



Lesson 3: A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words Part 1

Biblical Metaphors of the Church

July 9, 2017

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People think in pictures. Can you imagine a Lego instruction booklet that was written in words, and not pictures? “Take the dark gray flat 2x10 and place it on top of the light gray regular 2x4, lining the pieces up so that 2x1 of the flat piece hangs off of one side and 2x5 hangs off of the other.” Obviously, there is a time and a place for careful, written instructions, but most people understand things better if they are given a picture.

In our previous two lessons, we have sought to define what a church is. We came to the conclusion that ***a church is a group of saved, baptized believers that gathers regularly to evangelize the lost, build one another up, and worship God.*** But to help us understand what that looks like fleshed out in real life, God has given many metaphors (word pictures) of what a church should look like. As we examine these metaphors, we will see what they teach us about the church, and how our thinking about the church should be adjusted.

Field and Building (1 Corinthians 3:5-9)

NT Teaching

In this passage, Paul is addressing the divided Corinthian church. Corinth is getting a little too excited about some of their leaders and are forgetting one very important thing: their leaders weren't ultimately responsible for any spiritual progress; only God was. And so Paul describes the church at Corinth as a field and a building and makes the same point with both of them: God's the one who makes

things grow and God is the one building things. The majority of this passage deals with God making things grow; something only God can do anyway. Other passages build on the idea that God is the one building his church (cf Ephesians 2:22; Matthew 16:18).

Application

Dynamic leaders don't build churches. Gifted speakers don't build churches. Successful programs, well-crafted mission and vision statements, beautiful facilities, strong worship services, none of these things build churches. God builds the church. Now there is nothing wrong with any of the above listed things, so long as we do not begin to put our hope and trust in them. God chooses to use people, and that should motivate us to get involved. But he's the one who does the work, so that means we should be trusting in him and relying on him.

Temple

OT Background

Tracing out a theology of the temple begins in the garden and ends in the new earth. It starts when the fellowship between God and man is disrupted and continues when God comes to dwell with the people of Israel in the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34-38), and then later in the temple (2 Chronicles 7:1). Then the Holy Spirit leaves in Ezekiel (10:15-19; 11:22-23) but promises to return in a much more dramatic fashion in Joel (2:28-29).

NT Teaching

In the NT, the Spirit is indeed poured out on everyone in Acts 2. God's presence with his people comes to new heights as he now personally indwells them (2 Corinthians 6:16). This means that now the believer is the temple of God, both individually (1 Corinthians 6:19) and corporately (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). All of us enjoy God's presence through the personal work of the Spirit, but there is a

unique sense in which God is present when we gather together that he is not when we are alone (Matthew 18:20). As we saw earlier, this is a temple that God himself is building (Ephesians 2:21-22) and it is one in which Christ is the cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20).

Application

Because God dwells within us, that ought to inspire us to live holy lives (1 Corinthians 6:19) and any attempt to split the church is extremely dangerous (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). While we shouldn't split the church, we should as a unified church be separated from the world (2 Corinthians 6:16).

Flock

OT Background

In the OT, God refers to the leaders of Israel as her "shepherds" and warns that he will judge them for their abuse of his people (Ezekiel 34:1-10). In the middle of this warning of judgment, however, he also promises that he will one day himself shepherd his people (Ezekiel 34:11-16).

NT Teaching

The leaders of the church in the NT are also called shepherds in several locations. First, when Christ restores Peter after his betrayal, he gives him the task to "feed my sheep/lambs" (John 21:15-17). Later on, Peter would take these words to heart and would exhort other elders to be faithful in the task of shepherding the flock so that they won't be embarrassed when Christ return (1 Peter 5:1-4). Paul also uses this illustration when speaking to the elders at Ephesus (Acts 20:28-29). It should be noted that English word "pastor" means essentially "shepherd."

Application

To be called sheep is actually a bit of an insult. Sheep are stupid creatures that need someone caring for them, or else they will almost surely die (Psalm 23). The point of calling the church a flock is point out her need for spiritual care. This includes both feeding her with the truth of God's Word (John 21), and protecting her from dangers (Acts 20). We like to think we can make it on our own, but we need the help of the leaders God has put in our lives and should. The church should gladly follow her shepherds and they gladly follow the Shepherd.

Body of Christ

NT Teaching

Paul uses the illustration of a body to describe the church, the body of Christ. He primarily does this in 1 Corinthians and Ephesians, but he makes slightly different points in each case. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul's point is that we all need each other. We are hands, feet, noses, ears, and are interdependent on one another (cf Romans 12:4-5). In Ephesians 1:22-23 and Ephesians 4:15-16, the illustration changes slightly to emphasize that Christ the head of us, the body. Paul still emphasizes that we need each other, but adds the element of Christ's headship over us (cf Colossians 2:19).

Application

Because we are the body of Christ, we need to follow his leadership and seek to help one another. A body whose body parts randomly decide to stop working is in for a miserable time, and a church whose members decide to stop exercising their gifts for the good of all is in for a miserable time. We need each other, and that means we need you!