

<sup>36</sup> Holmes, *Ethics in the Presence of Christ* (London: T & T Clark, 2012), 148.

establishing the relation of the church to Christ is of critical importance, of much more importance that I have been able to ascribe to it here.

### *Concluding Remarks*

How then can we speak of Christ's presence on earth? First, Christ has chosen not to exist apart from the community of redeemed people that is called the church. He has united the church to himself through the incarnation, the atonement, and Pentecost. As an eschatological movement, it looks ahead to Christ's presence in glory while empowered by his presence in the Spirit. It also looks ahead to glory while reencountering his presence in the flesh through the sacraments of baptism, eucharist, and word.

As to some of the questions we have asked as to the degree of the church carrying the presence of Christ. It is certain that we cannot assert an equivalence between the church and Christ, nor can we say that the church is "another Christ." As the Head of the body, Christ must be given precedence over the church.

Is the church somehow the extension of the incarnation of Christ? Does it pick up where Christ left off at his ascension? This cannot be said since "in all its union with Christ, the church remains distinct from him and must never be confounded with him."<sup>37</sup>

What we can say about the church is that through the incarnation, atonement, and Pentecost, Christ has bound himself to the church in such a way that it can be called the "earthly historical form of his existence."<sup>38</sup> The reason the church exists as the earthly historical form of Christ's existence is to bear witness to its inner being, which is Christ himself. Christ forms a body [the church] by the Spirit and in so doing takes up creaturely

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<sup>37</sup> Toraance, 370.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 369.

instrumentality,<sup>39</sup> becoming the head of the body he has formed. Though this whole account is wrapped up in mysteries of the Triune God and his works of incarnation, atonement, Pentecost, and future glory, such an examination has helped to clarify, if only a little, how we ought to speak of the presence of Christ in the church.

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<sup>39</sup> Christopher R. J. Holmes, *personal email correspondence*, Decemeber 5, 2013.

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