
CHAPTER 13 : THE CHURCH

So that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. (Eph 3:10)

One of the most foundational and most important aspects to being a Christian is membership of and involvement in the church. We thus need to examine what the church is and what it does and why this is important for us.

The word “church” is the translation of the Greek word “ecclesia,” which means “the called-out ones,” that is, those called out from fallen humanity, the world, by Jesus: those bought by Him, those who belong to Him. This word tells us at least two important things:

- “Church” refers neither to a building nor to an organisation but to a group of people. So the question is not “What is the Church?” but “Who is the Church?”
- The Church has a special origin and identity.

The Bible (the book of Ephesians in particular) gives us a number of pictures (analogies) of the church, which taken together, give us a fuller understanding of the identity and ethos, the structure and leadership and the mission and mandate of the church.

A. Pictures Of The Church In Ephesians

A.1. People/Nation

“Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.” (Eph 2:12-13)

“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household.” (Eph 2:19)

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” (1Pe 2:9-10)

This seemingly most innocuous of pictures is perhaps the most powerful. In the Old Testament these titles were jealously guarded by and for Israel. They alone of all the nations of the earth were God’s people, called out from the nations of the earth (Ex 19:5-6). Their unique origin (divine election) gave them a unique and privileged status, identity, purpose and destiny (such as a covenant with God, being recipients of special revelation, having missionary responsibility to the nations and having ancestry of the Messiah).

Now the New Testament audaciously applies these titles to the Church. To believing Jews have been added believing Gentiles to make up the one New Covenant people of God (Eph 2:14-18), the Church, which is now called “the Israel of God” (Gal 6:16). The Church is the new (true) Israel, the eschatological (end time) fulfilment of the ancient people of God. Looking at a time line, the Church comes after ethnic Israel; but the Church’s election preceded that of ethnic Israel: the latter was preparatory for, and has now been superseded by, the former—just as the Old Covenant was preparatory for and has now been superseded by the New (note how closely 1Pe 2:9-10 adopts the terminology of Ex 19:5-6).

The Church, therefore, like Old Testament Israel, has a unique and supernatural origin (divine election: founded by God Himself and sovereignly chosen out of all the nations of the world) and thus also a unique and supernatural identity/status (covenant), responsibility (mission) and destiny (the new heaven and new earth). Throughout history God seeks a people who will be His covenant partner, a people with whom He can fellowship and share His love and life eternally. (What is known as the covenant formula, namely, “I will be your God and you will be my people,” is the most repeated phrase in Scripture.) The New Covenant is the perfect and final covenant, and the people of this covenant—the Church—is this people!

“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.’” (Rev 21:3)

This picture of the Church further tells us that:

- While the church is not primarily an organisation, it does involve structure and administration; church leaders rule, govern and administrate the people of God (upholding order, righteousness and justice).
- The “citizens” have both privileges and responsibilities toward the community in which they live (just as other citizens in any secular nation).

A.2. Family/Household

“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household.” (Eph 2:19)

“The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.” (Ro 8:16-17)

See also Ro 8:14-17 and Gal 3:26-4:7.

The Church is pre-eminently a family of believers. This means that it is a group of people linked primarily by relationship and not by structure, function or even common belief and practice or shared vision and values (although some of these do add to unity). Thus the maxims: “the Church is an organism not an organisation” and “friendship before function.”

We are all God's children (Jn 1:12, 1Jn 3:1-2) and heirs. Jesus is our elder brother and co-heir. We are brothers and sisters to all other believers. The godly, natural family is an environment of mutual love, affirmation, rest and renewal, and one in which people can grow up in a secure and unthreatening environment as they receive instruction, encouragement, support, correction and discipline. All this should be true of the church. In this picture the leaders act as parents, raising up their spiritual children—but even the youngest of believers can help their “siblings” in a variety of small ways.

A.3. Building/Temple

“In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.” (Eph 2:21)

“Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple.” (1Co 3:16-17)

See also 1Pe 2:4-8.

The Church is a building of which Jesus is both the cornerstone/foundation and chief builder. He thus ensures its growth and gives it unity. He builds according to a set plan (what is not built on the right cornerstone/foundation is not the Church). He refines each stone and fits it perfectly into the structure; the Greek word used by Peter for “stones” is not “petros” (rough stones) but “lithos” (carefully worked stones): the building thus grows qualitatively and quantitatively. Church leaders are assistant builders, helping in the refining and placing of the stones and so in the rise of the whole. This picture denotes the Church as something strong, enduring and visible to the world.

The Church is, moreover, a particular type of building, namely a temple (“holy temple,” “God's house” and “spiritual house”). In the Old Covenant the temple was where God dwelt (it was thus both holy and glorious) and where all the nations had to come to find God and salvation.

The Church is now the temple of God, the place where He dwells by His Spirit. As such it is holy (the Greek word translated “temple” in these texts is not “hieron,” used for the whole temple complex, but “naos,” the Most Holy Place), it is where God’s glory is manifest (2Co 3:18), and the nations of the world have to come to it to find the message of salvation (1Ti 3:15).

A.4. Priesthood

“You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” (1Pe 2:5)

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” (1Pe 2:9)

See also Rev 1:6.

The Church is not only the temple where God dwells but the priesthood ministering to God in that temple. (This picture is only implied in Ephesians but is explicit elsewhere.) Unlike in the Old Covenant, where only some of God’s people were priests, in the New Covenant all of God’s people are priests, that is, the whole Church is a priesthood; all believers are priests ministering to God, their fellow believers and the world. (We have already seen that all believers are part of the new “naos,” the Most Holy Place, and thus all believers can enter and minister there.) The “spiritual sacrifices” they offer include themselves, prayer, praise, finances and evangelism. The Church, moreover, is a “royal priesthood” because it is consecrated by and ministers to the King; and it is a “kingdom of priests” because God reigns over the Church and because through its ministry the Church both extends the kingdom of God and rules with Christ. Just as the Old Covenant priests ministered on behalf of their fellow-Israelites who couldn’t come into the temple, believers in the New Covenant minister on behalf of those who cannot come into God’s presence—that is, unbelievers—through prayer, warfare, evangelism and service.

A.5. Body

“So in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.” (Ro 12:5)

See also Eph 4:1-16, Ro 12:3-8 and 1Co 12:12-27.

The body of Christ is the dominating picture of the Church in the New Testament and it conveys at least four crucially important truths.

- Every body has a head. The head of this body is Jesus (Col 1:18). Jesus is not merely a nominal, lip-served head (like an honorary life-president or a constitutional monarch) but the real, day to day, hands-on head of the Church. His headship means both that He governs the Church (Eph 1:22-23) and (as a head of a river) that He is the life-source of the Church, nurturing and sustaining it (Eph 4:15-16, Col 2:19). Jesus is the only head: no one else can, or should try, ever to set himself up to be the head (a two-headed body is a monster!). Conversely, where Jesus is not allowed to be the head, there is no longer any body: that is, where the Church departs too far from the rule and pattern of the head it ceases to be part of the true body of Christ (a headless body is equally a monster!).

- Just as a body can only have one head, so a head can only have one body. There is only one true Church (a multi-bodied head is a third kind of monster!) and, whatever its appearance may suggest to the contrary, that Church does possess a unity derived from its common headship.

- Just as a physical body has many different parts, each essential to the successful function of the whole, so this spiritual body is made up of many different people, each of whom has a different gifting and ministry but whose contribution is essential for the proper functioning and effectiveness of the whole church.

- The Church, as Christ's spiritual body, continues in this age all the work Jesus began in His physical body during the Incarnation. We are the instruments through which Jesus continues His work amongst mankind.

Here leaders are the nerve system, relaying the commands of the head through the body; they ensure the health and functioning of each part.

A.6. Bride

See Eph 5:22-32.

The Church is Jesus' bride: He came to woo and win her (His love draws people to Him) and He paid the necessary price for her (He redeemed a people for Himself); now He perfects and nurtures her into full bloom; at the end of the age He will return to marry and celebrate with her in the wedding feast of the Lamb (Rev 19:6-9); like the eastern groom of old He will then take her back to His Father's house (Jn 14:2-3) and live with her there forever (Rev 21:1-3). This picture conveys the passionate and intimate love between Jesus and the Church, a love expressed chiefly in the Church's worship but also in all of her life and deeds, which stem from her love for Him. (This love is prophetically foreshadowed in the extravagant celebration of romantic and sexual love between the Lover and the Beloved in Song of Songs.) Like other pictures it reveals divine sovereign election, and with it both privilege (a favoured position, Jesus' total self-giving for her) and responsibility (to submit to, serve and glorify the Groom). And as wonderful as this relationship already is in this age, it is just the courtship: the wedding, consummation and life together still await us! In this picture leaders function as eunuchs, not daring to abuse the bride for themselves but working to present her perfect to the Groom.

A.7. Army

See Eph 6:10-18.

God is a warrior (Ex 15:3); Jesus makes war (Rev 19:11). The church is God's army, pushing back the kingdom of darkness and extending the kingdom of light. She does this in every area of her life and ministry: in evangelism, healing, deliverance and intercession it is more overt (Mt 12:29, Mt 16:18, Mk 16:15-18, Lk 10:17-19, 2Co 10:3-5) but in her teaching (setting free by bringing truth, refuting error and renewing minds), pastoring (healing broken lives) and social action (for example, countering poverty either by feeding the poor or by fighting injustices that cause it) she is also involved in spiritual warfare.

In short, just as the Church continues all the other work of Jesus, so she continues His work of destroying the work of the evil one (1Jn 3:8).

That the Church is an army involved in a battle conveys yet other aspects of the Church's life and ministry such as: knowledge of the enemy (his goals and strategies); training and fitness; armour and weapons; offensive tactics; discipline and obedience to orders. In this picture Church leaders are officers leading and commanding the army into battle.

B. Mission And Mandate

Other pictures of the Church, explicit or implicit, can be found in Scripture—for example, the Church as God's flock, field, pilgrim, servant and sacrament—but the above seven will suffice for now. Together they give us a clear idea of who the Church is and what she is called to do. At the risk of oversimplifying, we may say that the Church has one or two main tasks in each of four directions:

- Towards God: worship and prayer.
- Towards each other: fellowship and instruction.
- Towards the world: evangelism and service.
- Towards Satan (and his allies): spiritual warfare.

The Church continues the work of Jesus. Everything Jesus came to do can be summarised thus: He came to establish the kingdom of God. Thus, in a word, the Church is called to extend the kingdom (reign) of God. In her being she models the Kingdom; in her speech she proclaims the Kingdom; in her action she works for the Kingdom. The Church is both proof of, the signpost to and an agent of the Kingdom. The record of the Church's advance is the record of the coming of the kingdom of God in this age.

C. Universal Church And Local Church

Whenever the New Testament refers to "church" it means one of two things:

C.1. The Universal Church

The universal church, often just called the Church, is the total company of true believers in all places in all ages (those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life), the exact identity of which is known only to God. (Thus, while all members of the universal church should be part of a local church, not all members of local churches belong to the universal church.)

C.2. The Local Church

The local church, often just called the church, is a concrete expression of the universal church in space and time, that is, a visible community of believers in a particular place and period. Of course, where a local church departs from the rule of Jesus, the head, it is, despite its name, no longer part of the universal church (Rev 2:5).

The universal church and the local church are the only two meanings of "ecclesia" in Scripture: the Bible never talks about denominational, national, ethnic or other churches. Everything we have said about the identity and calling of the Church in this talk has been of a general nature and applies to the universal church. Local churches may take on a specific ethos, vision etc. and the last section in this course will be given to introducing the particular headship (leadership), heartship (values) and hopeship (vision) of this church, Live The Life.

D. You And The Church

We began by asking:

- Who is the Church and what is her calling?
- Why is the church an important part of the life of the believer?

In answering the first we have already largely answered the second. Every true believer is by definition automatically part of the universal church from the moment of rebirth. But just as the universal church needs to be made concrete in time and space to have any impact and meaning, so the individual believer needs to be part of a local church for there to be any reality to his profession of faith.

Not only is it impossible to survive and grow as a Christian in isolation, such an idea is totally foreign to Scripture

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An Old Covenant convert never became an isolated “Yahweh-follower” but a member of Israel; “saint” is never mentioned in the singular in the New Testament but always in the plural. To love and belong to God is to love and belong to His people.

The Christian needs the local church both for what he receives (instruction, pastoring and fellowship) and for what he gives (gifting and ministry): growth is impossible without both. Every picture of the Church we looked at emphasises the place and role of the believer in the church: the responsibility of every citizen for the prosperity of the nation; each member of a family has chores and can help their siblings; each stone has an exact place in the temple; every believer is a priest ministering to God and others; each part of the body must play its part for the successful functioning of the whole; an inactive soldier endangers the whole army. So find the local church where God is calling you, where you can submit to the leadership, vision etc. and get committed, involved and growing!