

New Testament Metaphors for the Church: Flock, Branches, Priesthood, Bride, Building, Body

What are we celebrating this month?

Christmas! The birth of Jesus.

We celebrate His arrival with the giving of gifts, a kind of mimicking the royal gifts given to baby Jesus by the Wise men who followed the star.

So why did Jesus come into this world?

...Yes, to save us. But to say just that is too simplistic and makes it too individualistic.

In Matt 16:18 Jesus says:

(NKJV) And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.

(The Message) You are Peter, a rock. This is the rock on which I will put together my church, a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out.

Often we think of the church as something passive, focused on resisting the influences of the world. Jesus, on the other hand, envisaged a dynamic, aggressive church, one that would attack Satan's strongholds, and break through its gates to rescue those in Satan's domain. And He has given us the assurance that the gates of hell will not be able to resist when we come in His name – as His representatives!

As missionaries working with the Chinantec people of Southern Mexico, we had the privilege of seeing God transform a society where almost all the men were alcoholics and women were essentially chattels. It has been thrilling and humbling to have had a part in that transformation.

So, Christ came to establish His church. I believe it will help us if we understand what it means to be part of Christ's church.

The Greek word translated as "church" in English is *ekklesia*; it basically means "an assembly or gathering". In ancient Greece, the *ekklesia* was a group of selected individuals who would assemble regularly to deliberate and decide on matters of civil policy.

In the NT, *ekklesia* was also used to refer to any assembly of people.

In his address to the Sanhedrin in Acts 7:38, Stephen calls the people of Israel "the *ekklesia* (assembly) in the wilderness". And in Acts 19:39, *ekklesia* refers to a convening of citizens to discuss legal matters.

So, in reality, our English word "church" translates a Greek word that simply means "a gathering or assembly of people bound together by a common cause".

In the NT there are several metaphors for this gathering we call the church.

A metaphor is a poetic statement where you say an object/action is another object/action to get a specific message across. For example:

1. My friend is a night owl: He stays up late most nights.
2. He is a couch potato: He's always lying around in front of the TV

So why do we use metaphors when we could simply say, for example, "He stays up late most nights." Metaphors lend a vividness to our communications, much like painting a word picture: "My friend is a night owl."

Today, I would like to briefly touch on six metaphors for the church. In the NT the church is compared to:

1. **Flock:** A beautiful, tender image depicting the relationship of believers to their Lord.

John 10:11-15

¹¹ *'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³ The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.*

¹⁴ *'I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep.*

There is intimacy, for the Shepherd knows His sheep individually, and they recognize His voice and respond to Him.

Jesus wants to build His church – a group of people who are attentive to His voice and willing to follow Him **wherever He leads**. He is the Good Shepherd! We can trust Him in all of life's ups and downs.

2. The second metaphor is that believers in Christ are **Branches**: As branches, we draw life from the vine because we are "in Him"

In John 15:4-8 we hear Jesus saying:

⁴ *Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. ⁵ 'I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ **This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.***

The branches receive their life-giving nourishment in their attachment to the vine; as they remain in the vine, they are able to grow and bear fruit.

There has been considerable debate over the nature of this fruit. Is it obedience? Perhaps the winning of new converts? Maybe Christian character as described by the apostle Paul in Gal 5:22-23 – "*when the Holy Spirit controls our lives he will produce this kind of fruit in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*"

Probably all of the above! – obedience, winning souls, and Holy Spirit transformation.

This fruit is nothing less than the outcome of persevering dependence on the vine, driven by faith, embracing all of the believer's life and the product of his or her witness.

3. The third metaphor for the church is **Priesthood**. In the nation Israel, only those of the tribe of Levi could serve as priests; whereas, according to the NT, in the church, **every believer** is a priest.

The apostle Peter indicates all believers are priests for the purpose of offering spiritual sacrifices instead of animal sacrifices.

In 1 Peter 2:5 the apostle refers to believers as a "holy priesthood"; and in 1 Peter 2:9 he refers to believers as a "royal priesthood."

⁹ *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ 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.*

And in Rev 1:6 the apostle John refers to believers as a kingdom of priests.

(He) has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father – to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

4. **Bride:** The metaphor of the church as the bride of Christ is found in Ephesians 5. This metaphor reveals the magnitude of Christ's love for his followers. Marriage is seen as a living metaphor – a representation – of the depth of Christ's love for his followers.

Ephesians 5:25-32

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. ²⁸ In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church – ³⁰ for we are members of his body. ³¹ 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' ³² This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church.

As followers of Christ, you and I comprise the “bride of Christ.” We can be confident of His good intentions, His unending love, His desire to “present us to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.”

5. The fifth metaphor for the church is a **Building**. The church, a union of Jews and non-Jews (or Gentiles), is built upon the “*foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.*”

Eph. 2:19-22

¹⁹ Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

In this metaphor, Jesus Christ is the cornerstone.

Traditionally, the "cornerstone" was the “primary foundation stone by which the architect fixes a standard for the bearings of the walls and cross-walls throughout.”

In Christ the whole building, the church, is being “fitted together.” As a building “grows” when under construction, so the church, as a living organism, is growing as new believers are added to the “building.” And as a building, you and I – all of us – are all integrated with one another; each one of us has a vital role so that the whole is not only functional but magnificent.

6. The sixth and final metaphor for the church is **Body**. As the head has authority over the physical body and gives direction to it, so Christ is the head of the church, has authority over it, and gives it direction.

In Eph. 1:22–23 the apostle Paul writes:

²² And God placed all things under his (Christ's) feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

And in Col. 1:18 Paul writes:

¹⁸ And he (Christ) is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

This metaphor emphasizes the unity of all believers because the church reconciles Jews and non-Jews; for that matter, people of all and any race, into one body. There is no distinction; they are one in Christ.

1 Cor. 12:12, 15-16, 19-20

¹² Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ.

¹⁵ Now if the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁹ If they were all one part, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

In 12:27 Paul summarises with this statement:

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

This metaphor also illustrates the unity of purpose that is meant to characterise the church – each part or member of the body watching out for and caring for the other. Just as none of us consists of only an ear or a nose, but have many parts to our bodies that enable the body to function well, so the church has individuals with a variety of spiritual gifts that enable it to thrive and have a meaningful impact on the world.

Christ nourishes the church apportioning spiritual gifts to all believers that it might grow to maturity and be built up as one body in Christ

In Eph. 4:11-16 Paul writes:

*¹¹ So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. ¹⁴ Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵ Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶ **From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.***

This concept of being “joined and held together” comes through in the many occurrences of the phrase “one another” in the NT.

Pastor Ken Harray made reference to this in his message a few weeks ago, and I would like to reiterate this truth. Here are just a few of the dozens of occurrences in Scripture:

A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. John 13:34-35

Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Romans 12:16

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. Romans 15:7

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. Gal. 5:13

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Ephesians 4:2

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. 1 John 4:11-12

Christians - By Maya Angelou

When I say... "I am a Christian"
I'm not shouting "I'm clean livin'."
I'm whispering "I was lost,
Now I'm found and forgiven."

When I say... "I am a Christian"
I don't speak of this with pride.
I'm confessing that I stumble
and need Christ to be my guide.

When I say... "I am a Christian"
I'm not trying to be strong.
I'm professing that I'm weak
And need His strength to carry on.

When I say... "I am a Christian"
I'm not bragging of success.
I'm admitting I have failed
And need God to clean my mess.

When I say... "I am a Christian"
I'm not claiming to be perfect,
My flaws are far too visible
But, God believes I am worth it.

When I say... "I am a Christian"
I still feel the sting of pain.
I have my share of heartaches
So I call upon His name.

When I say... "I am a Christian"
I'm not holier than thou,
I'm just a simple sinner
Who received God's good grace, somehow!

Christ's *ekklesia*, His church, His followers, are imperfect in this life.
But together, as the body of Christ – and with God's grace and enabling – we are "more than conquerors!"
As His representatives we are able to tear down Satan's strongholds and set the captives free.

So... **REJOICE!**