

Prologue

Picture one. Seen through the glass of a giant aquarium, a school of hundreds of fish swirls through the water, a silvery forceful mass of seething vitality. They are many, but move with the decisiveness of one.

Picture two. Seen from the interstate highway on a quiet morning, a large flock of birds moves against the cold blue sky, their motion like the alternating push and glide of an ice skater but in shorter bursts. It is the flock's motion as a whole, not individual birds, that captures the eye. They are many but move as one. Something makes possible a remarkable coordination.

Yet the flock doesn't move like an automaton or a regimented army with strictly linear flight and square turns. It is fluid, alive, with margins constantly in motion. The flock may move in a general direction across the sky, but in getting there, it takes the unpredictable path of a butterfly across a meadow. "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going."¹

Picture three. Seen from the Kebar River in Babylon:

a whirlwind came out of the north, a great cloud, and a fire infolding itself, and a brightness was about it

out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures As I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel on the ground beside each creature

When the living creatures moved, the wheels beside them moved; and when the living creatures rose from the ground, the wheels also rose. *Wherever the spirit would go, they would go*, and the wheels would rise along with them, because the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels.

When the creatures moved, they also moved; when the creatures stood still, they also stood still; and when the creatures rose from the ground, the wheels rose along with them, because the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels.²

Ezekiel saw a vision of the glory of the Lord, awesome, wondrous, holy. The expression of that glory in the living creatures and the wheels beside them speaks to another mystery.

Picture four.

“The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but *the same God works all of them in all men....*

To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.”³

How do the individual, separate members of the Church move as one? In Ezekiel’s vision, “When the living creatures moved, the wheels beside them moved ... because the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels.” Paul’s epistle to the Romans draws a similar picture. “You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.”⁴

Without individual submission to the Lord and his Spirit, coordination is impossible.

The variety of all creation speaks of the Lord’s incredible creativity; it is a mirror of his glory. Did he intend

any less for the Church? No. “His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.”⁵ The outline, the shape, the margin of the Flock is constantly in motion, many expressing the One.

If the Lord is not cramped or stereotyped in moving or working, then neither does he intend his Church to be stuck in a rut or constrained by a straitjacket. He made us to be alive, active, moving, and engaged with the world around us. As we walk with him—neither ahead nor behind, but keeping in step through our spirit—he expresses himself through us. As a member of my fellowship once remarked, “Inspiration is *normal*.” Sometimes a banjo’s tight drumhead picks up notes from a piano playing nearby and resonates in response, making its strings sing. If we are attuned to the Lord, we can hear what he is saying and express it. “I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit ...”⁶

So we are many, yet we are one.

They follow the Lamb wherever he goes.⁷

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