

Pictures of the Church (an excerpt)

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The church is much more than just a collection of individuals who claim to be disciples of, witnesses to, and believers in Jesus Christ. The church *as a whole* is a significant entity. It is a historical reality in the world, with its spiritual roots going right back to Abraham. The Bible provides many metaphors to convey different aspects of this reality. Most of them are found in the Old Testament as ways of describing Israel, and are then extended in the New Testament to those who are in Christ. One metaphor, however, the concept of the church as a body, or as the body of Christ, is unique to the New Testament.

A household or family

Old Testament Israel was a kinship-structured society, divided into tribes, clans and households. The basic unit in this arrangement was the 'father's house' or *bethab*. This was the extended family, of three or even four generations, including married sons and their children, household servants, agricultural workers and even resident foreigners practicing their trade. This robust organism also provided the individual Israelite with vital support. The household was the place in which the individual found personal *identity* and *inclusion* (personal names always included the father's house, as well as clan and tribal names). It was the place of *security*, since the household had its inherited portion of the land. And it was the place of spiritual *nurture and teaching* in the law of God. Already in Old Testament times, the whole nation of Israel could be metaphorically described as a household: 'House of Israel' or 'House of Yahweh', picturing the whole people as an extended family belonging to God.

It is not surprising that the early Christians adopted similar language to speak of the church community. Paul calls it 'the household of God' (1 Tim. 3:15). 'We are his house', says the writer to the Hebrews (3:6). Applying this metaphor was undoubtedly made even easier by the fact that the first Christians met in homes, and the sense of being an extended family must have been strong. As in the Old Testament, the church as a household was the place of *identity* (in Christ), *inclusion* (in the fellowship of sisters and brothers), *security* (in an eternal inheritance), *nurture and teaching* (in the scriptures and teaching of the apostles). For those who had been severed from their natural family connections because of loyalty to Christ, the church as a new family in all these senses was of great importance, and still is.

A people

Old Testament Israel most often referred to themselves as a people (*'am*), which is flavoured more by community than by ethnicity. In fact, although the core of Israel was the ethnically related community descended from the twelve tribes of the sons of Jacob/Israel, in reality it was a very mixed society (cf. Ex. 12:37; Josh. 9; Lev. 19:33-34). What held Israel together was not so much single ethnicity as *covenant loyalty* to the one God – Yahweh. So they were above all 'the people of Yahweh'. But that title could be expanded. The Old Testament envisaged people of other nations coming to be included in the people of Yahweh (Is. 19:24-25; Ps. 87; Zech. 2:11 etc.) – and that is exactly what the New Testament says has happened through the mission of the church.

So the church is a people, or rather it is *the* people of the biblical God, through faith in Christ. But it is also a *multi-national* people, in which membership is open to all, Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free (Gal. 3:28). So the language that had first applied to Israel is now extended to people of all nations. 'You,' says Peter, 'are a people belonging to God...once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God' (1 Pet. 2:9-10). As a worldwide community of peoples, the church fulfils the promise of God to Abraham and anticipates the ultimate gathering of God's people in the new creation (Rev. 7:9, 21:3).

A bride

The relationship between Yahweh and his people, being one of love, could be portrayed in terms of the marriage covenant. Hosea seems to have been the first to make that comparison. The metaphor could also be used negatively to accuse Israel of being an unfaithful bride (Hos. 2; Jer. 2:1-2; Ezek. 16). Nevertheless, it is clear that God wants a people who are united to him in mutual loving devotion as husband and wife ideally should be.

In the New Testament the church is portrayed as the Bride of Christ. On the one hand, the metaphor highlights Christ's love for the church, and especially his selfgiving, sacrificial care for his Bride. On the other hand, it speaks of the beauty and adornment of the Bride, who will one day be perfect and without blemish for her divine husband (Eph. 5:25-27; Rev. 21:2). In both directions, the picture is one of love, commitment, and beauty – and celebration (Rev. 19:9).

A priesthood

'You will be for me a priestly kingdom,' said God to Israel at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:6). Priests stood in the middle between God and the rest of the people. They operated as mediator in both directions. On the one hand they taught the law of God to the people. On the other hand they brought the people's sacrifices to God. Through the priests, God came to the people. Through the priests, the people came to God. And it was also the job of the priests to bless the people in the name of Yahweh (Num. 6:22-27). Then, by analogy, God tells Israel that they will stand in a similar position between him and the rest of the nations of the earth. Through Israel, God will become known to the nations (Is. 42:1-7; 49:1-6). And through Israel God will ultimately draw the nations to himself (Is. 2:1-5; 60:1-3; Jer. 3:17). Israel's priesthood among the nations would fulfil the Abrahamic role of blessing them.

That priestly identity of Old Testament Israel is now inherited by those who are in Christ (1 Pet. 2:9-12). So as God's priesthood, the church consists of those who are to declare the praises of God and what he has done. And as a holy priesthood, Christians are to live in such a way that the nations are drawn to praise God for themselves. Priesthood is a missional concept, for it puts the church between God and the world with the task of bringing the two together in Christ – making God known to the nations, and calling the

nations to repentance and faith in God and to the sacrifice of the cross. This double direction of movement seems to have been in Paul's mind when he spoke of his own missionary work as a 'priestly duty' in Romans 15:16.

A temple

The temple in Jerusalem was one of the central pillars of Israel's faith and identity. It had a double significance.

First of all, the temple (like the tabernacle before it) was regarded as the place of God's dwelling. Israel knew, of course, that the creator of the universe did not actually live in any little house they had built, nor did he need to (1 Kgs. 8:27; 2 Sam. 7:1-7) But nevertheless, this temple was the place that God had chosen to make his name dwell (1 Kgs. 8:29), and where his glory would be tangibly felt.

I will keep my covenant with you... I will put my dwelling-place among you, and I will not abhor you. I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people (Lev. 26:9-12).

Secondly, the temple was a place where Israelites would come to meet with God (as the tabernacle had been called a 'tent of meeting'. God was everywhere, but the temple provided a 'direction' for their prayer (1 Kgs. 8), and pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem became a significant and joyful (though never obligatory). Psalms 120-134 are songs for such pilgrimage, and they express the joy (in the midst of struggles too), of knowing, meeting, trusting, and worshipping God in Zion – the place where the temple stood and where God's people celebrated his presence – provided they did so with moral integrity (Pss. 15, 24; Isa. 1:10-17; Jer. 7:1-15).

Since Jesus, as the Lord's anointed messiah and king, had fulfilled God's purpose for Israel, this had major implications for the physical temple. Jesus himself took over its double role. Jesus is the person (no longer the place) in whom God's presence is among us (Immanuel), and Jesus is the person through whom people must now come to meet God in worship (Jn. 4:2-26). So, the writer to the Hebrews points out that by coming to Christ, Christians have already come to Mount Zion (i.e to the temple), just as in him they have an altar, the perfect sacrifice, and God's great High Priest (Heb. 12:22).

Paul goes further and sees the church itself as the temple of God. Not in the sense of a physical building (Christians did not start building 'churches' in that sense for a long time after the New Testament period). Rather, the church is the community in which God dwells by his Spirit, and to which people gather to meet with God – the double function of the Old Testament temple.

Actually Paul uses the temple imagery at three distinct levels: the individual Christian, the local church, and the whole church, but all with the basic idea of a dwelling place for God.

- In 1 Corinthians 6:19 Paul warns Christians that they cannot use their bodies in any way they like, especially not for sexual immorality for 'your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit'. This is the only individual application of the concept.
- In 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, Paul extends the picture to include the local Christians in Corinth as, collectively, God's temple. Similarly, in 2 Corinthians 6:16, Paul warns the Corinthians that they must not take part in things that were connected with pagan temples, 'for we are the temple of the living God'.
- In Ephesians 2:21-22 Paul is addressing Gentile believers. He has been explaining how they have now been united with believing Jews into one single community through the death of Christ. He uses temple imagery to describe how all Christians, Jews and Gentiles, are being built together into a temple for God to dwell in by his Spirit.

The temple image as applied to the church implies that there is only one church – the people of the one living God, who has only one dwelling place, through his one Spirit. There was only one temple in Old Testament Israel. But God had promised that it would be 'a house of prayer for all nations' (Is. 56:7). And indeed Solomon had prayed for it to be a place of blessing for foreigners when it was first dedicated (1 Kgs. 8:41-43). Now, through Christ and the gospel, that was a reality. The temple of God is now truly the multinational community of believers from all nations.

A vine and an olive tree

Two pictures of the people of God are drawn from horticulture. Both in the Old and New Testaments, they are compared to a vine and an olive tree. Jesus uses the first and Paul the second.

In John 15, Jesus says he is the true vine. Doubtless he is referring to the fact that in the Old Testament, Israel is likened to a vine that the Lord God had planted in his own land (Ps. 80). Unfortunately, God's expectations from his vine were rudely disappointed. Isaiah pictures God looking for a harvest of good grapes from his people to reward his loving investment in them, but instead of justice, finds bloodshed, and instead of righteousness, cries of the oppressed (Isa. 5:1-7; cf. Ezek. 15).

Jesus similarly is concerned about the fruitfulness of his followers. Abiding in Christ is the only way to fruitfulness as God's people.

In Romans 11:13-36, Paul compares Israel to an olive tree (cf. Jer. 11:16; Hos. 14:6). Paul, however, builds a whole theology around the horticultural practice of stripping some branches off a tree and grafting in others – in order to rejuvenate the original tree and increase its fruit-bearing. Paul sees an analogy to the way Gentiles are being grafted into the original covenant people of God, Israel, while some of those original people were being cut off because they failed to respond to what God had now done in Jesus Christ.

It is important to note that God's response to the failure of many Jews to believe in Jesus was not to chop down the olive tree and plant a completely new one. Some branches may be lopped off, and other branches wonderfully grafted in, but the roots and the trunk remain. Paul thus confirms the continuity between Old Testament Israel and the church, and the unity of believing Jews and Gentiles in the one new people of God. There is only one olive tree – only one covenant people of God throughout both testaments and all of history. And there also remains the opportunity for branches that have been cut off to be grafted in again, if they turn in repentance and faith to God through Christ.

A flock

Another picture of the church that is found in both testaments is also drawn from the world of agriculture – a flock of sheep. It is, perhaps, a rather passive and not very flattering image, but it is used in two significant ways, depending on who is pictured as the shepherd or shepherds.

God as Shepherd. 'We are his people, the sheep of his pasture' (Ps. 100:3). The main point of this metaphor was to highlight God's providential and tender care for his people, as a shepherd cares for his flock. Individuals could take comfort from this (Ps. 23), but the whole nation could envisage itself being led by their divine Shepherd (Is. 40:11).

Leaders as shepherds. It was common to speak of kings as shepherds of their people. Care, provision, guidance and protection was what was expected of them – in theory at least. In reality, in Israel, the complaint was that their 'shepherds' more often exploited the sheep than cared for them. So Ezekiel vigorously condemns such shepherds (meaning the kings of Israel), and says that God himself will take on again the job of shepherding his own flock (Ezek. 34). It is against this background that Jesus claimed to be the good, or model, shepherd in John 10. This was not just a promise of tender care (like Ps. 23). It was a bold claim to be the true king of Israel, indeed to be the divine king himself, as promised by Ezekiel. Not surprisingly, it led to a violent reaction (Jn. 10). But Jesus went on to describe his followers (i.e. the embryonic church) as his own known sheep and then pointed forward to the inclusion of others, within a single flock under a single shepherd (Jn 10:16 – echoing Ezek. 37:22-24).

As a natural extension, those who are called to leadership within the church are portrayed as shepherds also. Peter calls them under-shepherds of the Chief Shepherd, who is Jesus. Christian leaders are to work with love, without greed, with servant hearts, and as good examples to the rest of the flock (1 Pet. 5:1-4). Paul adds the additional duty of defending the flock from ravaging wolves – his matching metaphor for false teachers who seek to devour the sheep (Acts. 20:28).

A body

Finally we come to the one major picture of the church that is unique to the New Testament, and indeed, unique to Paul – that is, the church as a body, or specifically as the body of Christ.

We may note four key points that emerge from Paul's rich development of this picture of the church.

- Unity and diversity of members. Paul first uses the human body simply as very effective simile. In 1 Corinthians 12:12-30, he likens the believers within the church to the different members of the human body. There are many physical parts of a body, but they all cohere within the one body; they all assist one another; they all experience joy or pain together; and they all contribute to the healthy functioning of the body as a single organism. His main point in this context is that God has arranged things in this way for the good of the whole. So no single part should think that it is so important that it has no need of any other part of the body; and no single part should consider itself less important than some other more prominent part. Paul's point in relation to the church is that all the spiritual gifts God has distributed among different members of the church are actually given for the benefit of the whole. So, in Romans 12:4-8, using the same comparison, he urges those with different gifts to use them wholeheartedly and with humility. There is diversity within the church, but it exists within the fundamental unity that we all belong by baptism to the one Christ and share the one Spirit. The church, then, like the human body, is an organic unity with functional diversity.
- Christ as the head. The main emphasis in 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 on the 'horizontal' relationships within the body. But in Colossians and Ephesians, Paul develops the picture in a more 'vertical' direction by speaking of Christ as the head, in such a way that the church relates to Christ just as the rest of the human body is related to the head. There seem to be three elements to this picture. First, in both letters Paul puts this description of Christ as the head of his body, the church, in the same context as Christ's sovereignty over the whole of creation (Col. 1:15-18; Eph. 1:19-22). The implication is that Christ exercises Lordship and control over the church. This, however, as Paul stresses elsewhere, is a headship that is exercised in tender love and servanthood, with self-sacrificial, self-giving care (Eph. 5:23-30).

Second, in Ephesians 1:23, Paul speaks of Christ 'filling the church' as his body (just as he fills the whole of creation). This may mean something like our human consciousness, in the way our minds are conscious of our bodies – as if the mind 'fills' the body with its presence and direction. Likewise, Christ is everywhere present and active within his church.

Third, just as a body grows as a living organism under the direction of the head, so Paul describes the church as growing up, both 'from' and 'into' Christ (Col. 2:19; Eph. 4:12-14). So the body metaphor is useful for Paul's

passion for maturity among his churches. As a body cannot grow if it is severed from its head, neither can the church grow if it does not remain vitally connected to Christ.

- Reconciliation of Jew and Gentile. The most fundamental division in his world was that between Jews and Gentiles. And it was central to Paul's understanding of the gospel and of the church that God had dissolved that barrier through the death of Jesus the Messiah. So, in Ephesians 2:14-18 he describes how God has brought both together by uniting the two in a single new humanity through the cross and by presenting them both together to God. He uses body language again, saying that Christ's intention was 'in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility' (v. 16). 'This one body' here clearly means the church of believing and reconciled Jews and Gentiles in Christ. This was so important to Paul that he seems to have coined a new Greek word to describe it in Ephesians 3:6, where he says that Gentiles constitute a 'co-body' (*syssoma*) with Israel, as well as being co-heirs and co-sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus. The church in *this* sense is a new and unprecedented reality in history – nothing less than a new humanity. A new body.
- Appropriate behaviour. There is no place among the members of the same body for either a superiority complex (rejecting others as less important than oneself), or an inferiority complex (rejecting oneself as of no importance in comparison with others). This is the message of 1 Corinthians 12: 14-26. Paul takes the metaphor in an even more positive direction to speak about Christian behaviour within the church. In Ephesians 4:15-16, 23, Christians should speak the truth in love with one another, because they are to be growing up in love as a whole body under Christ and 'we are all members of one body'.

So, we have completed our survey of major biblical pictures for the church as the people of God. We should not set one up as dominant, at the expense of the others, or neglect any of them. Also, we should not imagine that these are pictures only of some idealized or mystical church. These are ways in which the Old Testament spoke about historical Israel, and the New Testament speaks about the actual assemblies of Christian believers in the early church. Both Israel and the church were filled with very ordinary people with many faults and failures. By means of these metaphors and images, however, God reminded them of the real identity that they had, and emphasized different aspects of their relationship with Christ and with each other. We need all of these teachings and models to inform our understanding of what we mean by 'The whole church'.

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