

Romans - Collective Body Fallacies

Romans Series (Part 11)

By Ed Stevens -- Then and Now Podcast -- Jan 12, 2014

Opening Remarks:

- A. Welcome back to our study of the book of Romans from a full preterist perspective.
- B. Last session we surveyed the meaning of the word BODY (Gk. soma) as Paul uses it here in his epistle to the Romans. The word "body" is used thirteen times in Romans, and we took a brief look at each of them to see what kind of "body" they were talking about (collective or individual).
- C. In this session I want to share a little bit of the history of how these "body" texts in Romans have been interpreted collectively by other preterists, and explain why I believe they should instead be interpreted individually.
- D. Let's ask God's blessing on our study:

Sovereign Creator and Sustainer of both the SEEN and UNSEEN realms of this universe, we exalt you and adore you for saving us and shaping us to be your servants. Thank you so much for snatching us out of the spiritual darkness and manifesting your regenerating light to us through your Word. Not only did that Word become flesh, but now it is embodied in your inspired, eternally relevant, and absolutely authoritative written Word. May your Spirit illuminate our minds here as we study a portion of that Word written by your faithful bond-servant Paul. Help us not only to understand it, but apply it to our lives in a way that will *sanctify* us, *attract* others to you, and ultimately *glorify* your Holy Name. We pray this in the Name of Your Beloved Son and our Glorious Savior Jesus. Amen.

A Look at Robinson's "Body" Book (1952)

Last time I mentioned several books by both collective body advocates and individual body advocates that deal with this whole issue of the "body" here in Romans: (1) Max King's book entitled *The Cross and the Parousia*, (2) John A. T. Robinson's book on *The Body*, (3) Tom Holland's *Contours of Pauline Theology*, (4) Dave Green's *House Divided* book, (5) Robert H. Gundry's *SOMA in Biblical Theology*, and several of the standard commentaries on Romans (by Nygren, Moo, Schreiner, Morris, Hodge, et al).

Last week I asserted that my study of these books had confirmed for me the utter impossibility of the Collective Body concept being the correct interpretative approach here in Romans. This time I want to provide the documentation for that assertion by interacting with some of those writers on both sides of the issue.

As we noted, in order to understand Romans correctly, we need to know what Paul's definition of the word "body" is, and how he is using it here in his letter to the first

century Roman Christians. The best way to get a good understanding of his definition is to look at each of his uses of the word "body" in their context. We did a little of that contextual study last time, and I intend to do some more of it this time after we take a brief look at some of the history regarding how the collective body concept was developed by John A. T. Robinson, Max King, and others.

So many cults, heresies, and defective theologies have resulted from a misunderstanding of the book of Romans. And that same thing is happening within preterism. Both the Collective Body View (CBV) and the Individual Body View (IBV) use the book of Romans as support for their respective paradigms. However, as we all know, both views cannot be right, so we need to be Bereans and search the scriptures to see what Paul was actually teaching here in Romans, and then let that guide us in discerning truth from error in the various views within preterism.

All of the preterist collective body advocates that I am aware of, borrowed their collective body concept either from Max King or someone who borrowed it from Max King. But where did Max King get it? He personally told me 35 years ago when I was visiting him at his home in Warren, Ohio, that he borrowed most of his "collective body" concepts directly from John A. T. Robinson's book on *The Body*. A quick look at the footnotes in his big book, *The Cross and the Parousia*, easily confirms that this is true. Furthermore, one of the collective body advocates who has been in the movement for almost twenty-five years told me in an email recently that:

Max King's definition of the body is basically just John A.T. Robinson's definition of the body in certain places like Romans 6. Reading Robinson's 83-page booklet "The Body" (1952) is like reading Max King. Even the style is much the same. After reading that booklet, there's no question that Robinson heavily influenced King on the word "body."

Moreover, Max King's son, Tim, who took control of Max's *Covenant Eschatology* ministry after Max retired, has reprinted Robinson's book on *The Body*, and said the following about Robinson's collective body concept:

In the field of eschatological studies, no topic seems thornier than that of the resurrection, regardless of the particulars of one's perspective. A great deal of misunderstanding about the resurrection in "preterist" circles stems from our tendency to see the concept of "body" largely in dualistic terms that do not reflect Paul's way of thinking. This is especially true of Paul's discussions of resurrection, and a recovery of the Hebrew understanding of body will go a long way toward a proper understanding of resurrection in first-century corporate terms. To this end, John A.T. Robinson's 1952 classic *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology* is a valuable contribution to the literature surrounding *Transmillennial*® thought... "One could say without exaggeration that the concept of the body forms the keystone of Paul's theology," contends the author. Robinson's own eschatology does not embrace complete fulfillment, yet this quality reprint of this classic book in Pauline

studies provides the serious student a missing piece of the puzzle of Pauline eschatology. [This statement was found on the *Preterist Archive* website]

That quote from Tim King does not really do much for me, but I wanted our listeners to know why Tim King (and evidently Max King also) has reprinted Robinson's book. It is clear that both Max and his son Tim, as well as other leading advocates of the collective body view, see Robinson's *Body* book as the primary source for supporting their Collective Body view. However, since Robinson was far astray in many areas of his theology, we need to examine his views a lot more critically before giving them any significant consideration. You will see why I say that when I read the following quotes from Robinson and others about what he really believed and taught:

This first quote is from Robinson's book, *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology* (1952). It is a good example of how Robinson uses his collective body concept to lead right into his universalism. It is interesting that one of the collective body advocates in an email exchange with me recently, denied that Robinson used his collective body concept to support his universalism:

Robinson used his sacramental literalism (*not* "the CB concept") as the basis for his Universalism (Holland, *Contours*, p. 87). And "the CB concept" does not *necessitate* sacramental literalism.

Notice the careful wording of this denial. While it is true that the collective body concept "does not necessitate either sacramental literalism or universalism," it CAN be pushed to those logical extremes, and that is exactly what Robinson does in his book. He lays his **collective body foundation** first, and then constructs his **sacramental literalism** as the framework on which to hang his **universalism**. Here is the progression of Robinson's argumentation:

1. Collective Body concept (CB)
2. Sacramental Literalism (built on CB)
3. Universalism (based on both CB and SL)

The collective body guys want us to think that the **universalism** of John A. T. Robinson and Max King has no connection whatsoever with the collective body concept. But you would never get that impression from reading Robinson. Universalism was the ultimate goal that his whole book was focused on. The last two pages of the book prove it (as we will see down below). So it is disingenuous to claim that there is no connection between Robinson's collective body view and his Universalism, when in fact Robinson goes to great pains throughout the book to lay the foundation for **universalism** by constructing both the **collective body concept** and his **sacramental literalism** first to make way for it. We will see this is the case when we read the following quote, which is taken from the last two pages of his book, where he summarizes the implications of all of his collective body and sacramental literalism arguments and pushes right on into Universalism. [note the words I have boldfaced]:

And as the Christian hope of resurrection is fundamentally social [i.e., realized in the collective body], so it is inescapably historical [i.e., the resurrection is a process, not an event, that is worked out during the transition period]. It is a resurrection, not from the body, but of **the body**. ... It is this very **body of sin** and death which, transformed, 'must put on incorruption' (1 Cor 15:54). The building up of **the Church** is not the gathering of an elect group *out of* the body of history, which is itself signed simply for destruction. **It is the resurrection body** of history itself, **the world** as its redemption has so far been made effective. 'The open consecration of a part marks **the destiny of the whole**' (B.F. Westcott, *The Victory of the Cross*, 51; quoted in A. R. Vidler, *The Theology of F. D. Maurice*, 73). The **mass of human existence**, for all its sin, its destructiveness, its determinisms, is still **SOMA** (body): **it is made for God** [This contradicts Paul in Rom 9:22 who says that it is a vessel of wrath destined to destruction – ees]. Though it may have become conformed to the SARX (flesh) and its end, that is **not its true constitution as it has been created and redeemed in Christ**. The Church is at once the witness to the world of **its true nature and the pledge and instrument of its destiny**. Those incorporated by God into the Body of His Son are to be 'a kind of firstfruits of his creatures' (James 1:18). So Paul sees the redemption of the body begun in the eschatological community of the Spirit (Rom 8:11) as **the hope ultimately, not only of all men, but of 'the creation itself'** (Rom 8:21). It is *'into the liberty of the glory of the children of God'*, into the **resurrection mode of existence** of those who even now can be **described as 'glorified'** (Rom 8:30), that **all things are finally to be brought**. This day has not yet dawned. It waits upon 'the revealing', or unveiling, 'of the sons of God' (Rom 8:19), which is the same as 'the revelation of the Lord Jesus', 'when he shall come to be glorified *in his saints*' (2 Thess 1:7, 10). But then the **Body of Christ** will stand forth, not as it is now, a world within a world, but as **the one solidarity, the restoration of the original image of creation**, 'where there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bondman, freeman: but **Christ is all, and in all**' (Col 3:10f). [John A. T. Robinson, *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology* (SCM Press Ltd, Great Britain, 1957, pp. 82-83, i.e., the last two pages of his book. italic emphasis his, bracketed words and bold emphasis mine, ees]

Anyone who has read Max King's book will recognize some of the terminology that Robinson used in that quote above (e.g., "**resurrection mode of existence**", "the one **solidarity**", etc.). Note also the highly glossed and nuanced language Robinson uses to teach his view of ultimate **universal salvation** (e.g., "the destiny of the whole", "the hope ultimately, not only of all men, but of the creation itself", "the resurrection mode of existence ... glorified", "one solidarity", "restoration of the original image of creation", "**Christ is all and in all**"). This is a clear example of how he used the collective body concept to construct, explain, and support his vision of ultimate universal salvation. It is not without significance that **Tim King** used some of this same terminology to support his view of "**comprehensive grace**," which is nothing less than warmed-over universalism veiled behind an innocent-sounding sheepskin. That ought to send up a few red flags for anyone tempted to even consider Robinson's collective body concept.

It leads right into universalism. It did so for John A. T. Robinson and many others who followed him, including Max King and Tim King apparently.

But universalism is not the only anti-biblical doctrine that Robinson uses the collective body concept to support! His book also argues for a "**sacramental literalism.**" He argues his case for *sacramental literalism* in Chapter Three ("The Body of the Resurrection" on pages 49-58 especially). The basic idea of sacramental literalism is that the collective body of the Church not only represents Christ, but is in fact the literal individual physical body of Christ that both died on the Cross, arose from the dead, and ascended. You might say that is absurd, and that surely no one would be so dense as to believe such a thing, but it is not much different than the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. Here is how Robinson explains it: [note the boldfaced words]

...But it is of great importance to see that when Paul took the term SOMA and applied it to the Church, what it must have conveyed to him and his readers was (to employ a distinction which itself would have surprised him) something *not corporate* [collective] *but corporal* [individual]. **It directed the mind to a person; it did not of itself suggest a social group.** Hence, as Professor A. M. Ramsay has well remarked, 'to call the Church TO SOMA TOU CHRISTOU ["the body of Christ"] was to draw attention to it not primarily as a collection of men, but primarily as **Christ Himself in His own being and life'** (*The Gospel and the Catholic Church*, 35). **It referred as directly to the organism of Christ's person as his other language about 'the body of his flesh'.** [Robinson, 50-51]

Consequently, one must be chary [cautious, hesitant] of speaking of 'the metaphor' of the Body of Christ. Paul uses the analogy of the human body to elucidate his teaching that **Christians form Christ's body.** But the analogy holds because **they are in literal fact the risen organism of Christ's person in all its concrete reality.** What is arresting is his identification of this personality with the Church. **But 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. They are all expressions of a single Christology. [Robinson, 51]

It is almost impossible to exaggerate the materialism and crudity of Paul's doctrine of the Church as **literally now the resurrection body of Christ.** ...The body that [Paul] has in mind [in 1 Cor 12:27] is as **concrete and as singular as the body of the Incarnation.** His underlying conception is not of a supra-personal collective, but of a **specific personal organism.** He is not saying anything so weak as that the Church is a society with a common life and governor, but that its unity is that of a **single physical entity:** disunion is dismemberment. For it is in fact no other than **the glorified body of the risen and ascended Christ. 'We are members of that body which was nailed to the Cross, laid in the tomb and raised to life on the third day. There is only one organism of the new creation; and we are members of that one organism which is Christ'** (L. S. Thornton, *The Common Life in the Body of Christ*, 298). [Robinson, 51-52]

It is to be noted how **uncompromisingly physical is the language in which Paul depicts Christians as going to compose the resurrection body of Christ.** This is particularly clear in the verse from Romans (7:4) ... They have been "joined to another, even to him who was raised from the dead." The unity is much closer than the English words would suggest. For the metaphor, as the context shows, is one of **sexual union**, and its presupposition is that the relation of Christians to Christ is that of "**one flesh**" (cf. Eph 5:28-32): they are **fused in a single *basar*** [Heb. for "flesh"]. This union is as exclusive as that of man and wife. [Robinson, 52]

...In the same way as no clear distinction can be drawn between the flesh-body of Jesus and the body of His resurrection, so there is **no real line between the body of His resurrection and the flesh-bodies of those who are risen with Him; for they are members of it.** [Robinson, 53]

...our concern here is with the doctrinal content which the term SOMA was used to clothe and express. And our contention is that **[Paul's] doctrine of the resurrection body of Christ, under all its forms, is a direct extension of his understanding of the Incarnation.** [Robinson, 56]

Further, **the grounding of the doctrine of the Body of Christ in the Eucharist does full justice to the emphasis on which we have insisted, namely, that SOMA is to be interpreted *corporally*, as the extension of the life and person of the incarnate Christ beyond His resurrection and ascension. ... Jesus is [handing] over to His followers "till He come" His actual self, His life and personality. In so far then as the Christian community feeds on this body and blood, it *becomes* the very life and personality of the risen Christ.** [Robinson, 57]

[Paul] also had seen the Lord in His risen body. ...Now, when we examine the narratives of this appearance itself, we find stressed in each account of Paul's conversion how the heart of the revelation which came to him was **the fact that the Church he was trying to stamp out was no other than Jesus Christ Himself:** "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou *me*? ... And I said, who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, *I am Jesus whom thou persecutest*" (Acts 26:14f; cf. 9:4; 22:7f). *The appearance on which Paul's whole faith and apostleship was founded was the revelation of the resurrection body of Christ, not as an individual, but as the Christian Community.* In face of this it would seem unnecessary to go further for an explanation of why the Body of Christ inevitably meant for him what it did. As Prof. Emile Mersch has put it, "Since that day, when he saw Christ in the Church he was persecuting, it seems that he can no longer look into the eyes of a Christian without meeting there the gaze of Christ" (*The Whole Christ*, 104). [Robinson, 58]

[The above quotes taken from John A. T. Robinson, *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology* (SCM Press Ltd, Great Britain, 1957, pp. 50-53, and 56-58] [italics his, boldface mine]

Did you notice all the words and phrases that I boldfaced in Robinson's quote above? If you are like me, you must be shaking your head in disbelief! How could Robinson get so far off base in his understanding of the literal physical body of Christ and the collective body of the Church, to take this position that the Church is the literal physical body of

Jesus that died on the Cross, was raised, and ascended? The reason is obvious. He needed to **push the collective body concept *that far*** in order to establish his sacramental literalism. And as we have already seen, he needed both the **collective body** concept and the **sacramental literalism** to build his doctrine of ultimate **universal salvation**. Now you are beginning to see why I have such difficulty giving any credence to the collective body view. When we see it being used to support such anti-biblical doctrines as sacramental literalism and universalism, **we ought to back away from it and take a more critical look**. The truth would never support those two unbiblical doctrines. Those two doctrines are very bad fruit coming the collective body tree. It indicates that the collective body tree itself might be bad as well.

Tom Holland, who wrote the book, *Contours of Pauline Theology*, teaches a collective body concept, and says that he bases his position on Robinson's collective body view. Holland is not a preterist, nor does he agree with Robinson's sacramental literalism or universalism, but he does use Robinson's collective body idea to build his own concept. Here is what he said about Robinson's *sacramental literalism*:

Robinson was able to make use of Bultmann's work to support a **sacramental concept of the body of Christ**. Robinson pursued what seemed to be the inevitable logic of the principle of Semitic completeness in the expression "body". He argued that **the ecclesiastical body of Christ is the whole Christ**. Indeed, for Robinson **the body of Christ (the church) is Christ**. ... Robinson argued that when Paul wrote of the body of Christ, as in Ephesians 5:30, he was not intending that "body" should be understood as a mere simile [Robinson, 66-67]. It speaks of organic unity, not only of the body, but of the body with its head. Robinson claimed that the concept is fundamental to the understanding of Paul's theology of the church. **The church is not merely a body of people in subjection to Christ, but is actually *the* body of Christ**. This is shown to be Paul's thinking [according to Robinson, p. 58] in the accounts of his conversion. Jesus' question, "Why do you persecute me?", demonstrates for Robinson the existence of an organic unity. **In persecuting Christ's people Paul was literally persecuting Christ himself**. [Tom Holland, *Contours of Pauline Theology: A Radical New Survey of the Influences on Paul's Biblical Writings*. Mentor Imprint by Christian Focus Publications, Scotland UK, 2004. p. 86] [italics his, boldface mine]

Robert H. Gundry, an American evangelical scholar, not only took issue with Robinson's universalism and sacramental literalism, but also with the implications of his views for the **resurrection of the dead** at the Parousia. Gundry noted several times in his book that Robinson's collective body concept ends up denying a future resurrection at the Parousia for believers by teaching an already ongoing dying-rising process during the transition period. If you have read Max King's big book, this language about a **dying-rising process** during the transition period should sound real familiar. Max teaches that idea in his book, as do all the other Collective Body advocates, as far as I am aware. Robinson does not see the resurrection as **an event at the Parousia**, but rather as a **process already taking place before the Parousia**. It seems that Max King and the other Collective Body advocates use this same idea as the basis for their

resurrection concept of **dying-rising reciprocity** throughout the transition period, which effectively **eliminates any resurrection of the dead ones out of Hades at the Parousia**. Notice what Gundry says about this:

Insistence that physicality defines the very nature of membership in Christ's Body runs into a **variety of impossibilities**. We have previously noted the impossibility of reconciling [Robinson's] view with **the futurity of the death and resurrection**, or translation, of Christians. For physical fusion of their mortal bodies with the physical body of the risen Christ, over whom death has no more power, **should automatically immortalize their present bodies and thereby put their resurrection in the past**. The mere fact that Christians die, and did so in Paul's time, and that Paul carefully assigns the resurrection of Christ **to the past**, but that of Christians **to the future**, refutes the notion. [Robert H. Gundry, *SOMA in Biblical Theology*, p. 232-233] [boldface emphasis mine]

Note the implications of Robinson's view that Gundry points out here. He says in net effect that Robinson's collective body view *necessitates* the conclusion that the transition period saints already had their immortal bodies because their resurrection with Christ was already in the past. Thus, there was no hope for a future resurrection at the Parousia, because they had already been raised with Christ (as His literal body) when Christ was raised. Gundry shows that this is not just a POSSIBLE implication of Robinson's view, but rather a NECESSARY implication of it. Therefore it not surprising that several of the collective body advocates are teaching this idea of "immortal body now." It is a necessary implication of the collective body concept. Gundry shows that it contradicts Paul's teaching of the resurrection as a future event at the Parousia, NOT an ongoing process during the transition period.

If some theologian has an incorrect understanding of the essentials of the Faith (like Deism, universalism, sacramental literalism, and secular theology), **what makes us think his understanding of eschatology is going to be any better**, especially when he uses his warped views of eschatology to support his Universalism, sacramental literalism, Deism, and secular theology? This is what John A. T. Robinson was doing.

It ought to send up a red flag in our minds when **a fellow preterist teacher** cannot find support for his resurrection view among conservative evangelical scholarship, and has to **resort to liberals, radicals, and secular theologians** to find it. That is what Max King did. It ought to raise lots of red flags for us. Our concern must always be, "To the Law and to the Testimony, if they do not speak according to this Word, it is because they have no dawn" (Isa 8:20). That is the problem here with Max King and the other collective body advocates. Instead of looking at Paul's language in context and drawing Paul's meaning out of the context of Romans, they instead chose to go to some secular theologian, a radical liberal like Robinson, and use his collective body view to help them understand Apostle Paul. Do you see the problem with that? I surely do!

Well there is so much more that could be said about John A. T. Robinson and his collective body concept, but we will save it for later. We have shown that there is a

linkage between the collective body view and universalism. It may not be a *necessary* connection, but there is a connection nonetheless. The fact that both Max and Tim King are now universalists and are using Robinson's book to support it, speaks volumes about that linkage. Universalism is very bad fruit coming from the Collective Body Tree. It certainly suggests the possibility that the Collective Body Tree might be bad as well.

Next time we need to get back into the text of Romans and let Paul tell us in context what he means, rather than letting liberal scholars tell us what they think Paul means.

That will do it for this time. Thanks for listening.

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