

Life Together...



CALLED INTO
THE COMMUNITY
OF FAITH

The Building, The Bride, and the Body: *Pictures of the People of God*

I Corinthians 3:9, 16-17, 12:27; Ephesians 5:21-33

The title of this current series is *Life Together: Called into the Community of Faith*. In the interest of continuity and comprehension I have been spending a few minutes each week reviewing the previous sermons in the series. So as we begin this morning I want to go back over the big ideas of each of the first five sermons. First, when it comes to the Church, to think correctly is to think corporately. As Millard Erickson puts it, "There is no such thing as an isolated, solitary Christian life" (*Christian Theology*, p. 1039). Second, the Bible teaches that you share a common life in Christ. This fundamental spiritual reality is *the* basis for our communion with one another. Third, the gospel alone is the essential mark of the true church. I quoted J. A. O. Preus who said, "It is the presence of this Gospel, in its verbal [and] visible forms (i.e., Word and Sacraments), that identifies the Church of Jesus Christ and distinguishes it from every other organization or sect. Where this Gospel is, there you have the Church. Where you do not have evidence of this Gospel, you do not have visible, and therefore trustworthy, evidence of the Church." From the Belgic Confession we learned that there are three dimensions of this essential mark: the faithful preaching of

the Word, the faithful administration of the Sacraments, and the faithful exercise of discipline (see Article 29). Fourth, maturity in the body of Christ is measured, not according to human standards of “success” but by the presence of the enduring virtues of faith, hope, and love. Nowhere is this expressed more clearly than in **I Thessalonians 1:1-3**. *Paul and Silvanus and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.*
² *We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers;* ³ *constantly bearing in mind your **work of faith** and **labor of love** and **steadfastness of hope** in our Lord Jesus Christ.* Fifth, the Lord Jesus Christ has established His Church in the world for the gathering and perfecting of the saints through the proclamation of the Gospel. The marching orders for the Church are to win men and women to Christ through the preaching of the gospel and then build them up, strengthen them, by that same gospel. This was clearly the pattern in the ministry of the apostle Paul. Acts 14:21-22, *And after [Paul and Barnabas] had preached **the gospel** to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue **in the faith**.*

This morning we want to explore the pictures, the images, the metaphors used in the New Testament to describe the fellowship of God’s people. All of these reinforce, enlarge, strengthen the idea that the Christian life is designed by God to be lived in community. Indeed, throughout the Bible those whom God has called to Himself; those who are the members of this community of faith are referred to as “the people of God.” Obviously this is a corporate designation for “those who stand in a special relationship to God” (Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 537). In the Bible that special relationship is called a covenant. All of you who are married have entered into a covenant with your spouse. Before

God and witnesses you have pledged your love, loyalty, and faithfulness to one another. The covenant is a relationship of loving loyalty that *God* has initiated *with us* as His people throughout human history. This relationship is summed up in a phrase that, like a magnificent river, courses its way through the Bible from cover to cover: *"I shall be your God, and you shall be **My people**."* In the Old Testament Israel was the people of God. The same covenantal language is taken up in the New Testament and applied to the Church (see Rom. 9:6; Gal. 3:7, 29; 6:16). II Corinthians 6:16, *For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, "I WILL DWELL IN THEM AND WALK AMONG THEM; AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE."* This community, this fellowship, this communion of God's people is created by a sovereign act of God out of His good pleasure alone. Deuteronomy 7:6-8a, *"For you are a holy **people** to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a **people** for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. ⁷ "The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, ⁸ but because the LORD loved you.*

Beloved, you are God's people. You belong to God and God belongs to you. He has chosen you. Chosen you to be His own possession. Chosen you out of no merit of your own. Chosen you that He might set His affection on you. Chosen you that you might be the beneficiaries of His infinite kindness in Christ. Surely, this truth ought to move us to the deepest gratitude and sense of privilege. These precious benefits are intended for and flow to His people as a community, a fellowship, a body.

But we are dull creatures. Our spiritual perception is clouded by sin. God, in gracious condescension, has supplied a gallery of pictures, images; familiar

metaphors by which our minds and hearts might better comprehend the meaning, the purpose, and the beauty of the people of God. So together we tour this gallery, these Biblical pictures of the people of God.

As we enter the first gallery we see three images. In the first the Church is portrayed as a household. I Timothy 3:15, *I write so that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the **household** of God, which is the **church** of the living God.* Surely this household imagery was in Paul's mind when, in Chapter 5 of the same letter he says, *Do not sharply rebuke an older man, but rather appeal to him as a **father**, to the younger men as **brothers**, the older women as **mothers**, and the younger women as **sisters**, in all purity (5:1-2).* This metaphor gives us a sense of the mutual respect and consideration with which God expects us to conduct ourselves in the Church. In I Peter 2:9, using the same titles applied to Old Testament Israel, the Church is referred to as A **CHOSEN RACE**, A **ROYAL PRIESTHOOD**, and A **HOLY NATION**. By focusing on the adjectives – *chosen, royal, and holy* – you get a sense for the esteem in which God holds His people. In the third image the members of the Church are portrayed as a flock. In I Peter 5:2-3. elders are instructed to *shepherd the **flock** of God among you (5:2) and to be examples to the **flock** (5:3).* This metaphor, of course, gives us a sense for the tenderness with which the Church is to be treated. All of these reinforce and enlarge the idea that the Christian life is designed by God to be lived in community.

As we make our way into the next gallery we see the image of the Church as a building. I Corinthians 3:9, *For we are God's fellow-workers; you are God's field, God's **building**.* This is a metaphor even the youngest can understand. Each of us is a stone, a living stone. When carefully chiseled and fitted together by God, the

Master Builder, we become a suitable dwelling for Him. **Ephesians 2:21-22**, *in whom the whole building, being fitted together is growing into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.* Do you see how it is simply impossible for you to think of the Church as so many individuals? Remember, a bunch of stones laying around by themselves is called what? A ruin.

We have learned that Christ is God's *true* dwelling. In the flesh of Jesus, God came to dwell among His people. **Colossians 2:9**, *For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form.* Christ is the *true* tabernacle. **John 1:14**, *And the Word became flesh, and dwelt (tabernacled) among us.* Christ is the *true* temple. **John 2:19, 21**, *Jesus answered and said to them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" ... He was speaking of the temple of His body.* God's true dwelling is not a tent of goatskins, or a temple of cedar and gold, but the person of His Son. "The recognition of this truth leads to the conclusion that it is only through union with Christ, who himself is the true temple of God, that believers both individually and corporately can be spoken of as temples or as the temple of God" (P. E. Hughes, p.82). **I Corinthians 3:16**, *Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?* **I Corinthians 6:19**, *Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?* **I Corinthians 3:17**, *If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.* This metaphor gives you a sense of the reverence with which God expects us to treat His Church. Beloved, God dwells here. O, not in this building but in us as a temple. If you want to incur divine judgment simply deface His temple, His Church. Mark it up with the ugly graffiti of gossip and quarreling. Vandalize it

with the bricks of self-will and pride. Would you destroy that in which God Himself is pleased to live?

We move on to the next gallery where we see the lovely image of the Church as a bride. The image of the bride is an ancient one. The Old Testament speaks of God and Israel in terms of a marriage relationship. Isaiah 62:5, *And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so your God will rejoice over you* (see also Hos. 1-3; Is. 54:5; Ezek. 16). It is here that we stop. It is here that we take a seat and linger, transfixed by what is before us. It is here that we begin to “get it” so to speak. Here we discern that the Church is God’s most precious possession. It is here where we shed tears that we have ever acted unseemly towards her; that we have brought reproach upon Her. It is here, more so than in the other galleries, that we feel shame that we have neglected her. Before us hangs the picture of the Church - the one whom Christ has promised to nourish; the one whom Christ cherishes. Before us the image of the one for whom He so willingly and gladly gave His life. Waves of shame spill over us because we have treated her with no more care and gentleness than we have.

At last we arrive at the gallery where the most familiar of all the metaphors for the Church – the body – is displayed. I Corinthians 12:27, *Now you are Christ’s body, and individually members of it*. One theologian has referred to this metaphor as “the most typical description of the church in Paul” (Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, p. 362). It has been described by others as “the most extended image of the church” (Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 1036), as “Paul’s maturest reflections on the subject” of the Church (R. Fung, “Some Pauline Pictures of the Church,” *The Evangelical Quarterly*, April/June, 1981, p. 92), and as “the most distinctive Pauline metaphor for the Church” (Ladd, p. 545).

These ascriptions are justified, if for no other reason, on account of the amount of ink the metaphor can claim. It is treated in the books of Romans, I Corinthians, Ephesians, and Colossians. The dual emphasis in Romans and I Corinthians is the “connection of the church, as a group of believers, with Christ” *and* “the interconnectedness between all the persons who make up the church” (Erickson, p. 1037). Clearly, the theme of the metaphor in Romans and I Corinthinans is expressed by the phrase “*one body, many members.*” Romans 12:4-5, *For just as we have many members in one body, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.*

While there are many aspects of this metaphor that we could explore I want to focus in this series on the idea of interconnectedness; the dependence of each believer upon every other believer. Providence has supplied an extraordinary illustration of the concept of interconnectedness. We are, today, on the backside of the “Blackout of 2003.” One article in yesterday’s paper said, “The power collapse that paralyzed a large swath of North America on Thursday apparently began with a failure in the Midwest that cascaded into Canada, and from there into New York ... In seconds, parallel lines were overloaded and shut themselves down, and then generating stations disconnected themselves. Ultimately, dozens of lines and about 100 power plants, with a staggering 61,800 megawatts of generation, had shut down – apparently before anyone could react. The series of failures began about 4:08 pm EDT, and was over within roughly five minutes ... [One man said] ‘This whole event was essentially a nine-second event, maybe 10’ “ (*Star-Telegram*; Wald, Perez-Pena, and Banerjee). The Church is interconnected more intimately than the U. S. power grid ever thought of being.

There are no circuit breakers. What happens to one part characteristically affects the whole whether for good or ill.

Let's look more closely at this interconnectedness by working our way through I Corinthians 12:12-27. We have read it once in the New American Standard version. Listen to it again from one of the modern translations (New Living Translation):

¹² The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up only one body. So it is with the body of Christ. ¹³ Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into Christ's body by one Spirit, and we have all received the same Spirit. ¹⁴ Yes, the body has many different parts, not just one part. ¹⁵ If the foot says, "I am not a part of the body because I am not a hand," that does not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear says, "I am not part of the body because I am only an ear and not an eye," would that make it any less a part of the body? ¹⁷ Suppose the whole body were an eye-- then how would you hear? Or if your whole body were just one big ear, how could you smell anything? ¹⁸ But God made our bodies with many parts, and he has put each part just where he wants it. ¹⁹ What a strange thing a body would be if it had only one part! ²⁰ Yes, there are many parts, but only one body. ²¹ The eye can never say to the hand, "I don't need you." The head can't say to the feet, "I don't need you." ²² In fact, some of the parts that seem weakest and least important are really the most necessary. ²³ And the parts we regard as less honorable are those we clothe with the greatest care. So we carefully protect from the eyes of others those parts that should not be seen, ²⁴ while other parts do not require this special care. So God has put the body together in such a way that extra honor and care are given to those parts that have less dignity. ²⁵ This makes for harmony among the members, so that all the members care for each other equally. ²⁶ If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is

honored, all the parts are glad. ²⁷ *Now all of you together are Christ's body, and each one of you is a separate and necessary part of it.*

The first practical inference from this passage is that each member of the body ought to be content in his or her role. John MacArthur says at this point, "In seeming humility [one may say] 'My gift is second-rate and unimportant. I have nothing to offer, so why participate?' But that attitude does not reflect humility. It is self-centered, selfish, and an affront to God's wisdom and love" (I Corinthians, p. 315). "The second practical inference is that the place and gifts of each member are determined by the Lord" (Hodge, p. 258). "Each member occupies in the body the position which God has seen fit to assign it, and which is most conducive to the good of the whole" (Hodge, p. 257). "The third [practical] inference ... is the mutual dependence of the members of the church" (Hodge, p. 258). "The fourth inference from the apostle's doctrine is, that the least attractive gifts are the most important" (Hodge, p. 259). Do you recall which gift the immature Corinthians prized the most? Tongues. Charles Hodge says at this point, "Those who in the closet, however obscure, wrestle with God, often do more for his glory and for the advancement of his kingdom than those who fill the largest space in the public eye. What would the tongue do without the lungs, which are neither seen nor heard" (Hodge, p. 259).

Friday evening I was working on my sermon. I imagined myself walking through this gallery with these pictures of the Church on display. I realized that a true corporate mentality is barely on my radar screen. As I studied these metaphors I came to the conclusion that my failure to think of my spiritual life in these rich Biblical, corporate terms has done damage to the body, stunted my own spiritual growth, dampened my zeal, and sapped my joy. Most of us think

we possess a healthy measure of faith, hope, and love. Most of us think we nourish and cherish the Church. But when examined under the scrutiny of God's word we may discover that this is so largely in our minds. I realized that Christian graces and virtues are properly demonstrated and confirmed, not in my imagination, but in the real life fellowship of the saints. I realized that true Christian character must be given life in the context of our communion with other real people, in real situations, in real relationships, in real ministry. Indeed, we pursue our personal passions, we nurse our petty resentments and hurt feelings, we knowingly engage in sinful behavior, we speak harsh and unkind words to and about one another with little awareness that the wounds we are inflicting are on the household, the flock, the temple, the bride, the body of Christ Himself.

Once again, we pray that God might pour out His mercy upon us granting to us eyes to see the beauty of the Church, minds to comprehend God's glorious plans for His people, and resolve to submit ourselves to the larger body of Christ.

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The Building, The Bride, and the Body: *Pictures of the People of God*

I Corinthians 3:9, 16-17, 12:27; Ephesians 5:21-33

Review

When it comes to the Church, to think correctly is to think _____.
The Bible teaches that you share a _____ in Christ.
The _____ alone is the essential mark of the true church.
Maturity in the body of Christ is measured, not according to human standards of
"success" but by the presence of the enduring virtues of _____, _____,
and _____.

The Lord Jesus Christ has established His Church in the world for the _____
and _____ of the saints through the proclamation of the Gospel.

This morning

The images used in the New Testament to describe the fellowship of God's people.

All of these reinforce, enlarge, and strengthen the idea that the Christian life is _____ by God to be lived in _____ .

Throughout the Bible those whom God has called to Himself; those who are the members of this community of faith are referred to as "the _____ of God."

This relationship is summed up in a phrase that, like a magnificent river, courses its way through the Bible from cover to cover:

"I shall be your God, and you shall be My people."

II Corinthians 6:16, *For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, "I WILL DWELL IN THEM AND WALK AMONG THEM; AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE."*

This community, this fellowship, this communion of God's people is _____ by a sovereign act of God out of His good _____ alone.

Deuteronomy 7:6-8a, *"For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. ⁷"The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, ⁸but because the LORD loved you.*

The church is referred to as a _____ (I Tim. 3:15).

Using the same titles applied to Old Testament Israel, the Church is referred to as **A CHOSEN RACE, A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD, and A HOLY NATION** (I Pet. 2:9).

The members of the church are referred to as a _____ (I Pet. 5:2-3). Elders are instructed to *shepherd the flock of God among you* (5:2) and *prove to be examples to the flock* (5:3).

The image of the Church as a _____ (I Cor. 3:9).
For we are God's fellow-workers; you are God's field, God's building.

The lovely image of the Church as a _____ (Isaiah 62:5).
And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so your God will rejoice over you (see also Hos. 1-3; Is. 54:5; Ezek. 16).

The most familiar of all the metaphors for the Church – the _____ (I Cor. 12:27).

Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it.

While there are many aspects of this metaphor that we could explore I want to focus in this series on the idea of interconnectedness; the _____ of each believer upon every other believer.

I Corinthians 12:12-27