

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Bible Speaks Today: What does the Bible say about the Church?

Some years ago, I attended a Christian conference on the subject of the Church. When introducing a lecture, the chairman complained that he'd had difficulty choosing what to sing because modern hymnology doesn't provide much on the subject. I hope that doesn't mean that twenty-first century Christians think that church truth is unimportant to their faith! It's a major theme in the New Testament!

The Bible provides us with pictures from everyday life so that we can understand spiritual realities. I want to look at three main ways in which the Church is described in the New Testament:

1. As a building, a house for God to dwell in.
2. As a body, the Body of Christ to express Him.
3. As a bride, for Christ to love eternally.

But, first of all, let's remind ourselves who's part of, or belongs to, the Church (Church with a capital 'C', that is, Christ's universal Church). The Apostle Paul addressed his first letter to the Corinthian believers in this way: "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours", 1 Corinthians 1:2. It's clear from this verse that any person, wherever he or she is located in the world, who has truly accepted Jesus Christ as his or her Saviour, and claimed Him as Lord, is a member of the Church. The Greek word for church, '*ēkklēsia*', means 'called out'. God has called out believers by the Gospel, sanctified, or separated, them from the rest of the people in the world, and made each one to be a saint. Each and every true believer is a member of the true Church.

And one other preliminary point. Some English translations use the word 'church' to translate '*ēkklēsia*', but others 'assembly'. Generally, Christians who use the word 'assembly' want to emphasise that it's really people (not materials such as stones, bricks and wood) who compose the Church. I'll use the word 'church' throughout this talk and by it I'll always mean the people - not the building in which they meet together for church services.

1. The Church as a building for God to dwell in

The Church is described as a building in which God has chosen to live by His Spirit in scriptures such as 1 Peter 2:5, where believers are called living stones who are "being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ". Jesus said in Matthew 16:18 that "He would build His Church upon the rock of the acknowledgement and confession of Himself as the Son of God; and that the gates of hell would not prevail against it". Historically, the Church was "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord", Ephesians 2:20-21. At the present time, the building work continues. Believers "are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit", Ephesians 2:22, where God inhabits the praises of His people, who honour, worship and praise God the Father through the Lord Jesus Christ. The 'spiritual sacrifices' mentioned by Peter, are accomplished by means of the Holy Spirit according to Ephesians 2:18. This praise and worship of God will go on into eternity: "to [the Father] be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen", Ephesians 3:21 (New King James Version).

What are the features of God's house?

It's well known that houses reflect the nature and character of the people who live in them. As a holy God, He requires His house to be holy so that He can dwell there by His Holy Spirit: "Holiness befits your house, O LORD", Psalm 93:5. Therefore, any worship of God must be 'in spirit and in truth' (John 4:24). The principle of holiness also directly applies to the lives of individual believers, who compose the Church. Paul wrote to Timothy giving instruction about godly living "so that ... you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth", 1 Timothy 3:15. By 'household' he meant every different person who belongs to the house. Whilst it's a great honour to be a member of the Church, there are accompanying responsibilities. In God's house, each one must strive to be "a vessel for honourable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house,

ready for every good work. So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart", 2 Timothy 2:21-22.

Holiness also is necessary for anyone who contributes to the edification of the Church. Paul said "that like a skilled master builder and by the grace of God given to him, he had laid a foundation of the Church for others to build upon." He warned that they should take care how they built for "no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ". It's possible to build gold, silver, precious stones, or wood, hay, straw on the foundation. But each person's work will be manifested on the Judgment Day, "because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done". If anyone's work survives, he will receive a reward. "If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire". Paul then asks: "Do you not know that [the Church is] God's temple [in which] God's Spirit dwells? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and [the Church is] that temple", see 1 Corinthians 3:10-17.

One final point about God's house. Sometimes it's called the temple of God, as in Ephesians 2:21-22 and 1 Corinthians 3:16-17. In Old Testament times, the temple replaced the tabernacle as the house of God for Israel. Not only was it to be a more permanent structure, it also was designed to display the glory of God. And so with the Church - it continues to grow into a holy temple in the Lord. When it's complete, it will radiate the glory of God eternally. Ephesians 2:20-22 teach that it's this complete Church, which will be the ultimate eternal dwelling place of God through the Spirit.

2. The Church as the Body of Christ to express Him

The Church is likened to the human body in 1 Corinthians 12. There Paul writes: "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many", 1 Corinthians 12:13-14. The Body of Christ was formed through the baptism of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, when the gift of the Spirit was given to all believers from their recently risen and glorified Lord. At Pentecost, the Church was brought into being by the sovereign action of the Spirit of God, who empowered the Church to act together as a whole - just like the human body where: "God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as He chose ... there are many parts, yet one body", 1 Corinthians 12:18 and 20. Since Pentecost, every person who believes the Gospel imbibes, or drinks, the Holy Spirit immediately upon believing, as Ephesians 1:13 states: "In [Christ] you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in Him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit" and is thereby incorporated into the Church. Through the Spirit, each believer is interrelated to the other and together they compose a single unit, the Church, one organic whole. Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 12:12: "For just as the [human] body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ". The JN Darby Translation ends 1 Corinthians 12:12 with the phrase "so also is the Christ". In reality, the Church is Christ as Head with believers making up His body.

Christ, the Head of the Body

1 Corinthians 12 stresses that believers are livingly attached to each other because they form the one body by the Spirit. However, they're also livingly linked to their Head in heaven by the same Spirit, see Ephesians 4:15-16 and Colossians 1:18 and 2:19. And just as our human bodies do what our head (or brain) tells us to do, so also the Church as the Body of Christ acts under His control and at His direction. He is "the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God", Colossians 2:19. The Body of Christ expresses Christ, its Head. For this to happen, He provides it with gifts - the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers. Like the human body, the Church as the Body of Christ is joined and held together by joints and ligaments which make the body grow. The outcome is that the Church builds itself up in love when each part is working properly, see Ephesians 4:11-16. According to 1 Corinthians 12:28: "God has appointed in the Church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues". We can readily see that in 1 Corinthians 12:28 Paul is referring back to 1 Corinthians 12:12-13 and to how God set up the entire Church by the baptism of the Spirit. 1 Corinthians 12:24 says that: "God has so composed the [human] body, giving greater honour to the part that lacked it". Primarily, this 1 Corinthians 12:24 speaks of how God has constituted the human body so that each part is vital for the functioning of the body as a whole. But it must also mean that no part of the Body of Christ is missing!

Practical Applications

What naturally happens in the human body practically should happen in the Church: "that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together", 1 Corinthians 12:25-26. Paul insists these should be evident features in each local church for in 1 Corinthians 12:27 he emphatically and directly applies what he is saying about the entire Church to the local church in Corinth: "Now you [Corinthians] are the body of Christ and individually members of it". 1

Corinthians 12:18 says that: "God arranged the members in the body [of Christ], each one of them, as He chose" - the practical meaning for every one of us today is that we express our interdependence with every other member in our local church. 1 Corinthians 12:15-21 elaborate on the impossibility of self-sufficiency or self-dominance for the Christian believer - the foot, ear, eye, etc. can't opt out of the body or exclude any other member! Christian fellowship is a must! (see Hebrews 10:25)

But we should also ask if gifts are evident in our churches today and how they compare with the descriptions of the functioning of the Body of Christ in New Testament scriptures such as Romans 12:4-5; Ephesians 4:4-16 and 1 Corinthians 12? God didn't make a mistake when He placed me in my local Christian fellowship. To paraphrase 1 Corinthians 12:27: "your local church should be a minute expression of the whole body of Christ. You're all individually interdependent members of it." Does my church resemble the Body of Christ, in which the Spirit of God works unhindered? Can He freely direct all our church activities as He wills? In this respect, 1 Corinthians 12:8 lists things to say in church by the Spirit, that is, words of wisdom and words of knowledge; and 1 Corinthians 12:9-10 list things which can only be done by the Spirit: faith, gifts of healing, the working of miracles, prophecy, and the ability to distinguish between spirits, various kinds of tongues, and the interpretation of tongues. 1 Corinthians 12:29-30 make the obvious point that there's diversity as well as unity in the Body of Christ, which means we won't all exhibit the same gifts of the Spirit! But I should ask myself, what gifts have I received from the Spirit to edify my local church? However the chapter finishes with a challenging directive to: "earnestly desire the higher gifts" (1 Corinthians 14:1) . 1 Corinthians 12:31 ends with Paul advising that gift-seeking must always be subservient to the "more excellent way". Supremely, it's the way of love which is to be manifested in church. After describing its features in 1 Corinthians 13, he returns in 1 Corinthians 14:1 to its practice in the local church by saying: "Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy". Challenging issues for all of us!

The Body of Christ now and into the future

As we look around at Christendom today, it's easy to be distracted by the divisions and differences between various Christian groups. The practical result is that we cease to believe Ephesians 4:4 - that there is only one Body! We'll then have an earth-bound view of the Church. But the perspective's entirely different from the reality of the spiritual world, where the Church is somehow seen as God purposed it should be. Yes, Paul's unique ministry concerning "[the] mystery ... that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel ... [that is] the unsearchable riches of Christ", has brought "to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the Church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places", Ephesians 3:6, 8-10. But when the dispensations reach their fullness and the Church is complete, comprising of all believers from Pentecost to the Rapture, the Church becomes the complement of Christ. Then, in actuality, what is now a spiritual fact will come to pass. "[God] put all things under [Christ's] feet and gave Him as Head over all things to the Church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all", Ephesians 1:22-23.

3. The Church as the Bride of Christ for Him to love eternally

What an emotion rousing picture Revelation 21:2 gives of the Church as the Bride of Christ! When time ends and eternity begins in the new heaven and the new earth, the Church will be: "the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband ... [where] the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and God himself will be with them as their God", Revelation 21:1-3. The previous mention of the Church as the Bride of Christ is in Revelation 19 where there's great rejoicing in heaven: "Let us rejoice and be exceeding glad, and let us give the glory unto [the Lord God Omnipotent]: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and His wife hath made herself ready. And it was given unto her that she should array herself in fine linen, bright and pure: for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints", Revelation 19:7-8 (Revised Version). There the Church is called "His wife" to be at His side to reign with Him over heaven and earth during the Millennium, see Revelation 20:4. But here in Revelation 21:1-3, she is seen suitably attired for Him and going into the eternal state as the object of His love. A wife for a thousand years; but a bride for eternity!

It's in Ephesians that all three pictures of the Church - as a body, as a building, and as a bride - are presented (Ephesians 1:22-23, 4:4, 4:11-16; 2:19-22; 5:22-31). However, the word 'bride' doesn't actually occur in Ephesians 5:22-31 - because the whole section is practical, exhorting husbands to love their wives. But the amazing truth of Christ's love for His Bride is elaborated on: "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her", Ephesians 5:25. He went into death, even death on a cross, that He might have her for Himself. Our thoughts go to the Lord's own words, where He describes Himself as: "like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that He had and bought it," Matthew 13:45. Not only is He the Church's Saviour in this prime sense that He delivered Himself up to death for her, but He continues to be her Saviour - He's preserving her at this present time so that she'll be properly 'adorned' for Him: "Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her, that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that He might present the Church to Himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish",

Ephesians 5:25-27. She's so special to Him that He "nourishes and cherishes" her, Ephesians 5:29. Paul then quotes from Genesis 2:24, where the picture of this relationship is first given: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the Church," Ephesians 5:31-32.

Revelation 21:2 also describes the Church as "the holy city, new Jerusalem". John was then invited in Revelation 21:9 to see the Bride, the wife of the Lamb as Christ sees her, that is, as His glorious Church (Ephesians 5:27). From the vantage point of a great high mountain, and by the Spirit, he saw "the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal", Revelation 21:10-11. This view shows the Church as the wife of Christ, at His side and displaying His glory throughout the Millennium (Revelation 21:11-22:7 go on to describe this glory in detail).

But I'd like to finish with the idea that for every eastern bride, her heart was on her bridegroom and her thoughts were filled with the expectancy of his soon arrival: "The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come.' And let the one who hears say, 'Come.' And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price ... He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with [you] all. Amen", Revelation 22:17, 20-21.

*We'll see Thee soon, Lord Jesus,
Amid the ransomed throng,
Its glory, joy and beauty,
Its never-ending song:
Oh, day of wondrous promise,
The Bridegroom and the Bride
Are seen in glory ever,
For ever satisfied!*

E. Cronin

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