

Baptized by One Spirit into One Body: A Textual Exposition of I Cor. 12:13

Forrest L. Keener, *Watchman Press*

"For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit."

This is a verse which has, through the years, received a huge amount of attention. I have read a great deal of material on the subject, and even distributed a lot of tracts with which I am less than totally pleased. I will try in this brief tract to state what I feel is the extremely simple and pointed truth of this verse. May I say to begin with, I don't think we need to be an exegetical or a translation expert to understand it; it is just not that complicated. It says precisely and simply what it seems to say.

WHY THE COMPLICATED APPROACHES

I have read many discourses which approach this verse as if we needed some particular insight into great mysteries, or an ability to dig out very obscure interpretations of other Bible verses, to understand this one. These approaches normally lead to some "necessary implication" of a "universal body." This wrong interpretation of I Cor. 12:13 (*"For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit."*) is supported by a wrong interpretation of Ephesians 4:3 and 4, (*"Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling;"*) and in turn that wrong interpretation of Ephesians 4:3 and 4 is supported by the same wrong interpretation of I Cor. 12:13. The fact of the matter is that neither of these verses so much as hints at any kind of a universal body.

In fact, the words "universal" and "body" are so antagonistic to each other, that we should be forced into laughter by merely hearing them so used. The word "body" always means something that is localized by union and united by locality. While the word "universal", as used in this respect, means something that is everywhere. Infinitude of locality always necessitates a spirit, as opposed to a body. Why the complication then? It is because of the carry-over of Catholicism, even through Protestantism, in so much of our "Christian" literature.

If it were not for the Catholic teaching that the "body of Christ" is literally the visible universal (Catholic) church, or the Protestant teaching that the "body of Christ" is literally the invisible universal ("Holy Catholic") church, no such notion would ever exist among evangelical Christians. They certainly would not, in a million years, arrive at it, merely by reading I Cor. 12:13, Eph. 4:3, 4 and Eph. 5:25-27. The fact is that to arrive at a universal church interpretation of these verses, a man must start with this Catholic presupposition and use these verses as proof texts to support it. I want to take each of the determinative words of I Cor. 12:13 and show that this passage does not even suggest universalism. Then, I want to very briefly expound the verse in its simple contextual meaning.

THE WORD "SPIRIT"

"For by one SPIRIT are we all baptized into one body." It has been argued by some, who realized the error of the Catholic interpretation, that the Spirit here was "a spirit of unity," and should be translated spirit not Spirit. Such a conclusion is not necessary, and I do not believe it is either accurate or logically justified. The Spirit here is the Spirit of the context. He is the Spirit who, according to verse 3, leads one to confess Christ, in verse 4 bestows diversities of gifts, and in verse 7 manifests Himself for the overall profit of the church. He is the same Spirit who, in verse 8, gives the word of wisdom to one and the word of knowledge to another, and who in verses 9 and 10, gives gifts of faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, divers tongues, and interpretation. He is the same Spirit who, in verse 11, sovereignly divides gifts to men, individually as it pleases Him. It is, by every contextual standard of interpretation the "Spirit" of the context and thus, the Holy Spirit who is mentioned here.

THE WORD "BY"

"For BY one Spirit are we all baptized into one body." It is thought by the universalist that this word, if properly translated, forces us to believe that this verse has the Holy Spirit baptizing us into Christ literally, and thus the baptism could not be water baptism, and the body referred to could not be a local church. This is interpretation either by presupposition, or by panic, or some of both. The word BY need carry no such meaning. It simply means we are led by the Holy Spirit to unite with that body (local church), exactly as we are led by the Spirit to confess Christ in verse 3. This is how-Simeon, in Luke 2:27, came into the temple at the time of Christ's dedication. (*"And he came by the Spirit into the temple: and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him after the custom of the law, "*) He came by the influence of, or the leadership of, the Holy Spirit.

THE WORD "BODY"

"For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one BODY." Again the "body" of this verse is the body of the context, that is, the church at Corinth. This is what Paul is, throughout the chapter, illustrating by the human body. The first question that should be asked here is this: Is the word "body" in this verse, that is the body of Christ, being used literally or figuratively? Is Paul saying we are literally being placed by this baptism into the physical, fleshly, actual, biological body of Christ? Of course not! He is using the human body, in this chapter, to illustrate the truth of necessary union and interdependency within the church, and he is using this metaphor, "body of Christ," to illustrate the relationship that the local church has with Christ as her "head," which is simply to say He has complete authority over the church.

To make the use of the words body or head more literal than that is to violate the whole nature of the chapter and indeed the entire epistle. Let it farther be understood that we are to think locally, that is of the church at Corinth, and locally as these truths apply to us in any church. Only in this setting can verses like 25 and 26 have any applicable reference to the context. Members of a local, visible assembly are to have the same care one for the other, suffer with each other and rejoice when another is honored.

If there were such a thing as an invisible, universal body (whatever that might possibly be) this conduct would surely not be possible for them. So the term body here is a metaphorical term describing the relationship that the members of the church at Corinth had with each other under Christ their head. He is talking specifically of the body, that is the church, at-Corinth. Oh, but someone asks, does Christ have many bodies? This is a foolish question. Once we see the metaphorical use of the word BODY in this passage we understand that the usage is generic or institutional and thus is not numerical in any sense of being either singular or plural.

Let me illustrate this truth thusly: Christ took a piece or loaf of bread, on the night before His crucifixion, He broke it and said, *"Take eat, this is my body."* He was simply saying this piece of bread, which you are to eat, pictures my body. But He said *"This is my body."* Now, are we to understand that this was the only piece of bread about which that statement could be made, or that all pieces of bread are a composite part of one great piece? Absurd! When we see that the statement is a metaphorical one, and could be rightly made of any qualifying piece of bread, that is unleavened bread consecrated to the purpose of symbolizing Christ's body, we see the truth that applies in I Cor. 12:13. Any proper qualifying piece of bread, at any proper time, and in any proper place and setting, could be referred to as "His body," and in the singular, without violence to any other piece.

The very same thing applies easily and automatically to any true church, and it does no violence to any other true church, nor does it so much as hint that they are composite parts of the same thing. Moreover, it does not hint at the foolish idea that the local church is only the manifestation or as some prefer to say, the only visible manifestation of the "real thing," "the true church," or the "universal church." Notice this truth as applied to the human body in I Cor. 12:15. Can the foot say *"...I am not of the body..."* What body? It speaks of the human body as an object, not an individual. So is the normal case in all metaphorical usages.

THE WORD "WE"

"For by one Spirit are WE all baptized into one body." Some have said the word WE here of necessity includes Paul, who was obviously not a member of that local assembly, and thus the usage of WE supports a universal interpretation. Nonsense! If the word WE in verse 13 necessarily included him, the word YE in verse 27 of the same chapter would necessarily exclude him. The principle, that we are each part of a local body, applies to Paul, and thus he uses the word WE in an editorial sense.

However, throughout the epistle and especially in the context, he excludes himself from this body of which he is speaking in this chapter. Notice verses 1, 2, 3, and 27. In none of these places does he imply that he is including himself in the body to whom he is speaking. To understand his editorial use of the word WE in verse 13, notice the use of the word I in chapter 13, verses 1-3. His usage here is hypothetical as if he had not love and became as sounding brass, but he does not really include himself in that group. For an example of the use of the word WE, which does not include both first and second persons, notice I Thes. 3:1. Notice I Thes. 5:5, where he, in the same verse, uses YE and WE referring to the same group. So don't let the word WE in I Cor. 12:13 be used to erroneously point you in a universal direction. It implies no such thing!

THE WORD "BAPTIZED"

"For by one Spirit are we all BAPTIZED into one body." The universalist's interpretation of this verse is essentially this: The Holy Spirit places (baptizes) us into the "true church," - "The Body of Christ." They make this a statement of regeneration, that is to say salvation is the Holy Spirit baptizing us into the "true church," the universal body of Christ. But where in Scripture is salvation referred to as "baptism" either in or by the Holy Spirit? While it is true that baptism is used metaphorically to describe salvation, salvation is never referred to as baptism in or by anything or anyone, unless I Cor. 12:13 is the only place. No ground is laid for it anywhere in Scripture.

The believers of Luke 3:16 and Acts 1:5 were promised the baptism of the Holy Ghost. It was fulfilled to them in Acts 2:1-4, but no one would claim that this was their regeneration. Salvation is not the context of I Cor. 12:13, the context is conduct in the local church. Again, salvation is not the context of Eph. 4:4. In reading Eph. 4:1-3 you find that mutual conduct among the members of the church at Ephesus is the context. This will be the case everywhere in Scripture you see the illustration of the body used. Regeneration is never the context. I thus conclude that no place in Scripture ever refers to salvation as baptism in, or by, the Holy Spirit. These people in the church at Corinth had been led by the Holy Spirit to confess Christ, and had by the same Spirit been led to identify themselves with that particular body, by water baptism. It was by the ordinance of water baptism that they had come into the fellowship of that body (the church at Corinth).

THE SIMPLE INTERPRETATION OF THE VERSE

The message and exhortation of I Cor. 12:13 and 14 is this: Cease your individual competition in the attempted display of spiritual gifts. Notice the first and last verses of each chapter are clearly this, and every verse in between is right on that line. This verse is simply saying: "All of you whether Jew or Gentile, whether bond or free have been led by the Holy Spirit to, by water baptism, unite yourself with this body (the church at Corinth). Now stop competing for position and pre-eminence, as if you were a unit within yourself, and accept the place in the body to which God has sovereignly appointed you, because you are by the design of God all dependent upon each other."

If this simple truth is missed, we not only entertain a totally wrong concept of Bible doctrine and definition of the biblical word church, we miss the glorious practical appeal for church unity and inter-submission within our church. Any notion of a universal church becomes an escape from the obligation to the local church, and to proper conduct within the local body, the true and only church of the Lord Jesus Christ.