Once more the body of Christ in Paul

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ABSTRACT
Although the 'body of Christ' concept in Paul has already been the subject of many studies, its meaning still seems to elude us. It is precisely the elusiveness of its meaning that has prompted this study. The first part of the essay consists of a survey of the most prominent investigations undertaken in the past. This is done in order to give the reader an overview of the different points of view that have been proposed since the first thorough and genuinely scientific study by Käsemann. Although it is clear that much remains to be said and that the elusiveness still persists, this essay, following Perriman's initiative, seeks to solve the problem by taking cognizance of the metaphoricity of the concept. My contention is thus that we should look for an answer in metaphor referring to a transcendent reality that lies beyond ordinary comprehension; a reality which can only be understood in metaphorical terms.

1  INTRODUCTORY REMARKS
Anyone interested in this topic would know that there is as yet no consensus as to what Paul actually meant when referring to the church as the body of Christ. Although I am under no illusion that I shall be able to open up a new perspective or make a meaningful contribution to the debate, I nevertheless consider it worthwhile to have another look at the issue. I do it in the hope that it may stimulate the debate, especially in view of the fact that of late, apart from the study of Yorke (1991), not many comprehensive studies have been done on this matter.¹

2  SHORT SURVEY OF PAST INTERPRETATIONS
Before presenting this short survey of past interpretations, I must emphasise that the idea is not to give a detailed account of every interpretation that has been offered, but only to pay attention to what, in my opinion, are the most prominent among them. The idea is also to present those who are perhaps

¹ It is an honour and gives me great pleasure to dedicate this modest contribution to a colleague and friend, Johnny Roberts, whom I have always held in high esteem both as a friend and as a New Testament scholar. I sincerely hope that this study in his honour will contribute to, rather than harm, his reputation as a Pauline scholar in particular.
not so well-acquainted with the subject with a fairly comprehensive picture of what has been done so far.

2.1 The gnostic redeemer myth

It is common knowledge that the first genuinely critical-scientific investigation into the ὑπάκτων and ὑπάκτων Χριστοῦ concept was carried out by Käsemann (1933). Starting off with the first question which is usually asked in connection with a given concept, the question of possible origin or background, Käsemann finds the earliest relevant evidence in the writings of Aristotle. He points out that Aristotle's ὑπάκτων-concept comprised two essential points of view: (a) the physical body as a material entity existing in space, and characterised by limitations; (b) the physical body as organism consisting of a variety of organs, and which in its (the body's) part as organism assists the soul in accomplishing its 'works' (1933:38). Käsemann, however, also points out that it is in Stoic literature especially that the metaphor of the body and its members became widespread, finding its most renowned expression in the fable of Menenius Agrippa in Livy (2.32.9-12). As far as the use of ὑπάκτων in the New Testament is concerned, Käsemann identifies two traditions, namely Hellenistic and Jewish. However, since both of these were only a naive continuation of an existing way of thinking, neither of them displays its own characteristics (1933:96).

According to Käsemann, the outcome of an investigation into the meaning of the ὑπάκτων Χριστοῦ concept in Paul will depend on whether one assumes Stoic philosophy or the gnostic αἰών-concept as background. Contained in the first is the notion of an organism, and the idea conveyed by the genitive is that the organism belongs to Christ. In the second instance, the genitive is to be taken as explicative: Christ himself is the body (1933:138). It cannot be denied that the Stoic organism concept is present in Romans 12:4 and 1 Corinthians 12:14-21, although this fact does not explain all the other cases of the use of ὑπάκτων Χριστοῦ by Paul (1933:160). What is clear to Käsemann, however, is that the idea is not that this 'body of Christ' is something that 'belongs' to Christ. One becomes part of the church by putting on Christ, and the Christ-αἰών is at the same time the head and the body, Christ and the church. For this reason 1 Corinthians 12:12 should be rendered 'such is the case with Christ', and not 'such is the case where Christ is'. Since the formula 'in Christ' is just a shorter way of expressing the notion of participation in the mystical body of Christ, one has every reason to understand 'body of Christ' as αἰών (1933:162).

Käsemann argues that the body of Christ metaphor should be interpreted against a gnostic background. It has frequently been argued that passages like Romans 5:12(ff); 1 Corinthians 15:21(f); 45(ff); and Philippians 2:6(ff) evi-
dence gnostic influence on Paul. Paul, however, could not have thought of Christ as the 'redeemed redeemer', since he regarded Adam and Christ in opposition to one another. That he was acquainted with the idea of the 'redeemed redeemer' is clear from Romans 5:14 where he speaks of Adam as the τῶν μεσλομντος, and from 1 Corinthians 15:45(f) where he explicitly rejects the identification of Adam and Christ. In any case, in Philippians 2:6(f) Christ is depicted as the gnostic ἀνθρωπος τέλειος, and it is not unintentionally that Paul here transcends the scheme of cross and resurrection in favour of the scheme of cross and ascension. Moreover, the notion that 'every knee shall bow and that every tongue shall confess' has its origin in the gnostic myth according to which the ἀνθρωπος embraces the All in its entirety, so that the All owe him obedience (1933:163). As in the case of the ἀνθρωπος one must 'put on' the Lord (Rm 13:14) and 'attach' yourself to the Lord (1 Cor 6:16f). Whoever professes Christ to be the κύριος, at the same time professes him-/herself to be in the κύριος as the highest ὅσιον (1933:164).

In a later contribution (1972) Käsemann expressed himself somewhat differently to his above-memioned study. In this later study he commented as follows on the Stoic organism concept, the Jewish corporate personality, and the gnostic anthropos myth respectively as possible backgrounds: 'Es ist nicht einzusehen, daß nicht alle drei Faktoren synkretistisch zusammentreffen sollten, selbst wenn man dem jetzten der genannten entscheidende Bedeutung beimißt' (1972:180-181). If I understand him correctly, Käsemann does not reject the possible influence that may have been exercised by both the Stoic organism concept and the Jewish corporate personality, but he holds on to his conviction that the anthropos myth occupies the most dominant position. He is also of the opinion that neither the Stoic nor the Jewish concept functioned as 'bloße Bilder', but rather as 'bestehende Realität' (1972:181).

In line with his gnostic interpretation Käsemann cannot agree with the argument that Paul is using the body of Christ concept in a metaphorical sense only. In connection with the use of σῶμα in Romans 12:4-5 and 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 he therefore states: 'Das ist nicht mehr metaphorische Redeweise' (1972:181). In his view, a denial of the notion of a real identity in these passages would have consequences for the theology of Paul in its entirety. 'Die erhöhte Christus hat wirklich einen irdischen Leib, und die Glaubenden werden mit ihrem ganzen Sein realiter darin eingegliedert, haben sich deshalb auch entsprechend zu verhalten' (1972:182). According to him the religio-historical, historical, and theological problem of the body of Christ concept in Paul is that it does not speak of a body, a collective body, such as a messianic community, but of the body of a single person, Jesus Christ. Paul's vantage point is not from a plurality towards a unifying unity, so that Christ is conceived of as the internal unity of his members. Just the
opposite is the case, namely that the heavenly Christ has a body that permeates and encompasses the earth. This body is then identified with the church, and this in turn is followed by a description of the solidarity of the members of the church by means of the organism concept (1972:201–202; see also 1973:323). As is the case with other genitive constructions in Paul, the emphasis here is also on the word in the genitive. It is therefore important that one should hold on to the fact that the believers become members of the church as people who are in the first place united with Christ and not the other way around. By becoming members of the church they also share in Christ (1972:202; see also Bultmann 1968:311). According to Käsemann Paul is not actually interested in the church as such or in the church as a religious fellowship. He is only interested in the church in so far as it becomes instrumental in Christ’s earthly revelation of himself and of his becoming a body in the world through his Spirit. ‘Sie ist der Bereich, in dem und durch den Christus sich nach seiner Erhöhung irdisch als Kyrios erweist’ (1972:204). The church as body of Christ is the sphere of his reign in the world, and this is the reason why the notion of the body of Christ is only employed in paracletic contexts. Paul did not write a theology of the church by means of this concept, because to him the body of Christ had a functional meaning. For this reason the paracleisis remained the context within which the theme of the church came to expression. ‘Es kommt darauf an, dass das Sein im Christusleibe gelebt und verwirklicht wird’ (1972:205). Later in this study I shall have to return to this issue of metaphor or reality.

According to Käsemann, Paul’s concept of σώμα πνευματικὸν should also be interpreted in gnostic terms. It is the heavenly likeness of man that awaits him/her after his/he deliverance from the material world. Paul’s dependence on gnosticism becomes especially clear in 2 Corinthians 5:1ff: we shall be ‘clothed’ with our heavenly garment, with the οἰκουμή coming from God, which is, as in Gnosticism, our εἰκῶν (1933:165). The πνεύμα is the heavenly Christ-ἀνθρωπός himself, as can be seen in 1 Corinthians 15:45ff where πνεύμα is explicitly equated with the heavenly άνθρωπος. The expected σώμα πνευματικὸν is the εἰκῶν of the heavenly ἀνθρωπός. Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18; and 2 Corinthians 4:4 undoubtedly have in mind the relationship between the primeval-man-εἰκῶν and his members. As in the case of the ‘Song of the pearl’ in the Acts of Thomas the believer is transformed to the δώξα of the κύριος (1933:166). The οἰών and εἰκῶν concepts had already flown together in Gnosticism, and Paul took it over in this form. To him both these concepts are rooted in the one sacramental event which at the same time unites the believer with Christ as his/her πνεύμα-εἰκῶν and puts him/her ‘in’ the Christ as in the body of the οἰών that embraces the believer. ‘Von der so gnostisch bestimmten Christologie des Paulus aus wird sich eine
Käsemann argues, against scholarly consensus, that it is to be doubted whether this formula originated with Paul (so also Schmithals 1994:160). It is to be doubted on the grounds that Paul made use of it relatively seldom, that he did not thoroughly develop its inherent mythological character, and that he referred to it just in passing. What is more, he utilised it exclusively for paranetical purposes, and thereby modified it in favour of the tradition of popular philosophy (1972:183). Although favouring the interpretation of the church as Christ’s body, Käsemann nevertheless rejects the idea that the church, by participating in Christ’s glory, is actually a continuation of the incarnation and is already sharing in heavenly glory. ‘Der Leib ist zum Dienst gesetzt und partizipiirt an der Herrlichkeit des erhöhten Herrn nur insofern, als er dessen Werkzeug in irdischer Niedrigkeit bleibt’ (1972: 203). He accordingly emphasises that the church as the body of Christ is the earthly body of the resurrected and exalted Christ and definitely not the crucified body, which is Jesus’ own with which no one can be incorporated (1972:194).

In conclusion, it is important to take cognisance of Käsemann’s remark in connection with 1 Corinthians 12:14-21: ‘Nun ergibt sich, daß 1 Kor 12,14-21, von fast der gesammten theologischen Interpretation als Zentrum der paulinischen Vorstellung vom Christusleibe angesehen, in Wirklichkeit nur eine Hilfslinie ist (1933:170-171)!’ This remark is a clear indication that Käsemann distinguishes sharply between the reference of σῶμα (Χριστοῦ) in 1 Corinthians 12:12-13,27 and 12:14-21 respectively. While σῶμα in the former refers to the body of Christ of which the believers form part as its members, σῶμα in the latter is just a metaphorical application of the body image in the same way as was the case in Hellenistic popular philosophy. The former is expressing what the church is, the latter is illustrating how the members of the church should behave toward one another.

As can be expected, Käsemann’s gnostic approach has its supporters. Thus Bultmann also has no doubt about the gnostic background of this concept, as is clear from his following statement: ‘Aber Paulus kann den überweltlich-eschatologischen Charakter der Gemeinde auch in der gnostischen Begriffsücklichkeit ausdrücken, wenn er sie das σῶμα Χριστοῦ (1. Kr 12,27) oder das σῶμα ἐν Χριστῷ (Rm 12,5) nennt.... Der Leib Christi ist also—gnostisch gesprochen—eine kosmische Größe...’ (Bultmann 1968:311). According to Bultmann, what Paul is saying about the church in both these instances is that the unity as well as the origin of the church lie beyond the will and doing of the individual, and that the transcendent nature of the church is expressed in this way. To this the opinion of Schmithals can be added, which assumes as background a Jewish type of Gnosticism. The myth of the
heavenly spirit-figure who was overpowered by demonic powers, shattered into pieces and incarcerated in prisons of material bodies also forms part of this (1994:72). According to Schmithals, however, no mention is made of a heavenly redeemer as a concrete figure in this type of Gnosticism. Salvation is brought about through a heavenly call by the ecstatic prophet who received revelation after ascending to heaven, but especially through the redeemed souls themselves who become active as redeemers: ‘...die schon erweckten Pneumatiker wecken die noch schlafenden auf’ (Schmithals 1994:74). It is this fallen and self redeeming ‘Zentralgestalt’, the redeemed redeemer of this system, who is called ‘Christ’ (Schmithals 1994:72). ‘Sie besagt ursprünglich also, daß die einzelnen Pneumatiker Teile (“Glieder”) einer kosmischen Gestalt sind, die den jüdischen Namen “Christus” trägt (vgl. 1 Kor 12,12)’ (Schmithals 1994:160). This means that the body of Christ concept should be constantly understood in spatial terms, and the body as ‘pneumatischer Leib’. It is, however, important to note that in Schmithals’ view the ‘Seinsidentität’ of ‘Christ’ and the ‘Christians’ which was originally inherent in the formula, was dropped by the theology Paul linked up with. This means that already in the pre-Pauline stage of this theology Christ was no longer regarded as the sum of the members of his body, but as their ‘Gegenüber als “Kyrios Christos”’ (Schmithals 1994:161). Some support also comes from Klauck, who although warning that one should not jump to conclusions regarding the redeemer myth, is nevertheless of the opinion that affinities can be identified (1984:90; see also Söding 1991:141).

As can also be expected, this gnostic approach did not remain unchallenged. Thus concerning a possible mythic origin, Wilckens remarks: ‘Dieser Gedanke lässt sich m. E. nicht als christliche Ausgestaltung eines Urmenschen-Mythos, sei es jüdischer oder gnostischer Provinienz, erklären’ (Wilckens 1982:13). More detailed objections, however, were raised, especially by people like Best (1955), Meuzelaar (1979) and Berger (1989). According to Best there are four arguments that can be put forward in opposition to this opinion: (a) in gnostic and pre-gnostic usage the head plays an important part in the metaphor, while in Paul the head occupies no position of special importance, and it is certainly not Christ; (b) in Gnosticism the metaphor is primarily concerned with the relationship of the members to the head, and not, as in Paul, with the relationship of the members to each other as well; (c) it is only in post-Pauline literature (e.g. Mandaeism), which was influenced by the New Testament, that we find the concept of human beings as members of the Heavenly Man. In pre-Pauline literature (e.g. Orphism and Indian mythology) the members are the sea, sky, air, et cetera. (d) Paul and Gnosticism differ in their use of σώμα. For the former it is man in his outward being, for the latter it is the garment or the prison of the soul. In the case of the former
the members are included in Christ, in the latter the Heavenly Man wears the believers as a garment; he draws them to himself like a magnet draws iron filings, and takes them to heaven (1955:85–86). Meuzelaar, in his turn, adds the following: (a) the gnostic concept is of a dualistic-soteriological nature, the Pauline conception of a christological-eschatological nature, and therefore historical as well; (b) in Paul there is not such a contrast between body and soul as is the case in gnostic dualism, and to him redemption is not from the material world but from sin; (c) in Paul the believers’ communion with Christ involves a personal decision, which is unknown in gnosticism where the primal man not only unites the believers into his body, but also wears them like a garment; (d) the most serious objection, however, concerns the issue of chronology, the fact that the texts that are presented forward as evidence of gnostic influence on Paul are younger than Paul. To argue that the texts in question, although younger than Paul, represent a stage older than Paul is just not enough to support this hypothesis (1979:9-10). Lastly, Berger especially addresses Käsemann’s contention that οὐσία Χριστοῦ refers to the church as cosmic ‘Riesenleib’, and argues: a) οὐσία in the relevant passages is a metaphor for a reality which is not in itself οὐσία, but is only sharing in the Spirit through baptism (1 Cor 12:13) or the expiatory death of Christ (1 Cor 10:16) or the self (Selbst) of the Messiah (1 Cor 10:16f). Through all these gifts the members are bound together on an equal basis, and it is this fact which legitimises the use of the metaphor ‘body of Christ’; (b) In the relevant passages, Paul is speaking about the local church, not about a cosmic phenomenon. As a consequence he does not speak of the body of Christ, but only of ‘body of Christ’; (c) The relationship between the self of Christ, the bread at the Lord’s supper, and the church as body is to be understood differently in 1 Corinthians 10:16; 10:17, and 11:27,29 respectively. In 1 Corinthians 10:16 ‘body’ refers to the individual, bodily self of Christ; in 1 Corinthians 10:17 it refers to the church being a body as the result of its sharing in the bodily self of Christ; and according to 1 Corinthians 11:27,29 to despise the body-ness of the church, is at the same time to despise the reality which forms the basis of this body-ness, namely the individual Christ himself. ‘So ist die Relation Gemeinde-Brot-Christus weder platte physische Identität noch nur leere Symbolic, sondern repräsentierende Teilhabe’ (Berger 1989:204). Berger is convinced that in contrast to many political analogies, Paul, in using the term οὐσία throughout, is only referring to the body of an individual. For this reason he would hardly have perceived the community (or the church for that matter) as the body of an individual person (Berger 1989:205).
2.2 A corporate personality

As is well-known, another fairly thorough investigation into the matter was the one undertaken by Best (1955). He starts off by making the point that the Christ that lies behind the phrase ‘in Christ’ should be described as a ‘corporate personality’ (1955:20), and that the term ‘corporate personality’ suggests that believers as a body express the personality of Christ (1955:22-23). According to Best, the explanation of Christ as corporate personality covers three conclusions that can be made from a study of the occurrences of the ‘in Christ’ formula: (a) it implies a relationship between Christians and Christ; (b) it leaves a place for the salvation that is in Christ; (c) it gives the év a local flavour. There are thus two fundamental ideas in this formula: believers are ‘in Christ’, and the locus of salvation is Jesus Christ (1955:21; see also Bultmann 1968:312). Baptism brings us into our share in Christ’s death, and it therefore makes us a part of the inclusive personality which is Christ (1955:66). Does Paul identify Christ with the church? According to Best it is not taught in 1 Corinthians 1:12-13 or Galatians 3:15-29, while in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 some measure of identity is present in that it is said that Christians are members of Christ. It is not said, however, that they constitute Christ, but only that together with him they constitute one being (‘one spirit’). In 1 Corinthians 12:12 we do seem to find that the church is called ‘Christ’; yet this expression is later reduced (v27) to ‘body of Christ’ (1955:81). The very use of the word ‘body’ suggests that Paul wishes to evade the identification of Christ and the church (1955:111).

In Best’s view it is not adequate to derive the idea of the church as a body with members from the Stoic commonplace of the state as a body and the citizens as its members. He argues that Paul does not liken the church to a ‘body’ but to the ‘body of Christ’ (1955:83). The fact that already in 1 Corinthians 10:17 and 11:29 the church is called the body of Christ indicates that it was thus called before the metaphor of the body and its members came into play (1955:84). Thus the depiction of the church as the ‘body of Christ’ was not occasioned by the metaphor of body and members. The church was in the first place termed ‘the body of Christ’, and only thereafter the conception of Christians as members of the body, as living as a body, was formed. It can thus be concluded that the occurrence of this metaphor in Greek culture is not the occasion of Paul’s depiction of the church as the ‘body of Christ’ (1955:85).

The different phrases ‘body of Christ’, ‘in Christ’, ‘with Christ’, et cetera, are projections of the fundamental idea of the corporate personality of Christ and the believers. They do not fully describe the church. Consequently the church is not really and ontologically the body of Christ (1955:100). The phrase ‘the body of Christ’ refers primarily to the relation-
ship of believers to Christ and only secondarily to the believers' mutual relationship. They may be regarded not only as members of his body but also as members of Christ himself (1 Cor 6:15). The church may, in a sense, even be called Christ (1 Cor 12:12). This is in line with Hebrew anthropology, for which the body is man in his outward being (1955:110).

An idea which can be regarded as related to, or a variant of the notion of corporate personality, is that of 'representation'. This position is taken, among others, by Roberts (1992:284-287; see also Du Plessis 1992:212-217). Roberts bases his argument mainly on the Adam-Christ parallel drawn by Paul in Romans 5:12-21, according to which the deed of the representative has become the deed of those he represents: the choice for sin and the choice against sin respectively. Because Christ is the representative of those who believe in him, they are the 'represented', and as such regarded as part of him. 'Christ is the Representative of the Church. Because it is represented by Him, its members have been incorporated into Him, grafted into Him, and in this way they become his body' (Roberts 1992:284). Thus the church 'becomes' the body of Christ, by being 'incorporated' or 'grafted' into him as a result of being 'represented' by him. However, how it should be understood that one is incorporated or grafted into someone by being represented by him/her, is another matter, to which I shall return below.

Park, although admitting that the idea of the ἐν σώματι has its roots in Hellenistic philosophy, nevertheless argues that the idea that the church is the body of Christ or that the crucified and exalted body of Christ is present in the church, cannot be explained against this background (1992:134). In Park's words: 'Der gekreuzigte und auferstandene Leib Christi ist für Paulus ein gegenwärtiger Raum, in den die Gemeinde hineingestellt wird'. It is only the idea of Christ as the second Adam that made it possible for Paul to portray Christ as the all-embracing being (Park 1992:135). Like Best, Park is therefore convinced that Paul could only have borrowed this concept from the Old Testament. But this is as far as the agreement between Best and Park goes. For the rest Park is rather on the side of Käsemann, with the exception that for Park it is Christ as the second Adam that the church is united with, and not the gnostic Primeval Man. On the one hand he remarks that Christ remains the opposite of his members, and that he does not dissolve himself in the church (Park 1992:232). On the other hand, however, he states: 'Der Leib gehört jedoch nicht nur dem Christus; vielmehr ist er auch dessen weltweite irdische Projektion und Manifestation' (Park 1992:274). And in the same vein: 'Der aus dem zweiten Adam Christus hervorgebrachte Leib ist deshalb der Leib Christi selbst, welchen Christus als den einzigen, mit dem Getaufsten zusammengehörigen pneumatischen Leib bildet; der Leib Christi gleicht der Gesamtperson in Gal. 3,28 (vgl. Kol.3,10f; Eph 2,15f)' (Park 1992:304). And
again: ‘Der “Leib Christi” ist die Explikation der im sein des Christen wirksam-en Existenz Christi’ (Park 1992:310). This is a definite identification of Christ and the church as one can possibly get, and it is therefore not clear in what sense Park is still conceiving of Christ as the opposite of his members.

Although this notion of corporate personality has found some support, it hasn’t won the day. On the one hand, it is to be doubted whether Paul did indeed think in corporate terms when depicting the church as a body. I therefore agree with Robinson’s statement that to Paul and his readers the term σώμα must have conveyed ‘something not corporate but corporal. It directed the mind to a person; it did not of itself suggest a social group’ (1961:50). On the other hand, Klauck makes the important observation that the term ‘body’ is totally absent from the idea of corporate personality (1984:90), while Söding contends that σώμα Χριστοῦ is the only ecclesiological concept in Paul that does not have an Old Testament background (1991:141). The same applies to the idea of the church’s becoming or being the body of Christ on the basis of ‘representation’, as Roberts contends. Although I have no problem with the notion of representation as such, it is not at all that clear how it is possible for Roberts to move in such an unproblematical manner from the semantic field of ‘representation’, to that of ‘incorporation’ and ‘grafting’ respectively, as if he is dealing with synonymous concepts. Obviously, the notions of incorporation and grafting comprise much more than representation, and belong to totally different fields of thought. To treat them as synonymous with representation thus boils down to a mixing of metaphors or of semantic fields. What is more, it clearly shows that it is not possible to give expression to what is presumably intended by the notion of the church as the body of Christ without having to resort to formulas like ‘grafted into’ or ‘incorporated into’. Having resorted to this option one is still confronted with the question: How should one understand the notion that being the body of Christ is as a result of being grafted or incorporated into Christ? It seems then that one will have to look elsewhere for a more probable explanation of the concept.

In the end it should be pointed out that there is no substantial difference between the interpretations of Käsemann and Best. In my opinion the only difference between the two is that while Käsemann interprets against the backdrop of Gnosticism, Best does so against that of the Old Testament. When Best (1955:110) maintains that, according to Paul, believers may be regarded not only as members of Christ’s body, but also as members of Christ himself (1 Cor 6:15), and that the church may, in a sense, even be called Christ (1 Cor 12:12), I can see no difference with Käsemann’s (1933:162) contention that believers are members of the Christ-αὐων.
2.3 For practical purposes only

Meuzelaar in his study (1979) considered most of the different opinions held or the interpretations proposed up to that point, namely the Hellenistic organism concept, the question of metaphor or reality, the possibility of gnostic influence, and the notion of corporate personality, the 'body of Christ' as referring to the real people of God (1979:3–16). He finds it remarkable that past efforts to determine the meaning of the formula have been primarily focused on its possible origin. Scholars did not ask, as they should have, in what situation and for what purpose this concept had been employed by Paul. Or to put it differently, they did not ask what its practical sense might have been (1979:16).

Paul, according to Meuzelaar, made use of this metaphor for practical purposes only. This means to say that it was not at all Paul's intention to say something about the character of the church or to talk about some mystical union between the church and Christ or about the church as in the real sense of the word being part of Christ's exalted and glorified body. From 1 Corinthians 10:17 it is to be deduced that the 'body of Christ' in 10:16 refers to the church, and not to Christ's body in any other sense (1979:29). Likewise, from what follows after 1 Corinthians 12:12 it is clear that there cannot be talk of any other 'realism' than the realism of the praxis of the church. It is not the physical or the exalted body of Christ that is under discussion in this context, but the fundamental unity of Jews and non-Jews, slaves and free in one body, a unity which is to be realised in practice through the solidarity of all members of the church. Furthermore, the summary statement in 1 Corinthians 12:27 underscores the hypothesis that 'body of Christ' is a metaphor and nothing else. This statement can therefore be translated: 'You are a body belonging to Christ'. But because this is the only instance in Paul where σωμα is used without article, the phrase can also be translated: 'You, however, are a messianic body' (1979:40).

We need not look further for the possible origin of this concept in Paul than classic and Hellenistic popular philosophy, which automatically excludes the Old Testament and the notion of corporate personality. Wherever Paul made use of this concept he had in mind the idea in these philosophies that society is to be likened to an organism, in that it constitutes an entity with different members and functions (1979:149). The meaning of this concept, therefore, is of a practical nature. In applying the metaphor Paul held on to its original ethical sense, for this was the purpose of its use in popular philosophies. It is precisely for this reason that the body concept in Paul cannot be explained against a gnostic background. The transformation of the image-like concept of the body into a cosmic myth by Gnosticism has robbed the concept of its practical sense. The same applies to the 'mystical' or
'realistic' meaning attached by some to the body concept in Paul. Paul is not conceiving of the church as a natural body, and consequently of the identification of the Christian with Christ, or of Christ with the church. 'Es handelt sich nicht um eine mystische Erhabenheit der Kirche, sondern um eine Anregung für die messianische Gemeinschaft zu Liebe und zu gemeinsamem Dienst' (1979:172). All this is to be explained on the basis of the fact that Paul's thoughts were rooted in the Jewish concept of history, and this concept, according to Meuzelaar, runs counter to every gnostic or mystic interpretation of the body metaphor in Paul (1979:173).

2.4 Just comparing the church to a body

Yorke (1991) agrees with most New Testament scholars that the referent of σῶμα in 1 Corinthians 10:16b is different from that in 10:17a (see also Wolff 1982:113), and that 17a admits of neither a mystical nor a metaphorical relationship between the σῶμα of Christ (v 16b) and that of the church (v 17a). The personal and now glorified body of Christ is not, in fact, mystically or metaphorically, the body which is the church. The apostle does not compare, much less identify, the church as body with Christ's own body; that body which, being raised by the power of God, now sits exalted in heavenly places (1991:38). Although the vast majority of scholars are of the opinion that the σῶμα reference in 1 Corinthians 12:13 is to both the body of Christ and to the church as body, Yorke regards the reference as pertaining only to the church as body as the most plausible (1991:45). He furthermore argues that since Paul did not employ Ἱσοτός in 1 Corinthians 12:12 as a synonym or as scholarly shorthand for the church, and therefore did not identify Christ and the church, one cannot validly argue that Christ and the church are identified with each other in 12:27 via Christ's σῶμα. By using Ἰσοτῶ (1 Cor 12:27) as a possessive genitive Paul is neither identifying the Corinthian church as a body with the body of Christ, his personal body, nor is he likening the one to the other. Instead, he is simply likening the cantankerous Corinthians to any human σῶμα (1991:47; however see Conzelmann 1968:287).

According to Yorke, there are four reasons why the notion that Paul is identifying Christ and the church with one another, should be rejected. Firstly, Paul's σῶμα language in 1 Corinthians 12:14-26 is completely devoid of Christological content, and this is strange if he was really announcing that metaphorically or mystically, the Corinthians were the personal body of Christ Himself. Secondly, it is also surprising that Paul did not make any mention of the supposed identity of Christ and the church from 12:28 up to the end of chapter 14. It is common knowledge that 1 Corinthians 12-14 forms a unit. Keeping this in mind, there is no plausible explanation as to why the apostle would choose to relate Christ and the church as intimately
as he supposedly does on the basis of οὐκα in 12:27, and then completely ignore it in his further discussion of the charisms issue, which supposedly gave birth to this identity and intimacy in the first place. It seems highly unlikely that such a profound and provocative Christological ecclesiology would have been given such a cursory treatment throughout the entire discussion of chapters 12-14. Thirdly, if the apostle is in fact relating Christ and the church as closely as he is understood to be doing in verse 27, he would, in a way, be giving credence and credibility to the Corinthians in their excessive self-confidence and enthusiasm. It would also be at odds with their immaturity and other forms of unacceptable behaviour. Fourthly, at no other occasion of his use of Christological titles in 1 Corinthians did Paul indicate that Christ and the Corinthians are to be so closely related as the prevailing interpretation of verse 27 would suggest. Why would he mention such a profound Christological concept just in passing (1991:48-49)?

Concerning Romans 12:4-5 scholars, according to Yorke, have correctly understood Paul to be using any human body as the metaphorical backdrop for the Church of Rome as body, and as standing clearly apart from Christ's own body (Yorke 1991:70).

3 RECONSIDERING THE MATTER

It is not my intention to respond to every argument that has been presented or to attend to every exegetical crux related to this motif in Paul. What I want to do is to ask what can and what can not be assumed regarding the use of this motif in the contexts in which it is being applied by Paul.

3.1 Passages to be dealt with

Naturally the first question to be asked is where to look for what Paul had to say regarding the body of Christ motif. What almost automatically come to mind are those passages where either the formula οὐκα Χριστοῦ (1 Cor 12:27) or οὐκα ἐν Χριστῷ (Rm 12:5) is used, or where οὐκα is used in connection with the church and/or Christ (1 Cor 10:16-17; 12:14-26). As we have already seen, some other passages have also come under scrutiny, namely 1 Corinthians 6:15; 12:12-13; Galatians 3:28, and others in which the ἐν Χριστῷ motif is expressed. Regarding the ἐν Χριστῷ formula, not all scholars are convinced that it should be seen as forming part of the οὐκα Χριστοῦ complex as such. Conzelmann, for one, rejects the idea that the formula should be interpreted as 'being in the body of Christ', since the two just do not cover each other. 'Οὐκα bezeichnet das Umfassende, ἐν Χριστῷ bestimmt den Ort des Heilsgeschehens als außer uns liegend' (Conzelmann 1968:291). This may be true, but only to a certain extent for it cannot be denied that
there are instances in which this formula seems to express the same idea as is presumably carried by σῶμα Χριστοῦ. If, for example, we are to assume that ἐν Χριστῷ in 2 Corinthians 5:17 does not give expression to the idea of the believer as being in union or one with Christ, and therefore part of the body of Christ, what is it then saying? In my judgement, therefore, the ἐν Χριστῷ motif can and should be seen as a key to understanding something about the σῶμα Χριστοῦ motif, although one has to admit that ἐν Χριστῷ has its own share of exegetical difficulties.

Although it is not of such crucial importance in determining the meaning of σῶμα Χριστοῦ, there is nevertheless the question as to whether the formulae σῶμα Χριστοῦ (1 Cor 12:27) and σῶμα ἐν Χριστῷ (Rom 12:5) are synonymous or not. Bultmann (1968:311; see also Käsemann 1933:168) is convinced that they are, while Söding (1991:139), although conceding that the two are parallel to a very high degree, is nevertheless of the opinion that there is a certain difference. According to him Paul made use of the words σῶμα ἐν Χριστῷ instead of σῶμα Χριστοῦ in order to avoid the misunderstanding of equating the exalted Christ and the church, and to qualify the church even more clearly than in 1 Corinthians 12:13 as a spiritual entity (1991:152). He finds support in Lindemann (1995:162) who argues that the portrayal of the church as the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12:27 is not found in Romans 12:4-8, since in the latter it is only said that the 'being one body' of the many is a reality that is determined by Christ. On what grounds this interpretation of Lindemann is based is not clear, and the issue remains a difficult one to solve. On the one hand one may argue that since Paul is enumerating the different charisms in Romans 12:6-8 in more or less the same way as in 1 Corinthians 12:28, the two contexts are the same, and that σῶμα must therefore have the same referent in each of them. It may also be argued that the unity-diversity notion in Romans 12:4-5 runs in some sense parallel to that in 1 Corinthians 12:12-26, which means that σῶμα should for this reason be interpreted as a simile giving expression to the idea that the church is or functions 'like' a body. Personally I am in favour of the latter possibility, because I am convinced that if Paul would have wished to say the same in Romans 12:5 as in 1 Corinthians 12:27, he would have made use of the same wording in the former as in the latter. However, as has already been indicated above, a definite answer to the question of synonymity is not of crucial importance to this study, since 1 Corinthians has been and still is by far the most prominent Pauline source for our investigation.

3.2 Metaphor or reality?

As has already become clear from the survey above, one of the main issues that is usually addressed is the question as to whether Paul is just comparing
the church to a body, or whether he is talking about something real. This question is often phrased with the opposites metaphorical vis-à-vis literal; with the notion that if the former is the case the church is only likened to a body, while if the latter is the case the church is Christ's body in some real sense of the word. However, concerning the use of the term 'metaphorical' in connection with this issue I fully concur with Perriman who has convincingly argued that it is a total misconception to regard metaphor or metaphorical language as not giving expression to what is real. Many studies on metaphor in recent times have shown that it can refer legitimately to something that is real (Perriman 1990:140). The fact that Paul referred to the church by means of the body metaphor is therefore in itself no indication that it should be interpreted figuratively.

But even if this is to be conceded, the question nevertheless remains as to whether Paul is in every instance using this metaphor with reference to a reality only, and not as a simile for the church as well. This indeed seems to be the case in some of the passages which have usually been discussed in connection with this motif, namely Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 6:15; 10:16-17; 12:12-13, 14-21, 27. When one looks at these passages it does not require much of an insight to observe that σώμα does not have the same referent in each of them. To begin with, as Yorke (1991:138) has already pointed out, it seems that most scholars agree that σώμα has a different referent at least in 1 Corinthians 10:16 and 17 respectively (see also Wolff 1982:113). In this regard Berger (1989:204) argues that in verse 16 'body' refers to the individual, bodily self of Christ, while in verse 17 it refers to the church as being a body as a result of its sharing in the bodily self of Christ. Berger, however, does not indicate whether this 'individual, bodily self' of Christ is to be understood soteriologically as his crucified body or ecclesiologically as his exalted and glorified body, of which the church forms part in one way or another. Schmithals (1994:214) is of the opinion that the difficulty one experiences in attempting to determine the referent of σώμα in 10:16 is to be ascribed to the ambivalence inherent in the concept κοινωνία in this context. If it is to be read as parallel to the preceding αἵμα in the same verse, it would have a soteriological reference, namely it would refer to the body of Christ that was delivered unto death. If, however, it is to be read in conjunction with σώμα in verse 17, it would have an ecclesiological reference, that is, it would refer to the κοινωνία among believers (thus, among others, Conzelmann 1969:203; Barrett 1968:233; Meuzelaar 1979:29). According to Schmithals this ambivalence was caused by the fact that Paul took over a traditional formula which only referred to the practice of the breaking of bread as an expression of κοινωνία among believers, but that he then applied it to the crucified body of Christ. 'Paulus greift diese Formel wegen des
Begriffs *koinonia* auf. Er bezieht nämlich ‘Leib Christi’ in 10,16b gegen dessen in der Formel vorliegenden ekklæsiologischen Sinn, aber in Analogie zu den ‘Einsetzungsworten’ (1 Kor 11,25) auf den gekreuzigten Leib Jesu’ ... (Schmithals 1994:215). Whether one agrees with Schmithals’ idea regarding the origin of the formula or not, what seems quite clear is that he is correct in maintaining that the reference of οὐάμα in verse 16 is to the crucified body of Christ (thus also Roloff 1993:101; Söding 1991:146–148; Wolff 1982:113). The parallelism between 1 Corinthians 10:16 and 11:23-24, in spite of the fact that αἷμα and σῶμα appear in a different order, is not to be overlooked or ignored. In 11:24 τὸ σῶμα τὸ ὑπὲρ ἠμῶν speaks for itself, and likewise its parallel in 10:16. This, however, need not exclude the possibility, or even the probability, that Paul intended σῶμα in 10:16 to be ambiguous in the sense that it is also meant to refer to Christ’s exalted and glorified body, namely the living Christ. This would mean that by participating in the eucharist the believers are not only enjoying the benefits of the death of Christ (’s body) on their behalf, but are also experiencing the closest life relationship with the resurrected-crucified, in such a manner that they share in the dynamics of Christ’s own life. Naturally as a consequence of this *koinōnia* of the believers’ with (the body of) Christ they also become part of his body, the church. As Söding puts it: ‘Die Teilhabe der Glaubenden am Soma Christi, ihr Hineingestell-Werden in den Herrschaftsbereich des auferweckten Gekreuzigten, wirkt sich so aus, daß sie einen einzigen Leib bilden’ (1991:149). Although in all probability σῶμα has this double reference in 10:16, I am however convinced that body of Christ in this verse does not have a bearing on the church in the first place. What is rather at issue here is a *special and personal communion with Christ*, which is of a different order to that of the believer as member of the body of Christ in an ecclesiological sense. It is precisely as a member of the body of Christ that the believer has a personal communion with Christ through the act of partaking of the bread in the eucharist. This may also be the case in 1 Corinthians 6:15, although the notion that the σῶματα of the believers are μελη τοῦ Χριστοῦ has in my opinion more of an ecclesiological tenor than *koinōnia* τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ in 10:16. It would for this reason not be inappropriate to include this text in an investigation into the body of Christ concept in Paul. There is, however, no need to, because of the fact that it is to be doubted whether it will add to the information that can be obtained from 1 Corinthians 12. This then leaves us with 1 Corinthians 12:12–13,14–21,27 as passages in which σῶμα (Χριστοῦ) is explicitly under discussion.

Concerning 12:14–21, I fully agree with Käsemann that Paul is only using the body-organism here as an example to illustrate how the members of the church should behave toward one another, as was customary in Hellenistic
popular philosophy (see again 1933:170-171; 1972:182). At this point it is important to remind ourselves of what Best says, and which is actually in support of Käsemann, namely that 1 Corinthians 10:17 and 11:29 show that the idea of the church as the body of Christ was formed before the metaphor of the body and its members came into play, and that the depiction of the church as 'the body of Christ' was therefore not occasioned by the metaphor of body and members (see again 1955:84-85). This means that a distinction has to be drawn between 12:12, 27 and 12:14-21, the latter only likening the church to a body, while the former is giving expression to what the church is like, namely that it is the body of Christ (see also Keck 1979:61). This distinction automatically excludes 12:14-21 from further investigation, which in turn means that in the end we do not have much to work with as far as text references are concerned. And if, in addition, ὁ τῶν καὶ ὁ Χριστός in 12:12 is not to be regarded as synonymous with σῶμα Χριστοῦ in 12:27, one would have to agree with Lindemann that "...über den einen expliziten Beleg in 12,27 hinaus ist die ekklesiologische Vorstellung vom "Leib Christi" in dem Brief durchgängig nicht belegt und auch nicht vorausgesetzt" (1995:159).

It is a matter of debate as to whether these two texts are to be taken as synonymous or not. That ὁ τῶν καὶ ὁ Χριστός is a very cryptic phrase, is not to be denied, which makes it very difficult to determine its meaning. Considering the context, however, it seems obvious that it is not Christ as such that Paul has in mind, but Christ in relation to or representing the church, namely the body into which the believers are baptised as its members (12:13). Thus what we have here is an abbreviated way of expressing the union between Christ and the church. But how would a longer version of the same thought have been formulated? Could it have been something like: Thus it is with the church, which understands itself as the body of Christ (Strobel 1989:195)? Such a version seems quite valid, but I would favour a more direct version like: Thus it is with the church which is the body of Christ. The singular Χριστός undoubtedly stands for a more complex idea, namely the church as Christ's body. Thus what we have here is that as a consequence of the union of Christ and the church, Christ is identified with the church in such a way that Χριστός can stand, and indeed stands, for σῶμα Χριστοῦ. If this is correctly understood, it would mean that ὁ Χριστός in 12:12 is synonymous with σῶμα Χριστοῦ in 12:27, so that it is immaterial whether one would either say Χριστός or σῶμα Χριστοῦ (see Bornkamm 1969:201; Lohse 1974:102). But even if one would find it improbable or unacceptable that these two are synonymous in this context, 12:27 still stands as an explicit depiction of the church as the body of Christ, albeit the only such depiction. Obviously most scholars do not experience the fact that σῶμα appears without an article as a problem. Whether there was a specific reason for its
THE BODY OF CHRIST IN PAUL

absence, namely to distinguish between the ecclesiological body of Christ and his body that was given unto death (Lang 1986:171), or whether it was meant to indicate that Paul is not speaking of the church as actually the body of Christ, but only as an organic unity as a result of the eschatological salvation in Christ (Wolff 1982:108), cannot be substantiated.

Having said all this, the exegetical crux of the matter has, however, not been solved yet, the difficulty being to determine what is really meant by this expression. The survey above has given us a glimpse of the diversity of opinions up to now, and as has already been said in the introduction, it is clear from the evidence that as yet no consensus has been reached. The problem is that Paul gives us nothing more than just the statement that the church is the body of Christ. He gives us no explanation or indication of how precisely this concept is to be understood, except for what can possibly be gathered from his ἐν Χριστῷ motif. It is for this reason that scholars had no other option but to look for possible backdrops to help shed light on this enigmatic σώμα Χριστοῦ concept. But as we have seen, none of these efforts have won the day, although we can assume that Paul and his readers could have been familiar with some or all of these concepts. The only problem is that it is impossible to determine without a doubt which of them served as such a backdrop.

Robinson is right in remarking that to say that individuals are members of a person is ‘indeed a very violent use of language’ (1961:50), and likewise Perriman refers to it as a ‘tantalizing and provocative idea’ (1990:141). Why did Paul not explain the idea to his readers? Was it because they were acquainted with it, and in no need of explanation, especially when one takes into account the enigmatic brevity of οὗτος καὶ ὁ Χριστός in 1 Corinthians 12:12 (Klauck 1984:89)? Paul surely must have been convinced of his readers’ pre-understanding, as it were, otherwise he would have elaborated on the subject. It is incorrect to assume the opposite, like Lindemann (1995:155) who claims that if the readers were acquainted with the idea, it would not have been necessary for Paul to explain the image at such length (namely in 12:14-21). The fact of the matter is that what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 12:14-26 is not an explanation of the body of Christ motif, but the likening of the church to a body.

What most scholars seem to be in agreement with, is that Paul is not talking about something unreal, but of something real. ‘Sie ist nicht so etwas wie ein Leib, sondern—realiter—sie ist Christi Leib ...’ (Bornkamm 1969:201). ‘Die partizipatorische Gemeinschaft ist keine Redefigur für irgend etwas anderes; sie ist, worauf viele Forscher insistiert haben, real (Sanders 1985:429; see also Dahl 1963:224; Robinson 1961:51; Conzelmann 1968:287; 1969:249; Schlier 1978:197; Wilckens 1982:12; Strobel 1989:194; and many others). In my opinion this observation is correct, and in no need of argumentation.
This in itself, however, does not answer the question as to what kind of reality we are talking about. To begin with, it cannot just refer to the fact that the church belongs to Christ (rightly so Käsemann 1933:162; Keck 1979:61; Perriman 1990:141; Park 1992:274; contra Barrett 1968:292) or that the church is the locus of eschatological salvation established and determined by Christ (Söding 1991:151). Both of these are in a sense true, but do not really touch the heart of the matter. There is obviously more at issue than this. It is not just a matter of relationship, but also of unity and identity, since it seems quite clear that Paul is thinking of a single entity of which both Christ and the church form part, and in which they are in some way or another identified with each other. It does not mean that Christ’s or the church’s identity is hereby eliminated or that the one has been absorbed by the other. On the contrary, by referring to the church as the body of Christ, Paul precisely distinguishes between the two, thereby leaving the two identities intact (see again Best 1955:111). He also refers to this entity just by means of Χριστός (1 Cor 12:12), thereby identifying the church with Christ, and vice versa.

4 CONCLUSION

Let us be frank and admit that after so much ink has already been spilt on this subject, it is still not at all clear what Paul wanted to convey to his readers. Consequently, we are still to a large extent at a loss for an answer. It seems much easier to say what Paul, in all probability, did not have in mind with this metaphor than to say what he did have in mind. If it is correct to say that he is not talking about the church as belonging to Christ or as a body under Christ’s rule, then he must be talking about something real, something constituted by Christ and the church, in such a manner that the one has become part of the other. Or to put it more correctly, the church has become part of Christ, it has somehow been incorporated into Christ. Whether this is to be conceived of as a mystic union or as something mythical or transcendent or pneumatic is difficult to say. It is probably not a question of either—or, but of both—and. Nevertheless, when Paul talks elsewhere of the believer as being ‘in Christ’ or of Christ as being ‘in the believer’ (Rm 8:10; 2 Cor 13:5; Gl 2:20), he must certainly be talking about a reality that lies beyond the reality of this world ruled by natural senses. He must have in mind another dimension, a dimension of which the church has already become part, although its existence as church remains to be realised in this world, and nowhere else. The reality that Paul is talking about, is neither comprehensible in familiar categories nor utterable in literal terms. It can only be expressed by means of metaphor, because, as we know, metaphor says what something is by means of what it is not. The church is, namely, not
the body of Christ in literal terms, but body as metaphor best describes the unity between Christ and the church. This metaphor also serves to express the one-ness of two entities that are incompatible, on the one hand Christ who is not of this world and on the other the church which is of this world. It is not describing this one-ness as something unreal, but as we have already said, as something real. However, the church can only be the body of Christ in the real sense of the word as an eschatological entity. It can only be his body as a new creation in Christ (2 Cor 5:17). Only in this sense can the church as an entity belonging to this world become a transcendent entity like Christ himself, and can it be Christ’s own body in this world, Christ’s ‘westliche irdische Projektion und Manifestation’ (Park 1992:274). In a certain sense both Christ and those who believe in him, assume a new identity: Christ by now having the church as an integral part of himself; the church by being transformed into a totally new dimension of existence, the eschatological, transcendent dimension of not being an earthly body any longer but the body of Christ which shares in his life and his glory. In the light of the role that the Spirit plays in Pauline thinking (cf Rm 8:9-11) it seems obvious that this new identity of Christ and the church is to be conceived of as a pneumatic entity, which can only become a reality through the indwelling of the Spirit in the church and its members.

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