

## The Pauline Doctrine of the Church

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The doctrine of the church is one of the prominent themes of Pauline theology. A glance at a concordance will show that Paul uses the term *church* sometimes to denote a local organization of professed Christian believers (1 Cor 1:2) and other times to denote the whole body of believers (Col 1:18). This twofold usage not only embodies the principal divisions of Pauline ecclesiology, but it also indicates the reason why this doctrine receives the attention it does by Paul. The local organization is emphasized in his writings because of the apostle's desire to organize his many converts into self-governing and self-propagating groups. The teaching concerning the universal church, the body of Christ, is vitally connected with Paul's relation to the revelation of the mystery (Eph 3:1–12).

### The Organism

The church as an organism is the complex structure of the body of Christ which carries on living activities by means of the individual believers who are distinct in function but mutually dependent on and governed by their relation to Christ the Head. This definition is built on the Pauline revelation of the church as an organism under the figure of the body. The body of Christ is the chief way the organism is pictured in Paul, although he also used two other figures—the church as a bride (Eph 5:22–32) and the church as a building (1 Cor 3:11; Eph 2:20–22).

*The unity of the body.* In Paul's view the church is one. It never occurred to him that differences that do exist could be construed as a basis for division. This essential unity of the organism is illustrated by all the figures of the church which Paul uses. The body is one functioning entity needing all the parts in proper working order (1 Cor 12:12–26). The parts cannot separate themselves from the body, so that as long as there is a body of Christ it must be one (cf. Eph 4:11–13). The bride relationship pictures one bride united forever with the bridegroom, Christ (Eph 5:22–32). The inseparable unity of the figure allows for no idea of polygamy or divorce. The figure of the building likewise emphasizes this idea of oneness. Each believer has his own special place in the building of which Christ is the chief cornerstone (Eph 2:20–22), and the believe...

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