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The Broken Body

By Benjamin Wagner

I remember sitting on the dugout bench wishing that I could play the same way the other kids did. They did not need to labor with such great exertion that their lungs might collapse—but I did. I was born with several chronic conditions that made all physical activities exceedingly challenging. For me, sports, exercise, or even playing with other kids always came with complications. I knew, deep down, that something was wrong with me. My body was not as it was meant to be.

Through the various limitations that I experienced in childhood, I discovered that I (perhaps more than most) am acutely aware of this world's fallenness. It is easy for a surgeon to observe and treat the ailments of his patients, but when he is himself underneath the scalpel and the blinding lights of the operating room, he knows—much more intensely—the suffering which these ailments cause his patients. Likewise, it was one thing for me to know about the fallen state of the world, and another entirely to experience the heartrending pain of sitting on the sidelines while the other children played.

It was in those moments of deepest resentment for my own condition that I found myself longing, groaning for something more than what this present world offered. We are very rarely conscious of our breathing, digestion, or other natural functions of the body. Only when they are not functioning as they ought to be—such as a case of bronchitis, or indigestion—do we notice there is something wrong with them. For me, my body was in a perpetual state of “wrongness,” discontent with the present state of affairs.

The Apostle Paul, writing to the Corinthians, uses this very language of the body to describe the church: “If one member suffers, all suffer together” (1 Corinthians 12:26). Just as my physical limitations taught me to acutely feel the brokenness that others might overlook, so too does the

church's scandals reveal a profound wound in Christ's body. The elder who steals from the church's treasury and the pastor who has an affair are not mere organizational inconveniences—each, in its own way, is a rupture in the body of Christ Himself. Christ mourns over the affliction which plagues His Church. Daily, there are schisms, scandals, breaches of trust, fits of rage, wrath, and conflict that hurt His beloved Church. Christ is not detached or disinterested in our sufferings; He knows them more deeply than we could ever fathom and therefore longs with eager anticipation for the consummation of all things.

This is the great Christian virtue of hope—to await that glorious day when all is restored through Christ. It is through hope, looking to this consummation, that the Christian begins to find himself—in a very real sense—changed. As I am sure many can attest, the man or woman who is engaged is not the same as they once were. Before, they found no need to drastically concern themselves with the health, wealth or wellbeing of another person. Yet, upon the acceptance of the proposal, there is a fundamental shift in their attitude towards all things. They no longer view themselves, their friends, their family, or anyone the same way—they are a new person. Now, all relationships, indeed, all things, are governed by that one hope—the day when they are united to their future spouse. That future event, and the confidence of it, changes who they are now and indeed changes their relationship to the world around them.

In the same way, the Church longs for her union with Christ. Considering this hope, the bride eagerly prepares for her wedding day. She prepares, washes, clothes, and adorns herself—all in eager anticipation of that blessed day. The Church does not remain complacent, but eagerly prepares to welcome her Savior. As C.S. Lewis observed,

The Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. (Mere Christianity P.134)

Lewis's point is precisely the one at stake here: it is not despite but because of their heavenward gaze that Christians are equipped to confront the church's present wounds. So easy is it, in our moments of despair, frustrated by all the scandals and brokenness which rots the church, to lose sight

of the age to come and focus entirely on the present suffering. That is not the calling of the Christian. Our calling is far higher: to long and look for the heavenly realm where our inheritance is hidden with Christ. So, we are to yearn, plead, and pray that Christ will come soon! But more than that, we are to bring His kingdom here and now!

The new creation is not some far-removed fantasy which is only wishful thinking—it is here! Christ’s kingdom has invaded this present world and is now restoring it through His church! And we, as members of His body, are bringing into this dead and dying world the restoration of all things. The poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, put it this way, Christ “plays in ten thousand places, / lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his, / to the Father through the features of men’s faces.” Christ lives, heals, and restores through His church—through people of every tribe and tongue, every people who hear and receive the Word of God, and partake of His sacraments! Where the Word of God is, there Christ is healing His creation! The calling of the Christian is not just a hope for the future, but to enact that hope in the here and now!

What might this hope-driven healing look like in practice? It begins with confession—acknowledging before God and one another that the church’s failures have hindered our witness and grieved the Spirit. In confession, the body names its wounds honestly, and in absolution, it receives the healing word of Christ who forgives and restores. From this foundation, there is faith, trusting the promises of God, that Christ, our glorious Savior, will come and come soon! If He is coming, we would be foolish to sit idle. There is work to be done for the wedding! We must feed the hungry, care for the orphan, defend the vulnerable—for not one deed of kindness will go forgotten by our lovely Savior. All this is done for the body, the Church, that she may be ready as she now eagerly awaits the return of her Savior.

So, when I sat on that bench in little league, I knew that there was something I awaited—something much more than my present suffering. My physical body’s brokenness pointed beyond itself to a deeper fracture: the brokenness of Christ’s body, scattered and tattered across continents and centuries, torn by history and pride. So too should every Christian who has known the pain which infests the Church await that glorious day when there is no more suffering—when we see Christ face to face and are gathered together under one Shepherd. And in longing for that day, we labor to make it visible even now. We pursue peace, guard truth, and love one another across every human boundary that would seek to hurt what Christ has made holy.