

Major Challenges of the Church on the Path to Maturity

By Dr. Michael S. Beates

The Church. Mention the word and a vast array of ideas and images enter people's minds. Some may conjure images of quaint, classical buildings with steeples that house local congregations where they grew up. Others may think of a grand and profound movement of God across the centuries and around the world. Our ecumenical creeds remind us that the Church is "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic." Further, accepted teachings remind us that the Church is "visible and invisible," "militant and triumphant," and that it is "local and universal." There are many good studies which unpack these important ways to understand the Church.

The Bible offers multiple images of the Church. The Church is called the bride of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit and the branches connected to the life-giving vine of Christ. But perhaps the most provocative and instructive biblical image for our purposes is the Church as "the Body of Christ." The Scriptures are rich in describing the Church in this manner. But to our surprise, the one we most often find is not the one that first comes to mind, especially in the West. Over the last couple of centuries, God's people have fallen prey to cultural forces which portray the Church as being full of successful, well-dressed people whose lives are well-ordered and influential in the affairs of the world.

What the Scriptures show us, however, is the Church as a broken Body, a suffering Body, and finally by God's grace, a maturing Body. In this paper, we will explore these three depictions in more detail.

The Church as a Broken Body

God never does things the way we would expect. In fact, throughout history, God takes the conventional wisdom and practices of the world and turns it on its head. The whole nature of the redemptive work of God is "upside down." Instead of using people of power and integrity, or beauty and influence, God uses unknown people such as Ruth, cowardly people such as Gideon and deeply sinful people such as David. The Twelve Disciples were culturally insignificant, but God used them to achieve his purposes. Why? So that he alone will receive the glory and the credit for what happens when he works through such surprising vessels. And of course, the Lord Jesus came as a vulnerable baby, born in questionable circumstances and raised in a backwater town like Nazareth.

For us to understand the power of God working through his people, we must understand two things: first, brokenness forces us to see God as the ultimate and only reliable source of power; second, God, through his Holy Spirit, brings about brokenness in the people he intends to use for his glory.

God as the Source of Power in Brokenness

When we consider the Church as a Body of broken people, we must remember that in as much as our

culture exalts strength and self-sufficiency, God uses “broken” people. And in doing so, he becomes the source of power. Our culture is focused on outward appearance, external beauty, physical and social power, self-sufficiency, and self-achievement. Yet at the end of the day, we must admit that these cultural pursuits are idolatry. We make little gods of ourselves. Further, we assure ourselves that we control our circumstances. Convinced of this, when life “spins out of control,” we often need therapy to help us cope.

This has never been the way God works with his people. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 1:27–31 that God chose what is . . . “foolish . . . weak . . . low . . . despised . . . things that are not”—so no human may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus. In his second letter to this same church, Paul declared outright that his ministry was not from his own strength, but from God’s. In 2 Corinthians 12:7–10, God says to Paul, “. . . my power is made perfect in weakness.” For Paul to boast in weakness seems absolutely insane to our modern sensibilities. To admit weakness means defeat in our world. But in God’s world, to admit weakness and defeat is necessary to accepting him as the source of real power and purpose. A maturing Church must embrace this truth.

The Holy Spirit Brings Brokenness

Not only is God the source of all power, the Scriptures show that the Holy Spirit brings about brokenness. The Spirit does this in three ways. First, through the faithful study and preaching of God’s Word, the Holy Spirit applies the truth of Scripture to bring conviction that our pride and arrogance are a source of weakness, not power. Jeremiah 9:23–24 says we should not boast in riches, strength, or wisdom (the three most vital human “powers”); rather, if we boast, we should boast in the LORD. And Psalm 51:17 tells us that “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit . . . broken heart . . .”

The Holy Spirit also uses life circumstances to convince us of our weakness and brokenness. God often uses tragedy, crisis, death and disability to bring about brokenness. Paul affirmed this in 2 Corinthians 12:7–10 saying, he was given a thorn in his flesh. Though Paul sought relief, and though God sometimes brings physical relief through healing, God was pleased to work through Paul’s affliction. The psalmist concurred when he said, “Before I was afflicted, I went astray . . .” (Ps. 119:67). Affliction can heal us of the disease of depending on ourselves and drive us to depend upon the only truly reliable source of power: the Lord God.

Finally, the Holy Spirit uses “identification” as a tool to show us our brokenness. As we identify with Christ and with his people, we recognize that God breaks, blesses, and gives away a transformed and selfless life to those who are his. Christ is the ultimate example of identification. Through relational ministry to and with broken people (disabled, poor, marginalized, etc.), Jesus identified with weakness and brokenness. His incarnation, seen in John 1:14 (“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us . . .”), brought him to identify with our humanness. And this allowed him to identify with us through his earthly experience, understanding our temptations and our weaknesses.¹ So likewise, he calls on us to identify with those more outwardly broken and weak in order to understand our real state. The Lord Jesus said, “As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me . . .” (Matt. 25:40). As we identify with the weak and marginalized, we not only gain a better understanding of ourselves, but we identify with Christ as well.

It is humbling to admit we do not measure up, that we are not sufficient, that we are broken people. But the Body of Christ must grasp this counterintuitive truth in order to find and dwell in God’s power. We must have the courage to look at each other on Sunday—well-dressed, well-spoken, appearing to have it all together—and say, “We know better. We are broken people, desperately needing the power of God to come in our weakness.”

The Church as a Suffering Body

Throughout Christian history wherever in the world the Church holds forth the light of the Gospel of Christ, believers in Christ have suffered. The early Church began this pattern. In Act 8:1, after the death

of Stephen, a great persecution broke out, and the Church grew and expanded as a result of the ensuing suffering. God allowed this suffering to come into the corporate life of the Church then, just as he allows it in the lives of individual believers still today. God's intention for his Church is that we identify with and embrace those who suffer and not exclude them from the community of believers. Suffering as the Body of Christ follows the Savior's call to suffer, as well as the Apostles' call and example of suffering.

The Savior's Call to Suffering

In His life, Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophecy of the Suffering Servant. He was indeed a "Man of Sorrows...acquainted with grief...who carried our sorrows..." (Isa. 53:3-4, NKJV). Though he is eternally the Son, and the second part of the Trinity, enjoying eternal bliss and fellowship with the Father and the Holy Spirit, yet, he humbled himself. In his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul reminds us that Jesus "made Himself nothing"² and humbled Himself in a progressively downward manner. First he became a human being, flesh and blood. For the eternal God, this alone was an act of infinite selfhumiliation. But he went beyond this, taking on the nature of a servant, living as a simple Galilean. Further, he willingly died, another infinite and mysterious act of suffering and humility. But finally, he not only died, but died in an act of profound humiliation: as a criminal on a cross, bearing on his body the sins of the lost. In this act, he experienced abandonment by God the Father (Matt. 27:46) and became "the Lamb that was slain" (Rev. 5:9-12, NASB). Jesus literally became a curse for us (Gal. 3:13), taking on our sin so that we might be clothed with his righteousness. Paul reminds us that "For our sake he made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21, ESV).

John Calvin said the Christian piety of self-denial is "the beginning, middle, and end of Christian living." In the Synoptic Gospels Jesus says, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me."³ Jesus calls his followers to a life of self-denial, suffering, and even, in God's providence at times, death, for his sake and for the sake of his people.

The Apostles' Call to Suffering

While the Savior's call to suffering is clear, the apostles also issued an unvarnished call to suffering. The Lord foretold this to the disciples in Damascus saying he would show Paul how much he would suffer for the sake of his name.⁴ And indeed, Paul's testimony included a long list of sufferings for the sake of Christ.⁵ Paul came to the place where he said, "I rejoice in my sufferings...filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions..." (Colossians 1:24, ESV). Further, Paul declared that his goal in life was to know Christ, the power of his resurrection, to share in his suffering, becoming like him in his death.⁶ The apostle Peter also spoke numerous times of this divine calling for God's people. He explained that suffering is an integral part of the normal Christian experience when he said, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed" (1 Pet. 4:12-13, ESV). Peter affirmed that God not only calls us to suffer, but assures us of God's plan when he said, "And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you" (1 Pet. 5:10, ESV).

And of course, remember that James opened his letter to the churches saying, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:2-4, ESV). Suffering, Jesus and the Apostles tell us, is the path to maturity. The world tells us to seek pleasure, comfort, and security. But the most enduring lessons and the deepest maturity come through the crucible of suffering.

The Church as a *Mature Body*

Perhaps the most provocative metaphor the Scriptures employ for the Church is “the Body.” Just as our natural body grows, so the Church grows. Maturity requires struggle, hardship, pain, and even brokenness to become, in God’s way and in God’s time, “strong.” The mature Church must understand the role of brokenness and suffering in the lives of believers and the Church must learn to respond to suffering and brokenness in a manner that gives God the glory. Maturity recognizes that God is at work through weakness and therefore counts ministry to the broken, disabled, and suffering not as an obligation, but as a privilege—as if ministering to Christ himself.

The Role of Suffering and Brokenness in the Church

Repeatedly, the New Testament affirms that suffering and brokenness is the path to deeper maturity. We learn that suffering produces character (Rom. 5:3–6); it produces maturity (James 1:2–4); and it produces faith (1 Pet. 1:6–7) and deeper trust in Christ (2 Cor. 1:8–11). Not only is this stated propositionally as true, it is displayed in the lives of the people of God throughout redemptive history. Joseph came through much suffering to a place where he confessed that even those actions people meant for evil in his life, God meant for good and for the saving of many lives.⁷

Though David was called to a position of power and authority, it was brokenness and affliction that brought him to deeper maturity. The Psalms are replete with references to his pain, abandonment, loneliness and brokenness. Through these many difficulties, God sanctified and molded David into the person he needed to be.

As we noted earlier, Jesus in a mysterious way, though God in the flesh, was brought to a deeper maturity through suffering. From the writer of Hebrews, we learn that Jesus was “made perfect” through suffering and as such is able to help us in our weakness (Heb. 2:10).

Finally, again, Paul unfolds this for us most clearly in 1 Corinthians 12:12–26. There he says that the Body has some members that are weaker and less presentable. But in God’s providence, just as in our physical body, so in the Body of Christ, these members are called “indispensable.” What the world would label as liabilities—those whose lives display weakness, brokenness, ugliness, and neediness—God calls absolutely necessary for the mature Body of Christ. This is a crucial lesson the Church must grasp. While we naturally avoid and even reject those who are different from us in their weakness, God says to embrace and bring close.

The Privilege of Ministry to the Broken

Many cultures stress the importance of being *independent*. We grow up, especially in the West, learning to depend on ourselves, not to admit needing anyone to help or assist us on our journey. Being “self-made” in this view is a sign of competence and strength. Being *dependent* on anyone or anything is a sign of weakness. In reality, this is an illusion—because we all need each other, and even more we all need God. No one “makes it” alone. We are in fact *inter-dependent* upon God and one another. Disability helps us see that we are all broken and all part of the same Body, needing to give and receive from one another. This in turn keeps each member of the Body *accountable* to Christ and one another. People with disabilities have much to contribute to the Body of Christ—and when they are not present, from Paul’s metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12, the Body is incomplete, lacking essential elements.

God’s intention for the Church, his Body, is that we would “grow up in all things...” (Eph. 4:15, NKJV). Part of growing up is having a proper understanding of serving and accountability to others. Disability is one way God shows his Church how to become his *complete* Body. Bearing one another’s burdens is actually a *privilege*, a way of assisting in the development of Christ’s likeness in our personal lives and in the corporate life of the Church. Paul says that if one member suffers, then all suffer (1 Cor. 12:26). As we identify with those who suffer, as we embrace the metaphor of an inter-dependent Body, we begin to

see how we can “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal. 6:2, NKJV). As we suffer and receive comfort from God and His people, we are also able to “comfort one another” with the same comfort we have received (2 Cor. 1:3–7). The Holy Spirit brings forth the “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22–23) in those who are disabled and non-disabled alike. The attributes of patience, longsuffering, self-control, joy, etc. are cultivated and displayed as the maturing Body of Christ embraces those who suffer, those who live with disability, weakness, and brokenness.

Final Thoughts

The way people react to suffering and brokenness reveals their assumptions about the nature of the world. Many people assume the world is the way it should be and that suffering is an anomaly to be avoided at all cost. But the mature Church says with conviction that the world is not as it should be. In fact, all creation has suffered the effects of sin and the Fall. All creation groans and longs for redemption and renewal. Because we admit that the world is broken, we believe there will be a re-making, a redress of injustice and brokenness. Brokenness creates a longing in God’s children for all the brokenness and weakness to be changed and made right. And in this “making right” God will receive glory and worship.

The mature Body of Christ says, “For from him and through him and to him are all things”—even suffering and brokenness—and “To him be the glory forever!”⁸

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Notes

1. Hebrews 2:17; 4:14–15
2. Philippians 2:7
3. Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23
4. Acts 9:15–16
5. 2 Corinthians 4:7–12; 11:23–29
6. Philippians 3:10
7. Genesis 41:51–52; 50:20
8. Romans 11:36

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Dr. Michael S. Beates is husband of Mary and father of seven children, the eldest born with profound disabilities. He earned the M.Div. and S.T.M. degrees from Biblical Seminary in Pennsylvania and the Doctor of Ministry (D.Min.) from Reformed Theological Seminary Orlando. Mike served as dean of students at RTS (1996–2003) and at The Geneva School in Casselberry, Florida (2011–2020). He now serves as Chaplain and Bible teacher at Geneva. Mike also served on the International Board of Directors at Joni and Friends from 2000–2023. He has written magazine articles, editorial columns and has contributed chapters to several books, including “God’s Sovereignty and Genetic Anomalies” in *Genetic Ethics: Do the Ends Justify the Genes?* (Eerdmans, 1996). He is the author of *Disability and the Gospel: How God Uses Our Brokenness to Display His Grace* (Crossway, 2012).