

The Church

The Christian life is not meant to be a solitary life. In the book of Acts, we discover that new Christians became immediately involved in the fellowship of an organized group of believers. This organized collective dimension of the new life in Christ we call the church. The primary Greek word for the church in the New Testament was *ecclesia*, and was first used by Jesus in Matthew 16. The word means assembly, and believers are encouraged to assemble together in fellowship with each other, and communal worship of the Lord on a regular basis in many of the N.T. epistles. Hebrews 10:24 says, “let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, but encouraging one another”. Paul uses the word for church more than any N.T. author. The word for church is used in several different ways according to the context. Paul’s letters are addressed to a geographic church such as the church at Corinth or the church at Ephesus, or the churches of Galatia. At the same time we know that there were home churches in each one of those areas as Paul said in Romans 16:5, “Greet the church in their house” (see also 1 Cor.16:19). Therefore the church was a group of believers in a geographic area, but was also a specific group meeting in a specific location. The church is even used for bigger areas such as Acts 9:31, “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace...”

There is still even a broader view of the church in the New Testament as a universal entity. When Jesus said, “I will build My church” in Matt.16:18, He was speaking of all believers in Christ throughout the world. Paul gave emphasis to the universal nature of the church in Ephesians. The church is the body of Christ, and “Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her (5:25). The church includes all persons everywhere in the world who have received Jesus as their Savior and are savingly related to Him and each other. In even a larger way, it includes all believers who have ever lived or who will ever live and be a part of the body of Christ.

Illustrations and Images of the Church

Jesus taught the image of the Shepherd and His sheep in John 10. The image of us as sheep is perfect in that sheep are utterly helpless, yet they tend to wander off and get in trouble. Jesus said that He is “the gate” or the way for the sheep. He goes before the sheep, and they know His voice and follow Him. Like sheep we get everything we need from the Shepherd. We receive salvation, nourishment, guidance, protection, and truth. There is a communion of fellowship and understanding as the sheep together know the Shepherd. The Shepherd laid down His life for the sheep, and He continues His advocacy for the sheep from the throne of God.

In the Upper Room Discourse, Jesus revealed that after He ascended to heaven, He would send His Spirit to help His church. Then in John 15, He taught how this would work using the image of the VINE AND THE BRANCHES. Jesus is the true vine and we are the branches that draw our spiritual life out of the Vine. Our spiritual life, our attitudes, and our good works are never an accomplishment of ours alone. Our fruitfulness is always dependent on us being plugged into Jesus as the vine that we draw all our

sustenance from. Jesus exhorted His disciples to “abide in Me”. We live in Him, have our focus on Him, and are dependent on Him as we derive our fruitfulness in life from Him. This is emphasized by Jesus saying, “Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.” (Jn.15:4-6)

In several illustrations in the New Testament, the church is likened to a building with Jesus as its foundation or its cornerstone. Viewing the church as a building brings out some important principles. Each stone in the building represents a believer, and all together the church is being built by God. Each of us is a living stone that gets its life from the cornerstone which is Jesus. The whole building of believers is growing into “a holy temple in the Lord in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.” (Eph.2:21-22). The church therefore itself is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. This same idea is presented in 1 Cor.3:9, Heb.3:6, and 1 Peter 2:5. In Ephesians 2-3, Paul uses this image to teach what Paul called “the mystery” which Jesus made known to him which is that Jews and Gentiles along with every race, gender, and occupation would be a part of this building together, as he wrote in Eph.3:6, “the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel”. All the different individuals are related to each other as stones are related in the same building with the same foundation.

Perhaps the most important illustration in learning how the church is to function currently is the image of the church compared to a human body. Just as a human body is one body with many different parts, each with an important but different function; the church is many members serving in different ways who all together are one body. Each member of the body of Christ is appointed by the Holy Spirit with a spiritual gift to be used to serve the whole body. The goal of this service is to meet all the needs of the body, and to achieve unity in the faith. The key passage is 1 Corinthians 12:4-27. All the various parts of the human body are designed to function in particular ways, yet the members of the human body function as a part of the whole body. Verse 7 says that each believer is given a gift of the Spirit for the common good. Then in v.14-27, Paul uses the different parts of the human body like the foot, hand, and eye to make the point that all the members of the body are important and serve a function in making the whole body work efficiently together. The church is seen as the body of Christ with many members, but Jesus is the Head of the church. Many passages such as Eph.4:15, and Colossians 1:18 say that Christ is the “head of the body, the church”. Peter views these spiritual gifts as a stewardship entrusted to every Christian as he wrote, “As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the grace of God.”

Another beautiful image of Christ and the church is Christ as the Bridegroom and the church as His bride. The love that Christ has for the church is compared to the sacrificial and unconditional love that a bridegroom should have for his bride. In the key passage in the New Testament about marriage, Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:25 that husbands ought to love their wives as “Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, that He might make the church holy”. In Revelation 19:7-8, just prior to the second coming of Christ we see the wedding celebration of Christ and His church, “Let us rejoice and be glad...for the marriage of the Lamb (Jesus) has come and His bride (the church) has

made herself ready.” Everlasting love and intimacy between Christ and His church is the point of this image.

The image of our eternal life in heaven is expressed in Romans 8:14-17. The church is seen as being children of God, “sons of God”. This “adoption” is our great hope that enables us to get through this difficult world we live in now. Paul used the term of intimacy, Abba, that we get to use for God as His children “by which we cry out, Abba (Daddy)”. As children we are heirs of the greatest inheritance imaginable---joint heirs with Christ.

The image that Paul used to guarantee the resurrection for the church has to do with the harvest of crops. In Old Testament Israel, at the harvest, they were to give “the first fruits” to the Lord. They were first supposed to harvest the best portion of the field and give it to the Lord. The acceptance by the Lord would guarantee the remaining harvest of the crop. Jesus was the first “harvest” of the bodily resurrection of the whole “crop” which is the church. Jesus was the first fruits already given to the Lord. His resurrection was the guarantee of the church of our future resurrection. Paul wrote in 1 Cor.15:23, “But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ’s at His coming”.

The Purpose of the Church

One of the most controversial issues in this century is what the purpose of the church might be. The world today would have us believe that the church is outdated. They see God working directly in the world outside any structure of the church, and accomplishing His purposes even through persons and institutions that are not Christian. There is a philosophic approach that the church should adapt to the condition and needs of the world. This has caused a shift away from the supernatural and looking forward to heaven, to a preoccupation with the worldly, material, observable realm. The church is becoming purely a social institution defined by its activity in dealing with social problems. The majority of professing Christians seem to be more interested in being a part of a social club than the biblical orthodoxy that defines the church.

Biblically, the church should minister to its members to help them grow, worship God, and do good works. The church is God’s mediator to carry out the Great Commission to take the gospel to their community and the world. The gospel should be preached in the church services for the edification of believers, but also for unbelievers who might be present. The local church is not just to minister to believers, but believers are to serve there and make use of their spiritual gifts. While producing mature, stable, holy Christians, it may be necessary to exercise discipline in the area of morals. It should be a priority to teach the Word of God, and maintain purity of doctrine. At the end of his ministry, Paul charged Timothy with taking over the work of the church saying, “I solemnly charge you...to preach the word...reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction; for the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine...and will turn away from the truth, and will turn aside to myths. But you...do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.” CHARLIE TAYLOR

