

The Church Extraordinary,
“The Body of Christ”

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Are you a member of the "vine"? Or are you a member of the "door"? Indeed such questions are not usually heard in Christian environments. Yet are you a member of "the Body of Christ" this is heard, and it is universally accepted that this phrase refers to the church of this age. It is not a figure of speech—that is, it is not a nonliteral expression utilized to add emphasis or force to some concept. No. It is a literal phrase, descriptive as can be of a very real living Being. The Body of Christ, is the church, the great composite construction of all elected saints from every dispensation. Portions of it exist today in a visible sense, other portions (members) exist in a spiritual sense. This brief paper is dedicated to elucidating this church, this reality.

The phrase "body of Christ" occurs only in the Pauline epistles in our New Testaments. The phrase seems clear and elicits, usually, no confusion. However some well-meaning religious groups have added some ramifications which could damage the pristine *semantics* of this phrase.

The phrase "body of Christ" has several forms in the original Greek. It appears as such:

Colossians 2:17	σωμα του Χριστου
I Corinthians 12:27	σωμα Χριστου
Romans 7:4	σωματος του Χριστου
I Corinthians 10:16	"
Ephesians 4:12	"

We have a total of five occurrences of this phrase. Each is rendered as "body of Christ", or as "the Body of Christ". It is not a noun with an appositive, that is "body" does not equal "Christ"; rather the whole phrase is a title, like *The New York Times*, or, *The Times of New York*.

Similar phrases such as "body of Jesus Christ" [Hebrews 10:10], "body of Jesus" [Matthew 27:58, John 19:40, Luke 23:52], *et cetera*, have not the same connotation as the genitives which Paul uses. Paul never utters the phrase "body of Jesus", nor does he dwell much upon the earthly body or temporary corpse of Jesus of Nazareth. A corporate sense is denoted in Paul's usage, and except in the breaking of the bread and the drinking of the mildly fermented grape juice in the gospel accounts (and I Corinthians 11), it is Paul who prefers this idiom to express this unity. John too, offers a glimpse in John 6:51-58, however John never refers to the "body" as a, or the church!

Unity or incorporation, is not limited to Paul when descriptions are forwarded to express the church or the oneness of believers. Nor is this phrase "body of Christ" the only phrase used by Paul to express the unity of believers. He also uses: "lump" - I Corinthians 5:6,7, Galatians 5:9; "common man" - Ephesians 2:15; "children" - Romans 8:16; as a garden (and a building) - I Corinthians 3:6-9; "Israel" - Galatians 6:16; "fellow-citizens" - Ephesians 2:19; as a "holy place" - I Corinthians 6:19; as a "marriage" - Ephesians 5:31,32. All of these words and phrases express various shades of the unity of believers, some aspects have an eschatological bent, some a spiritual bent, but all are used by Paul to express a unity.

John uses a "vine", Peter uses a stone altar or building. Many of the apostles, prior to Paul, referred to Israel as "tribes", or with the term "elect", the word "sheep" is also noted; these too manifest a unity. Paul's usage of "body" magnifies the aspect of a personal unity. It is especially relevant to his ministry as it communicates specific concepts already formed in the minds of the Greeks.

Some students and scholars declare that just because the phrase "body of Christ" occurs in the Pauline corpus—it must therefore have a significance above and beyond the other terms expressing unity, or that there is some deeper or hidden meaning or truth in this phrase. Though fanciful, this does not seem to be the case. Paul uses this phrase to express

the unity of believers as it has a clear denotation especially as concerns Greek imagery and it is directly related to the "Lord's supper". And, as shown above, Paul uses other phrases and terms to illuminate the unity of believers. It is well to consider these other terms too, it seems unwise to just focus upon one phrase and to give it an undue prominence. Some would declare that Paul's usage results from the observation that only Paul is the apostle to the nations, and he alone is sent to build the heavenly "body of Christ".

Those who magnify the phrase "body of Christ" out of proportion do so by declaring that the distinctive ministry of Paul is not to the Jewish church, or earthly Israel, but is for a separate group looking for the "rapture". Hence they are led to believe that this phrase is a figure of speech used by Paul because it cannot refer to earthly Israelites. That is why John nor James uses it not, in their thinking. This reasoning has some truth, there are distinctions in Paul's ministry, and Paul is the "architect" of this heavenly body-part, but the phrase "body of Christ" can be applied to believing Israelites of all dispensations as well and indirectly, is. Perhaps this can be illustrated by observing the genesis (beginning) of the "body of Christ", and its components. First its genesis.

THE WHEN

Some maintain that the beginning of the "body of Christ" began with the ministry of the apostle Paul, this about mid-Acts; until then it did not exist. The "when" is dependent upon the "what". The "body" is the union of all believers since Adam. The distinction which some excessively magnify, is that Paul is constructing the new portion known as the "holy place" [ναος] which is heavenly. As a heavenly portion it has heavenly hopes, a heavenly Lord, and a heavenly inheritance, with heavenly bodies promised, and heavenly rewards. Too, it is built on the basis of faith, incorporating

election. Prior works of men are not involved, nor is the Jewish (or any) Law. Paul's gospel is one of grace, it is Christ-centered, and its core meaning is the same as that which the 12 preached as per First Corinthians 15:1-4, 11. Paul adds the heavenly hopes, and shows the mysterious (and preplanned) grace of God extended to the nations.

The body is composed of various parts. However its primary construction is twofold - *earthly and heavenly*. God is building the heavenly portion today. After the heavenly portion is "raptured" [ἁρπαζῶ], he again returns to building the earthly portion. Both groups are united in one, but the manifestation of the union is future - Ephesians 1:10. This concept is admittedly deep, Paul quotes Genesis at Ephesians 5:31 to attempt to explain this mystery of the union of the church. Wherein he implies that God had therefore, predetermined this union, hence the quote from Genesis. Christ Himself manifests a mysterious union of the earthly and heavenly!

Let us compare two passages and observe some similarities:

GALATIANS 1:13

For you heard concerning my former behavior, when [I was] in Judaism that exceedingly I had been persecuting the church of God, and I had been trying to waste it.

I CORINTHIANS 1:2

to the church of God in Corinth to those who have been and remain sanctified in Christ Jesus called saints, with all those who call upon the name of the Lord of ours Christ Jesus in all places [both] theirs and ours.

Note that before Paul began his missionary journeys, and before he was saved, the "church [ἐκκλησία] of God" was prior existing, certainly Galatians 1:13 makes this clear. The "church of God" in Galatians 1:13 is that Messianic Church of Judea and Jerusalem! Further, he refers to the believers in Corinth, who are largely non-Jewish, as the "church of God". The conclusion is obvious, and intended.

Note these two quotes:

GALATIANS 3:26

For you are all sons of God through the faith of Christ Jesus.

ISAIAH 1:1,2

The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz concerning Judah and Jerusalem for ...for the Lord speaks: "Sons I have reared and brought up".

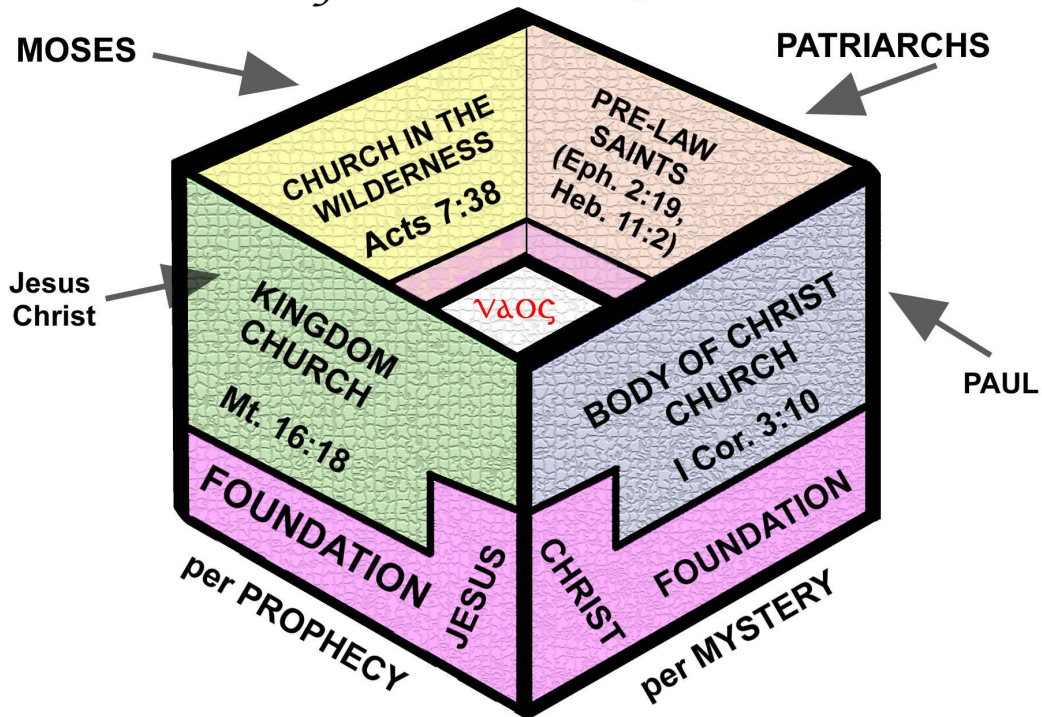
Again common sense and a literal understanding produces a clear unity between the groups addressed. Both are sons of God, both groups are of the church of God, and both will retain certain identifying distinctions [for example, no Israelite is told that his citizenship is in heaven!].

The earthly body-part began with the first believer—Adam. The heavenly body-part began with the saving of Paul. Though the earthly body-part has an eternal earthly future and inheritance, it will be, somehow, joined with the heavenly body-part in the future [Ephesians 1:10]. This union is exemplified in the epistle which has "Unity" as its theme—Ephesians, note Ephesians 2:19-22:

So then, no longer are you aliens and temporary dwellers, but you are fellow-citizens of the saints and household of the God, since having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets; Christ Jesus Himself being [the] Cornerstone. In Whom every building is being fitted together, growing into [a] sanctuary [ναός] holy in [the] Lord. In Whom you also are being built-together for [purpose] habitation of the God in Spirit.

Below is an attempt to illustrate this edifice, the future union of the individual "buildings". Each part is the result of a construction program occurring during a particular dispensation. The bringing together will occur at the end of the ages (dispensations). Ephesians 1:10

Ephesians 2 : 19 - 22



"In Whom every building is being fitted together..."

Note that *πᾶσα* of verse 21 is rendered as "every" and not as "whole". This great "building" has been being built, and is being built, and will be built. It incorporates believers from all ages. With this—"all Israel will be saved". (Note my essay on the meaning of the word - Israel). This "new" (or better, "common man") of Ephesians 2:15 is not any closer to God than the other prior building constructions which God has built. Verse 12 shows that one group was separated from Christ, but this separation had nothing to do with election, it was a separation due to dispensational divisions. (That is, during the "Law" age, we Gentiles were basically excluded, very few elected Gentiles existed at that time, those that did exist often became proselytes to Judaism [though not all]). Verse 16 is clear in showing that

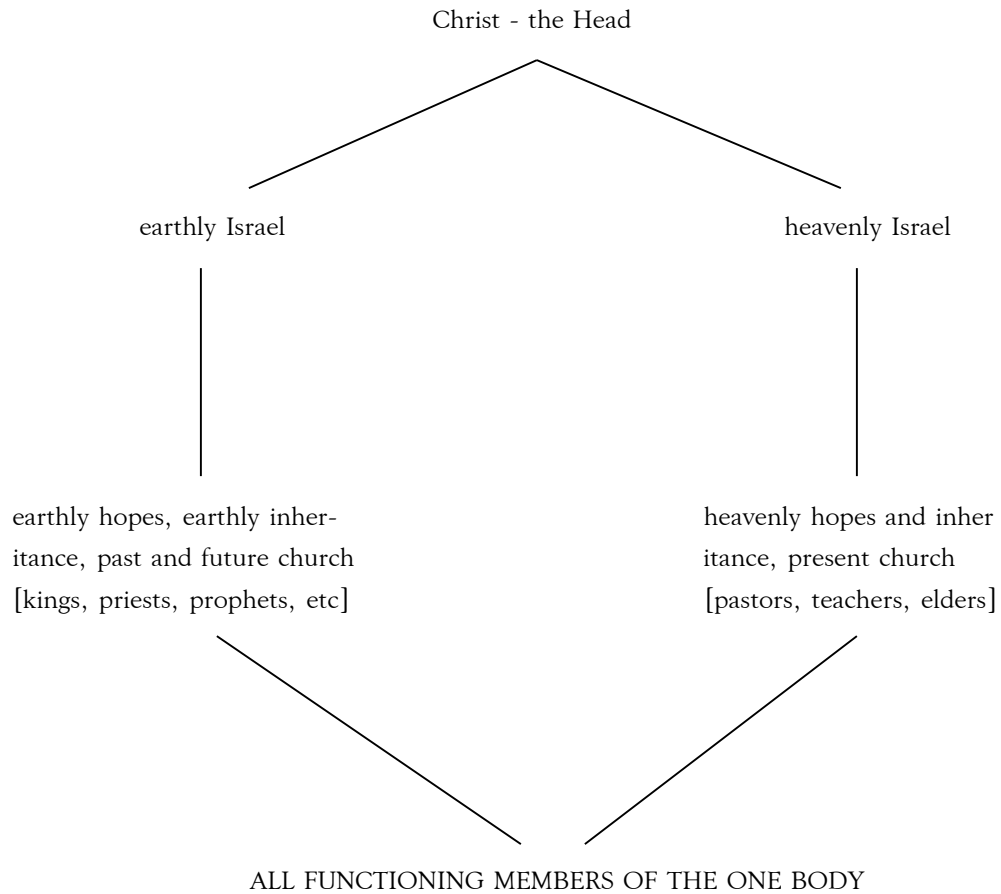
now both groups (earthly Israelites, and Gentiles) are joined in ONE body. [i.e. the "elect" from both are now joined].

The composite body is a concept which Paul emphasizes, but the actual parts have long existed. Though Paul often uses the descriptive term "body", it is also synonymous with other collective terms—such as "people" of Hosea 2:23 and Isaiah 19:25. The future "Kingdom church" is yet to be incorporated, yet it shall also be "built-together". The future Kingdom Church, is of the earthly portion of the body, it has earthly hopes, an earthly King, resurrected earthly bodies, it is the "Bride", *et al.*

Finally as concerns the "when", the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ provided the glue for the union, the precious blood of Jesus. The whole composite body was preplanned long ago by God. Paul first illuminates the hidden building plans, hidden IN God's Word [Ephesians 3:9, noting the suggested translation of the preposition *εν* here as "in" as opposed to the common "by"] this mystery was preplanned. Thus, Satan (lacking Paul's special revelations) could not see the plan.

THE COMPONENTS

In John 6:51,56 we note that believers must "eat" the body of Jesus, and partake of His blood, or else they were none of His. We know how the Catholic theologians use this text. Yet, we should be aware of its figurative meaning. Believers must be a part of Christ. They must "ingest" Him. This ingestion is akin to "baptism" which is the incorporation of something within something else. These references are similar to Pauline usages of "body". In this age, the Holy Spirit places each convert into [*βαπτίζω*, to baptize] the body of Christ,—I Corinthians 12:13 and Galatians 3:27. And it is safe to state that He eventually places each child of God into one of the portions of the Body (Ephesians 2:11-22). Each "member" has a function, each member is a part. Hence within the unity is also a divine diversity. Observe this schematic representation:



There is only one body, but many members. Paul never refers to any group which he writes to as THE Body of Christ. Each is a part of the Body of Christ. Note the Greek of I Corinthians 12:27:

υρεις δε εστε σωμα χριστου και μελη εκ μερους

"but you are body of Christ and members of a portion"

[see the appended "additional note"]

The subject "you" υ̐εις is of Christ's body. The same subject is further a portion of a part. In this age, this portion I believe, is the heavenly portion. One can refer to the work of Robertson and Plummer in the International Critical commentary—*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, page 277f. The body is a corporate construction. If it were not so, then it would not be a body. It must have a variety of members, each member with function(s) which assist with body growth and maintenance. [note especially I Corinthians 12:12, 25!].

In Colossians 2:17, the genitive functions as one which shows possession. Το δε σωμα του Χριστου - literally "but the body [is] of Christ" [it belongs to Christ]. Note the words "entire body" of verse 19 in chapter 2 of Colossians! Literally the usage of "body" in verse 17 is as a contrast to shadow. But the possessive usage of the genitive is displayed. These observations should result when one considers I Corinthians 12:27 (above) and Colossians 2:17, 19:

- (1) the church in Corinth is not THE body of Christ, but are members of some sort of a portion, part of a section.

- (2) the body is growing (Colossians 2:19), it is composite.

Ephesians 5:30 is relevant here too, "because members we are of His body". Paul and company and the audience(s) of the Ephesian epistle are not the body of Christ, they are members or a part of it. (And beware of the addition of the article "the" before "body" which the KJV editors added to the text of 1 Corinthians 12:27.).

Romans 12:5, is not referring to the mystical "Body of Christ", but rather is using "body" as a figure to illustrate diversity within the church. Paul wants the Roman believers to respect the humble and or various graces

given to each member. This is another usage of the word for "body" [σωμα] in the Pauline corpus.

In Ephesians 2:19 the "fellow-citizens" are the earthly Israelites *and* the current believers. Here an earthly unity is noted. In Philippians 3:20, a heavenly citizenship is applied to the Jewish-Gentile saints. Saints today, bear this type of dual citizenship, note the Greek term πεπολιτευμαι in Acts 23:1, wherein Paul states that he has "lived in all good conscience". "Have lived" is the same type of word for "citizen" as seen in Philippians 3:20 and Ephesians 2:12 and 19.¹ As per Witmer, Paul is probably referring to both his citizenships here. Israel is in a divorced state from God in this age, but back in Acts a partial reconciliation was beginning, a believing Israel was manifest! In the book of Acts wherein two ages were rubbing shoulders, portions of two churches were co-existing! One earthly and one heavenly. As Acts progresses, we learn that one church (the Messianic Church) is temporarily set aside in this dispensation.

Finally, Paul uses "body" as a term to indicate a composition particularly because Greeks have been using this term to represent a unity for some time before Paul. The concept is not new, nor its applications by Paul—the union of the earthly/heavenly. Plato spoke of the kinship of the human being with the great cosmos.² And in the *Orphicorum Fragmenta*, we read that Zeus was considered as the "Head" and as the "center" of all things, with his "boundless body".³ Philo also uses "body" to show a corporate composition, and the Qumran community viewed itself as a cosmic planting and building.⁴

Thus Paul uses "body of Christ"; we do well to recognize it as one of a variety of terms which are used to describe the past, present and future unity of God's people. Yet, clearly, "Body" is much more personal, and is literally descriptive of our relationship to our Head, Jesus Christ, we are a part of Him! In the epistles to the Colossians and Ephesians, he reassures

these saints and all those throughout the empire, that they are not excluded. The term "body" is very relevant and personal in these epistles which were circulated amongst the churches of Asia Minor and Europe, and which are written TO the saints in this the same age; the age of the construction of the heavenly body part, the age of grace, or the age of the Church.

REFERENCES

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2. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Fiedrich, editors. (translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley) volume VII, page 1029, article by Eduard Schweizer. William B. Eerdmans, Michigan 1971.
3. *Colossians and Philemon*, by Eduard Lohse, Fortress Press, Philadelphia. 1971. Page 53.
4. s.v. #2 above, Schweizer, page 1071.

ADDITIONAL NOTE

[The reference to the commentary by Robertson and Plummer does not support the notion of a "heavenly" body-part; it is referred to because they do support the fact that here Paul is not referring to these Corinthians as *the* body of Christ, nor as *A* body of Christ.]

The most natural reading of I Corinthians 12:27b from the Greek text, would produce this: "...and members of [a] portion." "Members of a portion" is the literal translation of μελη εκ μερους. "Portion" is the singular genitive - μερους it is not a pronoun and it does not equal the word "body" which is seen in the beginning of this verse. Hence, these saints are not a part, or members of an "it" which the NASB postulates. Paul is clearly declaring that they are members of some part or portion. Most commentaries and translations simply equate "part" with "body", Paul is not saying this! Thus, one must now determine just what this "part" or "portion" is of which they are members of. This is the issue, and the commentators and translators avoid it. Admittedly they do not know what Paul is saying here!

This prepositional phrase μελη εκ μερους is seen nowhere else in the entire Greek Bible, it only occurs here. Some commentators treat the preposition εκ as one denoting "in" and render this as—members in part, or in particular (Blass, Funk, Nida and Louw). It may make sense in English, but this Greek preposition should never be rendered as "in". Here it is part of a partitive construction, and it clearly means "members from out of a part (or, portion)". Some attempt to explain the "portion" as if Paul was declaring that each individual member was a part. This is the distributive sense, [a fine example of the distributive with "members" is seen at Romans 12:5], but had Paul meant this then he would have dictated this, "κατα μερος"; this construction is seen at Hebrews 9:5. [And note κατα with

"church" at Acts 14:23, "in each (or every) church"]. Thus Paul is not saying that these saints are individually members of that church in Corinth (which is already obviously understood!), but he is saying that they are also members of some greater portion. Here in I Corinthians 12, he does not identify the portion (which point may have been distracting here).

Μερούς, is used with ἐκ in four other places in this epistle. They are: 13:9 (2x), 13:10 and 13:12. In each case a partitive sense (part of... [not the English "in"]) is clearly meant. This writer suggests that Paul is subtly referring to that *heavenly* portion. (I trust the reader is following my line of reasoning here).

In verse 28 we note that Paul is referring to *the* church universal (apostles, and prophets of all dispensations). Verse 28 is connected to verse 27 via an explicative καί (see below) and Paul explains that in *the* church universal not in the local assembly there is an order of priority. First in this order is "apostles" and last is "kinds of tongues [languages]", "miracles" are placed in fourth position. Each of these positions are dispersed amongst *the* church universal.

Now these babes in the great city of Corinth, with their proliferation of miracles, obviously thought that they were the "main attraction" so-to-speak. Verse 28 puts them in perspective in *the* general church, or *the* church universal. What all this implies is that, here, Paul is not speaking about the positions in each local assembly. Hence they are not being referred to as "members of a *local assembly*"; it is asserted that the portion is not a local assembly via the context.

In the church universal, there are primarily two portions; but here in verses 28, Paul points to the individual functions in the church universal. In noting this most commentators suppose that this is the singular portion which is what Paul is referring to in verse 27, this writer does not as explained above. Paul is not referring to the "local assembly", he points these proud babes to the universal church. Though Paul does not identify the "portion" here, (he passes over it), it is touched upon in other contexts.

As far as this writer knows, no one else sees this "portion" here as a heavenly one, thus this explanation is due. Why is a "heavenly portion" possible here? The following clues suggest a "heavenly portion" to this writer, and this position is not dogmatically final. It is a suggestion, simply identifying this "portion".

Having spent some time in the Pauline corpus, it is easy for this writer to see the "heavenly" here, especially after reflecting upon the text of Ephesians, and after having written an essay on the meaning of Israel, and after having also written upon the text of Ephesians 1:10. But is Paul here at I Corinthians 12:27 implying such a distinction? This writer suspects he is! A subtle foundation seems to be in the process of being laid. Let us begin at verse 2 of chapter 1. Paul herein makes a reference to not only the saints in Corinth, but adds "with all who in every place". This unusual opening is repeated in II Corinthians 1:1 as, "with all the saints who are throughout Achaia". In the beginning of each of these epistles, and only in the beginning of these two epistles does Paul expand the borders of each local assembly. In I Corinthians 1:24, we note the "called" as coming from amongst both Jews and Greeks. In 2:6, Paul declares that all the saints in Corinth are not babes, some are mature, and hence can dine upon some of the meat in these epistles! Notice in 3:1 that "flesh" is equated with "babes", the immature babes in Corinth were viewed as "men of flesh". Though they are indeed saints, nevertheless their minds are not spiritually aware or trained. One is left to infer that when they mature, they will then be reckoned as "spiritual". This is true of all saints, first we live as fleshly, and then grow (hopefully), there is no circumventing this progression.

In I Corinthians chapter 10, the reader should note some salient features. In verse one, the NASB reads: "...our fathers were all under the cloud"! And in verse 2: "and all were baptized into Moses". Thus the Israelites of long ago are connected to these saints in Corinth. Though Paul is presenting an illustration, the use of "our fathers" deepens the connection. In I Corinthians 10, at verse 18, Paul mentions "Israel after the flesh", or

"Israel according to the flesh" which words are totally garbled in the NIV and NASB! They drank from the same spiritual drink (verse 4) and they partook of "spiritual food" (verse 3). They partook of Christ Jesus spiritually. Paul then goes on to discuss the Lord's Supper [communion], in verses 16 - 22. This writer senses a feeling of identity here.

Note verse 17:

Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread.

The same must be true of "Israel according to the flesh", for they also partook of this communion "type", they too are a part of the "we all" above. Now the phrase "Israel according the flesh" intimates that a "spiritual Israel" must exist, or better a "heavenly Israel". Indeed, Galatians 4:26 is more than just salient:

But the Jerusalem above is free, she is our mother.

and note Galatians 6:16;

...that is, upon the Israel of God

("that is" is *καί* used in its explicative [i.e. explanatory] function, as also noted by Zerwick, Winer, and H. A. W. Meyer).

The saints in Galatia are reckoned as the "Israel of God" children of a heavenly Jerusalem. All of this makes perfectly good sense if one acknowledges an earthly and a heavenly Israel. In fact, Paul in I Corinthians 15:38 - 50, discusses the necessity of a progression. The earthly must *first* exist, then comes the heavenly. First the natural, then the spiritual. First as babes, then as mature. First earthly Israel, then the manifestation of the heavenly Israel. [Note the "kingdom" of I Corinthians 15:50, is not the Messianic 1,000 year earthly kingdom, but rather a heavenly *spiritual* kingdom].

Earthly Israel has earthly hopes, and knew only an earthly/fleshly Jesus Christ - Romans 9:5, John 1:14, I John 4:2, II John 7 ("as coming in the flesh"); these hopes and realities are contrasted with II Corinthians 5:16, disclosing that we (saints of this dispensation) now no longer know Christ as fleshly, our relationship with Jesus is purely spiritual. We have not earthly hopes, our hopes are heavenly; we do not long for a long life in earthly bodies, we long for our new spiritual bodies; our inheritance is not earthly, but heavenly; earthly Jerusalem is not our mother, but the "Jerusalem above" the heavenly Jerusalem is our mother!

Hence, we have two groups! Both are composed of many members—apostles, prophets, leaders, *et cetera*. The first section is earthly, the second section is heavenly. Both are composed only of elected saints! Both are covered by the shed blood of Jesus, both are partakers of Jesus Christ, both are referred to as the "church of God", and are referred to as "church" (Acts 7:38 - the εκκλησια - "church in the wilderness"); both will live eternally, both will be joined under the one Head - Jesus Christ, Ephesians 1:10. This notion of a "heavenly portion" seems to be carefully woven throughout the Corinthian epistles, and it seems very evident to this writer. This subtle evidence is why this writer suggests seeing the "portion" of I Corinthians 12:27 as a *heavenly* portion. A literal translation of the Greek phrase also suggests some portion is referred to. Yet the reader may not accept such a suggestion here, as Paul does not identify the part! However, the fact of a "heavenly portion" is made very very clear in the whole of the Pauline corpus, and Ephesians proves this with vigor. I Corinthians 12:27 is not the passage to use to verify a "heavenly portion", it cannot serve as a "proof-text" here, nor can it deny such an assertion! A comprehensive understanding of Paul's theology is needed to add veracity to this writer's suggestion. I close with this fine quote: Colossians 1:18,

He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything.