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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

Andrew Perriman

'His body, which is the church' Coming to Terms with Metaphor

Mr Perriman, a graduate of London Bible College, who is working in Gabon in West Africa, here tackles an often-neglected question, the precise nature of what happens when a writer uses metaphor, and takes the concept of the church as the body of Christ in the Pauline letters as a case-study.

The theme of the church as the 'body of Christ' has more than any other in Paul stimulated critical reflection on the question of his use of figurative language. Yet, while considerable exegetical and literary-historical attention has been directed towards the problem of whether the identification of the church with the body of Christ is to be understood as simply metaphorical or in some more mysterious, perhaps mystical sense as literal, few commentators have given much thought to the peculiar character of metaphor and its bearing on the general debate.¹

The aim of this article is, *first*, to collate some—by no means all—of the disjointed and incomplete notions that have been expressed in relation to the church/body motif and to attempt to sort out the major rhetorical assumptions that underlie them; and, *secondly*, to set up a few signposts towards a more adequate appreciation of Paul's rhetoric of metaphor. The dependence of this critique on the numerous theoretical discussions of figurative language that have been carried on in recent decades² must

¹ Note Snyman's comment (A. H. Snyman, 'Animadversiones: On Studying the Figures (*schēmata*) in the New Testament', *Bib.* 69:1, 1988, 98): 'Figures and their functions seem to have little impact on scholars writing *exegetical commentaries* on the N.T.'

² Among those works which bear some relation to the study of Biblical language might be noted: F. B. Brown, 'Transfiguration: Poetic Metaphor and Theological Reflection', *JR* 62, 1982; G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London, 1980); N. Frye, *The Great Code* (London, 1981, 1982); R. W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic and the Word of God* (New York, 1966); M. S. Kjærgaard, *Metaphor and Parable* (Leiden, 1986); S. McFague, *Metaphorical Theology* (London, 1982); J. Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and*

remain largely implicit, though care will be taken to indicate what appear to be the most relevant features of an adequate understanding of metaphor. For the most part, particular exegetical and stylistic judgments will be avoided; and for the sake of clarity the more constructive arguments about the proper understanding of metaphor will make use of an abstraction—'the church is the body of Christ'—which is not an exact Pauline formulation, though it might reasonably be regarded as a conflation of 1 Corinthians 12:27 (ὁμοίως δὲ ἑστε σῶμα Χριστοῦ) and Ephesians 1:22–23 (τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ, ἣτις ἐστὶν τὸ σῶμα αὐτοῦ).

Literal and Metaphorical Interpretations

The most significant presupposition, universally evident, is the distinction between literal and metaphorical interpretations of the description of the church as the body of Christ. So H. Ridderbos argues, surveying a broad range of exegesis on this topic: 'one may distinguish between two kinds of conceptions, namely, those which understand the qualification body of Christ in a figurative, collective sense and those which take it in a real, personal sense.'³ For E. Schweizer this is not simply an interpretative dichotomy: there is an actual division within the texts between the 'figurative sayings', on the one hand, and the 'stricter sayings' according to which 'the one body of the community is no other than the body of Christ Himself'.⁴ However, the question of what, linguistically and semantically, such a distinction entails is rarely asked.⁵ What of the common opinion that all language is fundamentally metaphorical? And if a distinction is allowed (this seems neces-

Religious Language (Oxford, 1986); A. N. Wilder, *The Language of the Gospel: Early Christian Rhetoric* (New York, 1964). General studies include: M. C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics* (New York, 1958); M. Black, *Models and Metaphors* (New York, 1962); D. Cooper, *Metaphor* (Oxford, 1986); T. Hawkes, *Metaphor* (London and New York, 1972); A. Ortony, (Ed.) *Metaphor and Thought* (Cambridge, 1979); I. A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (New York, 1936); P. Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* (London, 1975); S. Sacks, (ed.) *On Metaphor* (Chicago, 1978); C. M. Turbayne, *The Myth of Metaphor* (New Haven and London, 1962).

³ H. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of his Theology* (London, 1977), 363.

⁴ E. Schweizer, 'σῶμα κτλ.', *TDNT* VII, 1068–1071.

⁵ D. E. H. Whiteley is one of the few and he merely touches on the subject: 'Although it would be going too far to say that "all language is decayed metaphor", there lies behind our ordinary language more metaphor than we commonly realize' (*The Theology of St. Paul*) (Oxford, 1972), 192.

sary at least at a synchronic level), on the basis of what criteria is it made?

Instead, where the metaphorical interpretation is considered inadequate, we find emerging two general critical habits of thought. The *first* is a tendency to fudge the distinction between metaphorical and literal language. The *second* is an unnecessarily low opinion of metaphor.

1. The word 'literal' is rarely allowed to stand alone as a sufficient definition of Paul's usage: it is invariably reinforced by terms such as 'ontological', 'real', 'spiritual' and 'mystical'. L. Cerfaux, for example, is of the opinion that even in the earlier epistles there is evidence of a 'mystical deepening', a transformation, of the traditional Stoic simile of the body.⁶ But as R. H. Gundry points out, words such as 'spiritual' and 'mystical' only serve to obscure the issue, disguising the fact that the implications of literalness have not been fully thought through. In fact, to apply the word 'mystical' to 'the body of Christ' is virtually an admission of defeat. It shifts the notion into an area of semantic and logical imprecision where, for example, it is inappropriate to ask how individual bodies can be members of another body; but this is only what metaphor does. In both cases there is a suspension of the literal sense of the expression: the difference is that 'mystical' provides a more specific (and more restricted) definition of how the non-literality is to be understood.

A comment made by J. A. T. Robinson, who has promoted the literal interpretation more vehemently than most, is particularly revealing in this context and provides an opportunity to look more closely at the relationship between literal and metaphorical language. Speaking of 1 Corinthians 6:15 he admits that 'to say that individuals are members of a person is indeed a very violent use of language'.⁷ But if what Paul says is to be taken literally, as Robinson argues, it is not at all a violent use of language: the 'violence' is rather conceptual. It is metaphor that is a violation of language, and it is precisely this violation that marks it off from literal language.

Metaphor initially is the misapplication of a term, a 'calculated error' (P. Ricoeur), which, to be understood, necessitates the abandonment of its literal meaning in favour of a new meaning

⁶ L. Cerfaux, *The Church in the Theology of St Paul* (New York, 1959), 267–268.

⁷ J. A. T. Robinson, *The Body* (London, 1952), 50.

determined interpretively through its interaction in the particular context. (This dependence on context is true to some extent of virtually all meaning—it is what I. A. Richards called the ‘interanimation of words’⁸—but it is radically enhanced in the case of metaphor by the overt inappropriateness of a literal interpretation.) One problem with metaphorical language is that the ‘error’ is not always obvious: it is a measure of the extent to which metaphor must be understood as a contextually determined phenomenon that it is often necessary, as in the case of the church/body motif, to subject it to the full range of interpretive strategies (logical, theological, exegetical, literary critical) before a confident answer can be given to the question of whether an expression is literal or figurative. The extent of the problem can be illustrated by noting the sort of factors—limiting ourselves to those that arise out of the immediate passage—that must be taken into account before we can decide whether the identification of the church at Corinth with the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12:27 should be regarded as literal or metaphorical: the anarthrous status of *σῶμα* (*the* body of Christ or *a* body of Christ?); the question of whether Paul is speaking of the local or the universal church; the relation of this statement to the preceding ‘parable’ of the interdependency of the parts of the body and to whatever parallels or sources lie beyond it; its relation to the emphasis in vv. 12–14 on the *one* body; the question of the general appropriateness of an ontological statement in what is essentially a political context.

2. More significantly, affirmation of the literal interpretation frequently entails a belittling of metaphor. E. L. Mascall, for example, rejects the idea that we are dealing with a ‘*mere* metaphor’.⁹ E. Käsemann dismisses the old view that ‘in describing the church as the body of Christ, Paul, who inclined to bold statements, was using a beautiful metaphor’, as though it were *a priori* impossible for ‘bold statements’ to be made by means of metaphor.¹⁰ Schweizer argues that 1 Corinthians 12:27 ‘cannot be regarded *merely* as an imprecise way of putting a *pure* comparison’.¹¹ And Robinson betrays his contempt for figurative language when he says of the same verse that Paul ‘is not saying

⁸ Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, 47–65.

⁹ Cited in E. Best, *One Body in Christ* (London, 1955), 98 (italics added).

¹⁰ E. Käsemann, *Perspectives on Paul* (London, 1971), 103.

¹¹ Schweizer, ‘*σῶμα κτλ.*’, 1071 (italics added).

anything so weak as that the Church is a society with a common life and governor.¹²

What these statements have in common is the assumption that metaphor is cognitively ineffectual. Käsemann's argument is particularly puzzling:

The apostle uses the expression 'the body of Christ' because he really means to point out the structural characteristics of a body; that is why he makes a detailed comparison in 1 Corinthians 12:14ff. But this way of speaking does not indicate that what is being described is any different. On the contrary, the comparison brings out the reality which is intended through the concrete application of the statement of identity to the life of the Christian community. The exalted Christ really has an early body, and believers with their whole being are actually incorporated into it and have therefore to behave accordingly.¹³

What this appears to be saying (it is not altogether transparent) is that statements about the church as a body are both analogical and literal: both 'the way of speaking' and 'what is being described' are the same. Käsemann cannot deny that Paul introduces the passage with a comparative article (καθάπερ . . . οὕτως) and that 'a comparison determines the progression of his argument', yet, supposing that a metaphor must be merely a 'pictorial' expression of certain 'structural characteristics', he insists that this is in effect incidental to the underlying literal identification of the church with the exalted body of Christ. This is surely far-fetched. It is tautological to describe something by analogy with itself, as though we might say 'a house is like a house', 'a body is like a body'.¹⁴

Within the terms of Käsemann's account we are obliged to choose between an impotent metaphoricity and an uncompromisingly literal assertion of the *incorporation* of believers in Christ. There is no consideration of the possibility that a *real* relationship might be expressed by means of the metaphor. The same restrictive evaluation of metaphor is evident in E. P. Sanders' comments on Paul's assertion, 'your bodies are members

¹² Robinson, *The Body*, 51.

¹³ Käsemann, *Perspectives*, 104.

¹⁴ Cf. E. Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (London, 1973), 336, where it is argued in the context of Romans 12:3-8 that 'A distinction must be made between the metaphorical explanation of the motif and the underlying conception of the worldwide body of the Redeemer which is most strongly worked out in the deutero-Pauline epistles.'

of Christ' (1 Cor. 6:15): 'The participatory union is not a figure of speech for something else; it is, as many scholars have insisted, real.'¹⁵ The oddity of this remark lies in the notion that if the expression 'members of Christ' is taken metaphorically, then it must be speaking about 'something else'—with the implication that, whatever this 'something else' is, it is not real. But there is no reason at all why a metaphor should not speak of a state of affairs that is real (and certainly neither Käsemann nor Sanders offers any justification for his assumptions): the indirection that characterizes metaphor does not abrogate its semantic and referential functions, it merely renders them more complex.

The literal view of the body of Christ has fallen somewhat into disfavour, partly because the history of religions context of ideas that writers such as Käsemann invoked in its support¹⁶ is now less convincing, and partly because figurative language has acquired a new respectability, albeit it at a rather unsophisticated level, among biblical commentators, largely as a result of literary critical work done on the parables. Much of what has been written on the 'metaphorical' side of the debate, however, developed as a reaction to the literal interpretation of the body of Christ and it is this polemical motivation which accounts for the frequent reductive qualification of the term 'metaphorical'. The argument is that the language is not literal but metaphorical and for this reason we must concede that it is saying much *less* than the literalists suppose. In other words, we find the same low opinion of metaphor, the same reluctance to ascribe to it anything other than a nominal, illustrative function, that we found in the literalist camp: thus Gundry speaks of *σῶμα* as being 'purely metaphorical'; and according to C. F. D. Moule it is 'a metaphor simply for the corporation of Christians'.¹⁷ As a result, understanding of the idea expressed by the phrase 'the body of Christ' must be deepened not through the structure of metaphor but by going outside the metaphor, by distinguishing between it and some separate conception of the church's organic relationship to Christ. An inadequate appreciation of the distinctive semantic function of metaphor places an immediate restriction on the

¹⁵ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London, 1977), 445. Cf. H. Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* (Philadelphia, 1969), 111 n. 21: 'μέλη, "members," is not merely a figure, but signifies real connection.'

¹⁶ Käsemann, *Perspectives*, 103.

¹⁷ R. H. Gundry, *Sōma in Biblical Theology* (Cambridge, 1976), p. 255; C. F. D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology* (Cambridge, 1977), 81.

meaning that we expect Paul's language—as metaphor or simile—to yield.

Paradoxically, therefore, any attempt to develop the metaphorical interpretation of the body of Christ on such a narrow basis is likely to lead back sooner or later towards a realistic conception. Moule's ambivalence on this score is perhaps symptomatic. He believes that Paul's designation of the church as the body of Christ is for the most part metaphorical but that 1 Corinthians 6:15 and 12:12–13 suggest 'a mode of thought which viewed Christ himself as an inclusive Person, a Body, to be joined to which was to become part of him'.¹⁸ It is not clear, however, whether these two passages are to be thought of simply as 'exceptional cases' which leave the metaphorical interpretation more or less intact or whether they represent a more fundamental extension of the body motif in the direction of a literal conception. His discussion leaves the issue unresolved. Similarly, the distinction that Gundry draws between two bodies of Christ ('an individual body, distinct from believers, in which he arose, ascended, and lives on high, and an ecclesiastical Body, consisting of believers, in which he dwells on earth through his Spirit'), while doing some justice to the complexity of Paul's language, begs the question of what the precise rhetorical relationship is between these two bodies.¹⁹ We are not told.

Gundry, nevertheless, goes further than most in attempting to assess the rhetorical character of Paul's language. His argument against the literal interpretation put forward by writers such as Cerfaux and Robinson rests largely on the insistence that the distinction between literal and metaphorical language must be consistent. On the one hand, there must be an internal consistency: it is illegitimate for Robinson to claim, for example, that the church is literally Christ's physical body yet that individuals are only 'analogically' members of that body.²⁰ Similarly in discussing Robinson's treatment of 1 Corinthians 6:12–20 he asks, 'if we take the sexuality of the language as figurative, ought we not to take the physicality of the language in the same way?' On the other hand, there must also be, he argues, an external consistency in relation to alternative descriptions of the church. Robinson happily classifies as metaphors, for example, the growing up of believers into the full stature of Christ and the picture

¹⁸ Moule, *Origin*, 81.

¹⁹ Gundry, *Sōma*, 228.

²⁰ Gundry, *Sōma*, 231.

of the church as a building or temple. But, Gundry protests, 'what justifies our treating such expressions as metaphors and image while insisting that the Body of Christ is literal?'²¹

While it is true, however, that Robinson's distinction is arbitrary and unsupported, this latter objection is not entirely valid: first, there is no necessary reason why one expression should not be literal and the others figurative; secondly, given that Christ is thought to have an exalted body (Phil. 3:21), the identification of the church as the body of Christ has a stronger claim to be understood literally than, for example, the description of the community of the church as a temple, in which there is not the same semantic proximity. A more serious objection emerges, however, when the christological implications are brought into view, for the realistic interpretation of the body of Christ conflicts not so much with alternative metaphors for the church as with the idea of Christ's lordship over the church. It will be seen later that in Colossians and Ephesians the metaphor of Christ as head is never properly assimilated into the metaphor of the church as his body: the measure of detachment presupposed by the sovereignty of Christ must constitute part of the explanation for this.

Sources and Parallels

One aspect of Paul's rhetoric in connection with the church/body motif that generally has been well covered by commentators is the question of sources and parallels. The importance of this for our investigation is that to a large extent the question of rhetorical status and the question of terminological origins are interrelated. So, for example, Schweizer claims that the step of regarding the church as the real body of Christ 'is hardly conceivable apart from some guiding religious model', which he finds in the unity of patriarch and people represented in Adam.²² And Käsemann, having ruled out a purely metaphorical explanation of Romans 12:4-5, argues that we thus 'cannot avoid the question of the origin and mediation of the motif even though there is no more difficult riddle in the whole literature of mysticism'.²³

Two particular methodological difficulties with this project need to be emphasized. *First*, even supposing that Paul's identification of the church as the body of Christ can be plausibly linked with a prior literary or religious tradition such as the 'Stoic commonplace of the

²¹ Gundry, *Sōma*, 234.

²² Schweizer, 'σῶμα κτλ.', 1071-1072.

²³ Käsemann, *Romans*, 336.

state as a body in which each member had his part to play²⁴ or the Heavenly Man of Gnosticism, there is no guarantee that the rhetorical status has been borrowed along with the terminology. Language that was originally understood literally can easily be re-applied, metaphorically; equally, for particular stylistic reasons, a writer may choose to make a literal statement in terms that have a strong figurative background. Thus Käsemann assumes too much when he writes that

neither Judaism's 'corporate personality' nor the middle Stoa's cosmic organism was a mere image which could be set over against reality in the modern manner. In both cases the ancients believed that they were dealing with an actually existing reality. The position is no different when Paul talks about the body of Christ.²⁵

Secondly, the hunt for origins and parallels tend to distract from the fundamental task of reading the text intelligently. Part of the problem is that the evidence that such a hunt is likely to uncover is usually contradictory and rarely decisive. And given that any writer is free to adapt the literary tradition upon which he draws, the approach is inherently flawed. While the literary and religious context certainly cannot be ignored, the sort of rhetorical and stylistic judgments that we are dealing with here must emerge ultimately from the text itself. Cerfaux traces the shifts of opinion that followed T. W. Manson's claim that the expression Ἑλλήνων σώματι in the inscription of Cyrene, edict iii, constituted a precedent for a collective and figurative interpretation of Paul's application of σῶμα to the church.²⁶ He comes to the conclusion that Manson's view is mistaken and that prior to Paul there is no example of such a usage in Greek: 'we refuse to see in σῶμα the meaning of "social body".' As a result the church can be spoken of as a body only because it is indeed the real body of Christ. But such an emphatic judgment takes no account of a large number of other hidden factors that may have shaped Paul's language: non-extant literary precedents, popular conceptions, the context of controversy and debate within which Paul formulated his ideas, and even the possibility that particular expressions arose out of the very process of composition. It is a peculiarity of Biblical studies that answers to what are essentially literary critical problems are more often than

²⁴ W. L. Knox, *St Paul and the Church of the Gentiles*, cited in Best, *One Body*, 83.

²⁵ Käsemann, *Perspectives*, 104.

²⁶ Cerfaux, *The Church*, 272-274.

not sought outside the text than within it. This demonstrates a lack of faith in the text and presumably in the capacity for literary judgment that the reader brings to it.

Those studies which attempt to locate the origin of the body motif within Paul's own thought (as arising, for example, out of Eucharistic language or the 'in Christ' phrases) are on safer and more useful ground. But even here we need to tread carefully. On occasion such arguments can sound distinctly haphazard:

We have seen that there are grounds for not finding the idea of a collective Body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 6; hence Paul's preparation for the introduction of this concept in 1 Corinthians 12 is to be found solely in the context of the Eucharist. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the concept is somehow connected with the words of institution.²⁷

In a text such as a Pauline epistle there are numerous levels at which words can be 'connected', and a connection at, say, an associative level need not necessarily imply a connection at a logical or referential level. E. Best also manages to draw some highly questionable conclusions from the development of the body motif in 1 Corinthians.²⁸ Does the extent to which the metaphor is worked out in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 necessarily imply that 'this is the first occasion upon which Paul has explained its meaning to the Corinthian Christians'? Are we bound to suppose that, since the elaboration of the metaphor in chapter 12 comes after an apparent reference to the Church as a body in 10:17, 'the Church was first termed "the Body of Christ" and then the conception of Christians as members of the Body, living as a body, was formed'? There is no reason to assume that the sequence of ideas presented in the letter is the same as that which too place in Paul's own thought; nor is it impossible that an abbreviated reference to the body should *precede* the explanation which logically it presupposes.

Varieties of Figure

Some sort of differentiation between figures (metaphor, simile, analogy, etc.) is evident in most of the studies of 'the body of Christ'. Often little more is involved than an approximate labelling.

²⁷ A. J. M. Wedderburn, 'The Body of Christ and Related Concepts in 1 Corinthians', *SJT* 24.1, 1971, 78.

²⁸ Best, *One Body*, 84-85.

Two particular areas of contention might be considered, however, both of them represented in Robinson's work.

1. The relationship between simile and metaphor has not always been clearly understood. Notoriously Robinson writes:

... to say that the Church is the body of Christ is no more of a metaphor than to say that the flesh of the incarnate Jesus or the bread of the Eucharist is the body of Christ. None of them is 'like' His body (Paul never says this): each of them is the body of Christ, in that each is the physical complement and extension of the one and the same Person and Life.²⁹

But, as Gundry correctly observes, 'failure to use simile does not decide against the use of metaphor.'³⁰ The underlying mistake that Robinson makes (the more obvious one is not to notice that it is simile not metaphor that uses 'like') is to suppose that metaphor is functionally an existential assertion of a certain type of relationship, that of similarity, which stands in contrast to assertions of literal identification.

The part that similarity plays in metaphor has been a bone of contention among theorists ever since Aristotle said, 'The simile is also a metaphor; for there is very little difference.'³¹ Objections have frequently been voiced against the view that resemblance is determinative for metaphor: 'Similarity is a vacuous predicate,' J. R. Searle argues: 'any two things are similar in some respect or other';³² and he claims further that there are 'a great many metaphorical utterances where there is no relevant literal corresponding similarity.' These arguments, however, are invalid (they are also, for that matter, self-contradictory): in the *first* place, the vacuousness of similarity is reduced both by the context of the metaphor and by the fact that some things are *more* alike than others; and *secondly*, it seems fair to say, though it cannot be demonstrated here, that where there genuinely is no similarity, we are probably dealing with some form of metonymy³³ rather than metaphor. We can agree with W. Empson when he criticizes

²⁹ Robinson, *The Body*, 51.

³⁰ Gundry, *Sōma*, 234.

³¹ Aristotle, *Art of Rhetoric* III.iv.1 (London, 1975).

³² J. R. Searle, 'Metaphor', in Ortony, *Metaphor*, 106.

³³ Metonymy depends on a relationship not of similarity but of literal contiguity: either of part to whole (the sail for the ship) or of intrinsic association (the crown for monarchy). Defined broadly in this way it includes figures such as synecdoche; it differs functionally from metaphor in that it is not predicative.

Richards for undervaluing the part that likeness plays in the total effect of metaphor: 'the hatpeg is functionally important even when hidden by the hat.'³⁴

'Much of the difficulty arises from the fact that similarity is not a simple, undifferentiated function but operates between two poles according to the degree of semantic relatedness between the two subjects.³⁵ Towards one end of the scale, whose extreme is marked by synonymy, lie statements such as 'a wolf is like an alsatian', 'a bus is like a car', in which there is a high degree of relatedness and whose purpose is to point to the essential character of the subject. As semantic relatedness decreases, however, the function of similarity shifts from definition towards description (Ricoeur's term 'redescription' is useful because it distinguishes metaphorical predication from literal predication), towards the modification of non-defining characteristics. So the simile 'man is like a wolf' would be of no use if we did not already know the meaning of 'man': its function is rather to present the known subject in a new light, to draw attention to a set of secondary characteristics. The limit to this shift of function is meaninglessness, though such a point is practically difficult to determine.

Metaphor is not simply an assertion of similarity, as Robinson assumes: it *uses* similarity in this second sense in order to say something about its subject. What distinguishes it from simile depends to a large extent on context and the question is probably most usefully approached by considering the difference between the statements 'the church *is* the body of Christ' and 'the church *is like* the body of Christ'. (It is, in fact, only in this sort of case, where the metaphor and similar are closely parallel, differentiated only by the particle, that such a comparison is worth making: frequently the difference between metaphor and simile is a matter not of semantics but simply of syntax and grammar.)

The simile is unambiguous; it says something about the church by means of a perceived literal similarity with the body of Christ, though out of context it is impossible to determine exactly what is being said. At the heart of the metaphor lies the same redescriptive action: it is not primarily the assertion of a particular type of relationship (Paul is saying neither that the church is

³⁴ W. Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words* (London, 1951), 331.

³⁵ The idea of 'semantic relatedness' depends on the sort of hierarchical structuring of vocabulary that J. Lyons describes in *Semantics I* (Cambridge, 1977), 291-301.

identical with the body of Christ nor that the church is similar to the body of Christ), but a statement about the church. The content of this statement, however, is mediated by means of both a similarity and a false identification, and it is this latter aspect that distinguishes the metaphor from the simile. A further point that might be made is that there is often a pragmatic difference between metaphors and similes of the kind *A is B*, *A is like B*, in that they tend to constitute different speech acts: the statement 'Albert is a skunk' entails a much higher degree of commitment (it is an accusation) than the essentially descriptive 'Albert is like a skunk', which is why it is the more effective insult. Paul's metaphorical identification of the church with the body of Christ likewise carries a commitment of faith, or an exhortation to faith, that is lacking in the more rational simile.

2. Confusion has also arisen on occasion between metaphor and analogy. Robinson's argument that 'the body of Christ' is not a metaphor but an analogy and that 'the analogy holds because they are in literal fact the risen organism of Christ's person' is untenable.³⁶ The necessary literal basis of the analogy is simply that both the church and the body are constituted of cooperating parts. Analogy differs from metaphor on two grounds: in terms of structure and in terms of function. *First*, the emphasis in an analogy is on the correspondence between relationships (*A is to B as C is to B*) rather than on the less precisely articulated interaction between two subjects that operates in a metaphor of the type *A is B*. *Secondly*, while metaphor is essentially predicative, analogy is ratiocinative. But there is no reason why analogy should be considered more compatible with a literal interpretation than metaphor: between the description and the thing described there is the same disjunct relationship of similarity. We might note further S. F. B. Bedale's equally misleading argument that the image of 'the body of Christ' is 'not a mere metaphor, but one which implies the existence of a real *analogy* between a spiritual relationship and organic life'.³⁷ If an analogy can be 'real', so too can metaphor.

Head and Body

The problematic relationship between 'head' and 'body' in Col-

³⁶ Robinson, *The Body*, 51.

³⁷ S. F. B. Bedale, S.S.M., 'The Theology of the Church', in F. L. Cross (Ed.) *Studies in Ephesians* (London, 1956), 66.

ossians and Ephesians has elicited a modest amount of critical reflection at the level of rhetorical analysis. Moule largely endorses J. J. Meuzelaar's argument, primarily on exegetical grounds, that 'head' and 'body' in these epistles constitute not a single integrated figure but two logically distinct metaphors.³⁸ Similarly, on the basis this time of the conceptual and logical difficulties posed by attempts to reconcile the two terms, Ridderbos asserts that we have to do here 'not with one and the same metaphor but with two, each of which, although they are (can be) closely connected with each other, yet has an independent significance and an independent existence.'³⁹

Both judgments rest on criteria of coherence. In Meuzelaar's case the coherence is partly grammatical: in Colossians 2:19 and Ephesians 4:16 by virtue of a masculine relative pronoun the 'body' is associated not with the 'head' but with 'Christ'. Such a disjunction of the terms is considered sufficient to bring about a complete dissociation of the metaphors. For Ridderbos, as we have said, the coherence is logical. he argues, for instance, that 'Christ cannot be thought of as a (subordinate) part of his own body, which is involved in the process of growth toward adulthood and which as part of the body must itself consequently be "in Christ"'. Neither Moule nor Ridderbos gives consideration to the rhetorical implications of the textual proximity of two such congruous terms. (Paul never speaks of Christ as the head of the church in Colossians and Ephesians without in the same breath speaking of the church as the body.) Yet their arguments are important because, by allowing, in these cases, logical and grammatical coherence to take precedence over a superficial imagistic coherence, they resist the temptation to rationalize metaphor—essentially the error of allegoristic interpretation. It is usually a mistake to separate the figurativity of a passage from its specific discursive context.

The measure of dissociation between the two metaphors suggests, moreover, that in Colossians and Ephesians the church/body motif at least has become to some extent 'established': so Ridderbos speaks of the fixed 'technical' significance that the term has acquired.⁴⁰ In connection with this we might make two related observations about the occurrence of the metaphor in these two epistles. *First*, with the possible exception of Ephesians 5:30, the metaphor is not used in a

³⁸ Moule, *Origin*, 74.

³⁹ Ridderbos, *Paul*, 380–381.

⁴⁰ Ridderbos, *Paul*, 376–377.

framework of grammatical predication in the way it is in the earlier epistles ('we . . . are one body in Christ', 'your bodies are members of Christ', 'you are a body of Christ') with the result that the metaphorical predication ('the church is the body of Christ') is implicit. *Secondly*, the occurrences of the metaphor fall into two distinct categories: an appositional use in which the implicit metaphorical predication is carried by the explanatory juxtaposition of 'body' and 'church' (for example, 'his body, which is the church': Col. 1:24); and a unitive use where there is no mention of the church but 'body' is qualified by either 'whole' or 'one' ('you were called in one body' (Col. 3:15)).

The Function of Metaphor

It has been a central complaint of this essay that commentators on the church/body motif have generally failed to appreciate, let alone attempt to describe, the full semantic function of metaphor. There have been some exceptions.

The 'close relation between symbol and reality' in Hebrew thought, which Best puts forward as an argument in support of the metaphorical interpretation of the body of Christ, does not explain very much and raises some difficult questions. Are some symbols closer to reality than others? What difference does such proximity make? But his attempt to explain the provisional and heuristic character of metaphorical language is more carefully thought out:

We can compare the difficulty of drawing an accurate map of a part of the earth's surface. The earth is a sphere; maps are drawn on two-dimensional plane surfaces; there are a number of ways of 'projecting' the surface of a sphere on a plane; each reproduces more or less faithfully certain aspects of the original but distorts others; each results in a map of the earth which gives its user valuable information, provided he remembers its limitations, and does not accept it as a completely true picture of the real world. In a very similar way the different phrases 'Body of Christ', 'in Christ', etc., are 'projections' of the fundamental idea of the corporate personality of Christ and believers. The same is true of the other phrases which describe the Church—olive tree, building, bride; each tells us something about the Church but no one of them fully describes the Church. Consequently the Church is not really and ontologically the Body of Christ.⁴¹

Two basic thoughts emerge here: *first*, that metaphors are

⁴¹ Best, *One Body*, 99–100,

'projections'; and *secondly*, that the deficiency of each projection is offset by the multifariety of metaphorical descriptions of the church. We may consider each in turn.

The idea that metaphors are 'projections' calls to mind M. Black's argument that in a Metaphor a set of 'associated implications' derived from the secondary subject is 'projected upon' the primary subject.⁴² However, it is clear that Best draws the term from his own map-making metaphor and it would therefore be a mistake to suppose that it has any explanatory value: it is merely a concomitant of the second idea, which is his main concern. In fact, in Best's account the process of 'projection' is the reverse of Black's idea and a less accurate representation of what happens in metaphor: the secondary subject (the metaphorical term, and in this case the map) is seen as a projection of the primary subject (the sphere), whereas for Black the secondary subject is projected upon the primary subject. This is not a trivial point: it is symptomatic of a tendency to overlook the predicative character of metaphor, the function it has as part of discourse. The same is true of the fact that Best has more to say about the complementarity of the several metaphors for the church than about the peculiar type of perception carried by each individual metaphor. Detached in this way from their proper context, the metaphors become merely images and their most striking characteristic, the 'logical absurdity' (M. C. Beardsley) that gives rise to new meaning, is blunted.

D. E. H. Whiteley sees the importance of the metaphorical character of the church/body motif in the fact that it provides a means of speaking about something which simply cannot be adequately expressed in literal language:

When we say, 'The church is the Body of Christ', we are trying to express our *solidarity* in *Christ*: both *Christ* and *solidarity* are foreign to our understanding. We are trying to express a fact which we cannot wholly understand by means of a metaphor; and the metaphor which we employ cannot be translated without remainder into non-metaphorical terms: nevertheless, the metaphor remains a metaphor.⁴³

The observation is a commonplace in most theoretical discussions of metaphor: J. D. Crossan, for example, contrasts cases of metaphor used as a 'pedagogical device', arguing that "in any

⁴² M. Black, 'More About Metaphor', 28, in Ortony, *Metaphor*.

⁴³ Whiteley, *Theology*, 192.

final analysis such metaphors are expendable', with those cases in which metaphor is used to 'articulate a referent so new or so alien to consciousness that this referent can only be grasped within the metaphor itself'.⁴⁴ But it is rather unusual in the context of Pauline studies. Best sees the failure of logical or literal language to express the relationship between the church and Christ as the reason why Paul 'rationalizes it into metaphors'.⁴⁵ Gundry's argument that the Pauline metaphors 'stand for a reality understandable but incomprehensible' is hardly lucid, but it does seem to point towards a similar recognition of the power of metaphor to carry a semantic surplus: thus 'the attempt to exhaust its meaning is doomed from the start'.⁴⁶

The idea of a semantic surplus needs careful qualification, as indeed does that of 'metaphorical meaning'. We have noted already that metaphor is contextually dependent in a way in which normal language is not because at its heart lies an illogicality. A more precise way of understanding this is to recognize that the cognitive content of a metaphor, its contribution to discourse, is not strictly a matter of sentence meaning but of use: words in a metaphorical statement do not change their meaning, the only meaning they have is their literal one, but they are employed in such a way that ideas other than the literal meaning emerge. 'Metaphorical meaning,' Searle writes, 'is always speaker's utterance meaning'.⁴⁷ There are, in fact, good grounds for arguing, as D. Davidson does,⁴⁸ that it is a mistake to talk about 'metaphorical meaning' at all; in practice, however, it is very difficult to avoid using the term (to speak of metaphorical effects, as Davidson proposes, may be phenomenologically correct but it tends to isolate the metaphor from its discursive context) and it is enough for our present purposes to make it clear that the unavailability of an intrinsic meaning forces the reader to interpret for himself within a relatively unrestrained field of meaning. (There is a point of contact here with the idea that metaphor may be used to evoke commitment.) The less conventional the metaphor, the greater the interpretive effort that is

⁴⁴ Cited in N. Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom* (London, 1976), 158.

⁴⁵ Best, *One Body*, 111.

⁴⁶ Gundry, *Sōma*, 241.

⁴⁷ Searle, 'Metaphor' in Ortony, *Metaphor*, 93.

⁴⁸ D. Davidson, 'What Metaphors Mean' in Sacks, *On Metaphor*, 29-45; this is also Cooper's position (*Metaphor*, 89-117).

required. What is remarkable about the church/body motif is that the dimension of conventional meaning (the Cynic-Stoic analogy of the body) with its emphasis on unity and cooperation is overlaid by the far more startling identification of the church with the particular body of Christ. It is at this level that the reader is more creatively engaged.

A. C. Bridge argues that the difficulties interpreters have had with the identification of the church with the body of Christ stem chiefly from the fact that our presuppositions are not those of the N.T. It is worth asking, he says, whether the problem

may not be a consequence of the contemporary assumption that, in the doctrine of the body of Christ, theology is faced with an ontological either-or: *either* the N.T. is speaking of a literal, material reality, *or* it is using mere metaphors; where, for the N.T., there was another category of reality, the symbolic, which either we have altogether lost or we largely discount.⁴⁹

This is certainly one way of approaching the question. But it should be noted that Bridge's solution is not a linguistic one. The dichotomy is overcome by positing an intermediate 'category of reality' which he calls 'symbolic'. This has led to a somewhat curious explanation of the logic of the symbolism involved. He argues that 'the N.T. presents the Church as the symbolic image of the risen Christ because there are no other terms in which the experienced reality of the new life . . . is expressible'. But this is an inversion of the normal direction of predication. When Paul says 'you are the body of Christ', it is 'the body of Christ' which provides the means of expressing the character of the church, not the other way round. It is not the case that 'the Church is presented as the image or material component of a symbol, of which the risen Christ is the transcendent reality.'

There is, in fact, no need to introduce a separate mode of reality in order to account for the impact of Paul's language. The matter can be dealt with at a rhetorical level if we allow, as we have argued already, that metaphor can refer legitimately to something that is *real*. The manner of that reference, of course, is not the same as literal reference, which is why metaphor is so valuable for talking about such intangible subjects as the relationship between Christ and the church. By disrupting normal, literal ways of describing and referring, metaphor makes possible new ways of speaking. Paul Ricoeur's definition cannot be fully

⁴⁹ A. C. Bridge, *Images of God* (London, 1960), 112.

appreciated apart from the total context of this work, but its relevance here should be sufficiently clear: 'Metaphor is that strategy of discourse by which language divests itself of its ordinary descriptive function in order to serve its extraordinary function of re-description.'⁵⁰ But there are few rules for working out the substance of this re-description. Where conventional associations and the more obvious structural features (the church is like a body in the relation of its parts) do not exhaust its 'meaning', then metaphor takes on a more elusive and creative role. The greater value of the various theoretical accounts of metaphor on the market lies not in their individual coherence or adequacy but in the extent to which they stretch the interpreter's appreciation of metaphor. Metaphor is a complex device—probably the most dynamic and radical means of expression available to us.

Between the mundane community of the church and the exalted person of Christ Paul has allowed a series of figures to emerge—superimposed frames of the body motif—that can be focused in the simple statement ὑμεῖς δέ ἐστε σῶμα Χριστοῦ (1 Cor. 12:27). At a relatively low, illustrative level there is the idea of corporation, of the interdependence of members within a body. But this metaphor/simile or the collective body is overlaid, as we have seen, by a more tantalizing and provocative idea: that it is at the same time the body of Christ. It is no longer the general term 'body' which provides the metaphorical predicate but a specific reference to Christ's glorified body. This achieves more than the simple relation of the community to Christ (a body which belongs to Christ), the addition of a vertical dimension to the horizontal; it attaches a specific set of associations (an implication-complex, to use Black's phrase⁵¹) by means of which understanding of the significance and function of the church might be extended; and it provokes an interpretive response that in the end makes sense only in the context of a demand for commitment. Finally, beyond this, we should not forget, there is the fact that the idea of the glorified body of Christ is itself something other than strictly literal, as 1 Corinthians 15 makes clear.

By dismantling the total metaphor in this way we are not presuming to describe the history of the expression: that is another task. Moreover, we ought also to recognize that we have

⁵⁰ P. Ricoeur, 'The Metaphorical Process', *Semeia* 4, 1975, 88.

⁵¹ Black, 'More About Metaphor', 31, in Ortony, *Metaphor*.

been dealing chiefly with *interpretative*, not *productive*, categories and distinctions. Projected back across the hermeneutic divide, our arguments would take on a different guise: far more important would be the process of thought, the struggle to understand, to express, to persuade. And, naturally, there is much more that could be said both about the structure of the body motif (each of these three frames is itself the focal point of various associations and patterns of ideas that contribute to the complexity of the total image) and about the particular nuances and restrictions associated with each individual occurrence. But the value of the metaphorical interpretation should be clear. To conclude with a rather mannered and not entirely appropriate conceit, it is an explosive metaphor, one that breaks up the rock face of mystery so that new veins of meaning can be mined.