



Lesson 4: A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words Part 2

Biblical Metaphors of the Church

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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 first two lessons, we defined a church as ***a group of saved, baptized believers that gather regularly to evangelize the lost, build one another up, and worship God.*** But God not only tells us what a church is, he shows us what it looks like. Last time we met, we saw God describe the church as a building and field, a temple, a flock, and a body. Today we will build on that by examining four more pictures of what a church is.

Priesthood (1 Peter 2:9)¹

There is a lot of overlap but also much that is different when comparing the priests of the OT and NT believers. To see this most clearly, we will examine what Scripture teaches about the OT priesthood and then what is true about NT believers.

¹ Robert Saucy, *The Church in God's Program*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1972), 38-44.

OT Background

1. The Requirements of the Priests

- **Elect** – the priesthood was chosen by God, and was not to be sought. Those who were not selected and yet attempted to be priests anyway faced God’s wrath (Numbers 16).
- **Holy** – those who served were consecrated and expected to live holy lives, at times abstaining from things others could partake in so as to be ceremonially clean (Exodus 29:4-6).

2. The Function of the Priests

- **Sacrifice to God** – OT priests were essentially glorified butchers. They spent much of their time assisting others in their sacrifices to God.
- **Represent God to others** – God was upset with the priests when they failed to share with the nation his teaching (2 Chronicles 15:3; Jeremiah 2:8).

3. The Extent of the Priests – while in one sense the whole nation of Israel was priests when it came to representing God before others and bringing them to him (Exodus 19:5-6), when it came to directly approaching and worshipping God only the descendants of Aaron functioned as priests (Exodus 28:40-42).

NT Teaching

1. The requirements of the NT priesthood

- **Elect and Holy** – believers have also been chosen by God, and they have been chosen for the purpose of living holy, set apart lives (1 Peter 2:9).

2. The Function of the Priests

- **Sacrifice to God** – NT believers are called upon to offer sacrifices of self (Romans 12:1-2) and praise to God (Hebrews 13:15).

- **Represent God to others** – This is the main point of 1 Peter 2:9, the reason that God has created this priesthood is “that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”
3. **The Extent of the Priests** – while in the OT, only the descendants of Aaron were priests, in the NT every believer is a priest who, because of the work of Christ, has direct access to God the Father (Hebrews 4:14-16).

Application

God has given us an incredibly privileged position that Old Testament saints could only have dreamed of. But this position is given for a reason, and it is ultimately about God, not us. As priests we have direct access to God through Christ, but with that comes the responsibility of worshipping God properly and representing Him to others, a task we must not take lightly!

Branches (John 15:1-11)

In the OT, Israel was described as an unfruitful vine (Ezekiel 19:10-14; Isaiah 5:1-7). Christ uses a similar image in the NT with his disciples to show how they could do what Israel had originally failed to do, produce lasting spiritual fruit. This would only happen as they abode in him and allowed him to prune them. The point of this image is that our union with Christ should lead to communion with Christ if we would be spiritually productive. Since we are in Christ, we should seek to abide in him. This is true individually as well as of the church.

Although this passage does not tell us what the “fruit” was that Christ had in mind, Galatians 5:22-23 includes a list of the fruit of the spirit, and it is significant that the first two items on that list, love and joy, show up frequently in this passage.²

² Saucy, 55.

Application

Christ is the lifeblood of the church. Without a conscious, intentional pursuit of him both individual Christians and entire assemblies will shrivel. This metaphor humbles us by reminding us that without Christ at the center, we will not grow or succeed in any spiritual or life endeavor.

Family of God

The NT uses the image of the church as the family of God in a number of different places and in a number of different ways.

- **God is our Father** – the concept of God going to as a Father was a point of emphasis for Christ that was not previously known. Christ introduces this as the primary way to relate to God starting in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:16, 45, 48; 6:1, 4, 6, 8, 9, 14, 15, 18, 26, 32; 7:11) and the title continued to be important throughout the NT.
- **Christ is our brother** – surprisingly, on several occasions in the NT, our Savior is described as the brother of those he saves (Matthew 12:50; Mark 3:35; Romans 8:17, Hebrews 2:11-12).
- **We are siblings** – one of the most common titles for a Christian in the NT is “brother.” In an age where everyone is called “brother” or “bro” this title has lost some of its shock. But when it was used in the first century, it would have been stunning for a wealthy, land owning male to walk into a church gathering and call his slave “brother.” Yet that is the believers related to each other (Philemon 16).
- **The church is a household** – Paul tells Timothy that he wrote him a letter so that he would know how to behave himself in the household of God, the church (1 Timothy 3:15). Then in 1 Timothy 5:1-2 he gives specific examples of how to treat

people of different ages and genders, as if they were immediate family members (fathers, mothers, and sisters).

Application

Church gatherings are family reunions. Believers ought to view the person down the pew from them as an immediate family member, because they are. Unfortunately, family imagery has been used so much that it has lost some of its original potency. We get so used to saying “brother” we don’t actually think of other Christians as brothers or sisters. But viewing fellow church members as family members and then acting on that reality will do much to strengthen and unify our churches.

Bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:22-33)

OT Background

The picture of God’s people as his bride began with the prophets of the OT condemning Israel for their sin, which they put in terms of marital infidelity. Hosea in particular, but also large portions of other prophets such as Ezekiel (16, 23) and Jeremiah (2) use this imagery. The language is specific and at times surprisingly graphic, intending to shock God’s apathetic people into seeing the serious and grievous nature of their sin.

NT Teaching

Paul applies this same imagery to the church in Ephesians 5:22-33. There he relates the roles of husband and wife to Christ and his church, and states that Genesis 2, God’s plan for marriage, is actually a picture of Christ and his church (5:31-32). Paul uses a similar expression in 2 Corinthians 11:2, where the church is seen as being engaged to Christ. Finally, in Revelation 21:2 we find the true bride of the Lamb, and it’s a city! The city is comprised of the church and Israel, and so we see the unified people of God from the ages living with God forever in paradise.

Application

There appear to be two reasons God chose this image.

1. This picture in the Old as well as New Testament shows us the need for purity and faithfulness. God described Israel's unfaithfulness to the covenant as "whoring after" other gods, and Paul uses the term to argue that Christians must live pure lives (Ephesians 5:25-27; 2 Corinthians 11:2). Marriages, in order to work, must be free from defilement. So we in our relationship with our Lord must strive to be pure for him.
2. The second reason for this image is that it is the closest, most intimate image that can be thought of. In fact, that appears to be part of God's plan in instituting marriage in the first place according to Ephesians 5:31-32. This image is so intimate and so close that it is somewhat shocking that it is used at all! If God had not used the image, who would dare to even think it up? And yet God wants us to know that his desire for our relationship would be closer even than that of husband and wife.