The Church in Descriptive Figures

John C. Brunt

Introduction

New Testament writers use numerous and varied figures, symbols, and pictures to depict the church. Paul Minear numbers these images at more than 80, but he suggests that the list swells to over 100 if each Greek word is counted separately. He goes on to treat 96 in his monumental work. Judgments differ as to which of these images is most important. While many theologians point to the "body of Christ" figure as most important, Küng holds that the "people of God" is primary, and Banks makes the family "the most significant metaphorical usage of all."

Obviously a study of this size must be very selective. Only a few major images can be chosen, and only the briefest of surveys can be attempted for each one. Any one of the symbols could be the subject of the entire chapter. Although there is always room for argument in the selection process, we have chosen on the basis of three criteria so as to insure objectivity and to avoid the circularity of predetermining the outcome by means of the images selected.

The selected figure had to meet the following tests: (1) Multiple attestation within the NT. In other words, it had to be included in more than one author and/or book. (2) Some references in the NT had to make explicit connection between the image and the postresurrection Christian community. Thus a figure such as "salt" was not included, for Christ’s reference to disciples as salt is not explicitly connected with the postresurrection community, nor does it receive multiple attestation. (3) At least one NT reference had to be an extended reference in which the author drew implications from the image, as

3 Robert J. Banks, Paul’s Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting (Grand Rapids, 1980), 53.
The Church in Descriptive Figures

opposed to an offhanded allusion.

With the use of these three criteria, nine images are chosen for this study. I have divided them into the three following categories:

**Community Comparisons**
- Assembly
- People of God
- City: Citizens of Heaven
- Kingdom of God

**Object Comparisons**
- Body of Christ
- Building: Temple
- Flock

**Family Comparisons**
- Household of God
- Woman: Bride/Wife

The figures will be treated in the above order. Brief attention will be given to Jewish and/or Greco-Roman backgrounds with the primary focus placed on their use in the NT. A summary of the significance of each symbol for an understanding of the church will conclude the several sections.

A very important caveat is in order at this point, however. When we speak of the meaning or significance of a figure, this does not suggest that literary metaphors are fully translatable into nonmetaphorical propositions that can be quickly summarized. The very existence of these numerous and varied pictures testifies to the fact that when we think of the church, we are thinking about a complex, multifaceted reality that transcends simple definition. The images help us intuit and experience meaning in ways that go far beyond anything that our brief summaries can capture.4

After the symbols have been surveyed, the concluding portion of the chapter will reflect on the relationship between these biblical images and contemporary models for understanding the church.

4 In a sense this chapter’s theme is more “the church as images” rather than “images of the church.” In fact, it would probably be better not to use the term “church” as a general designation throughout the study since it is one of the images to be discussed. But because the term “church” is in such general use today, and because it is cumbersome to speak continually of “the early Christian community,” we will use the term “church.”
Community Comparisons

Assembly

We usually think of the word “church” as a designation rather than an image. Yet the Greek term *ekklesia* has definite pictorial characteristics. (It is, of course, doubtful that any term for a theological reality such as the church is purely an arbitrary designator with no symbolic overtones.) The basic picture represented by the term *ekklesia* is that of an assembly of people gathered for some specific purpose.

Secular meanings. All kinds of meetings and assemblies in the Greco-Roman world were designated by this term. The book of Acts preserves this secular usage. Luke employs *ekklesia* three times in chapter 19, twice to refer to the mob gathered in the theater at Ephesus to protest Paul’s ministry (vss. 32, 41) and once to refer to the legal assembly that would be necessary to review the matter if charges were to be pressed against Paul and his companions (vs. 39). Even this limited NT use of the term in its secular sense reveals the breadth of meaning that is possible. It can refer to both a legally called assembly and a somewhat spontaneous riot!

Old Testament links. In the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (Septuagint, LXX, third-second century B.C.) *ekklesia* was used almost a hundred times to translate the Hebrew qahal (congregation) or its derivatives. It is especially important when used for the “congregation” of Israel gathered before God. In at least two passages the NT preserves this OT usage of *ekklesia*. Stephen speaks of Moses in the “assembly [ekklesia] of the desert” (Acts 7:38), and the author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 22:22, which speaks of singing praises in the presence of the congregation (Heb 2:12). The picture of Israel gathered before God stands behind the NT designation of God’s people as *ekklesia*.

Varied usage for the church. New Testament usage of *ekklesia* for the church is extremely varied and frequent, although it is surprising that 10 books do not use it at all (Mark, Luke, John, 2 Timothy, Titus 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, and Jude). It can be used for the individual, local church, as when Paul appointed elders in each church (Acts 14:23). It can also refer to the church “in” a certain place (Acts 8:1—Jerusalem; 1 Cor 1:2—Corinth), in a home (Rom 16:5; Col; 4:15; Philemon 2) or to churches in a given area (1 Cor 16:19—Asia).

The term can also refer to the totality of Christians in these local settings as well. Saul set out to destroy the church (Acts 8:3), and later proclaims that Christ is the head of the church (Eph 5:23). New Testament writers can speak
of belonging to the church (Acts 12:1) or being put out of the church (3 John 10). Paul can speak of the Corinthians coming together in church (1 Cor 11:18) or of the whole church coming together (1 Cor 14:23). The term can also point specifically to the worship service when the people are assembled (1 Cor 14:19).

Most important, the *ekklēsia* is the church of God (Acts 20:28). As such it can be contrasted to both Jews and Gentiles (1 Cor 10:32). Schmidt argues that "of God" is implied even when it is not specifically added. The basic picture of *ekklēsia* is that of God's people assembled before Him. Although these people are in continuity with the congregation of the OT, they are now constituted by their commitment to Jesus Christ.

**Relationship: part/whole.** It is significant that the NT does not call each local assembly of believers a part of the church, but simply the church. As Schmidt (referring specifically to Paul's use) puts it, "The sum of the individual congregations does not produce the total community of the Church. Each community, however small, represents the total community, the Church." Griffiths illustrates this point with the analogy of the moon. Whether we see the full moon or only the tiniest sliver of the new moon, we call it the moon. We don't point to the new moon, and say, "Look, a little bit of the moon." We simply say, "Look at the moon." For early Christians whenever and wherever believers gathered or existed as a community, the church was visible. Each local church pointed beyond itself to an assembly that could only be imagined, but was nevertheless made concrete by this local church's own existence.

**Summary.** Several ideas, then, are central to this image of the *ekklēsia* (church). The basic picture is that of people assembled with a common commitment and focus toward God, the Father of Jesus Christ. Emphasis falls on the church's relationship to God. The church is the church of God; it belongs to Him. And since the NT explicitly points to the OT background of the term, we must also see included in this image the idea of the believers' continuity with Israel.

Many commentators have pointed to the etymology of the term *ekklēsia* and have emphasized that the church has been "called out" by God. They often go on to elaborate on the significance of the church as the "called out" community. But this particular imagery does not seem to have been in the minds of the NT writers who employed the term. Not once is any such explicit...
connection made in the NT, and we should remember that usage, not etymology, is the key to understanding. Just as we use all kinds of words without ever thinking of their etymologies, NT writers seem to have focused on the general concept of assembled people without making any point of, or probably taking any thought of, the etymology to which these commentators point.

**People of God**

Perhaps no image for the church has stronger OT ties than this one. God’s basic affirmation in making His covenant with Israel was “I will be your God and you will be my people” (Exod 6:7; Lev 26:12). As Küng says, “The concept of the people of God is at the heart of Judaism. Fundamentally the whole faith of Judaism can be summed up in the single phrase; Yahweh is the God of Israel and Israel is the people of Yahweh.”

Küng goes on to argue that this concept is also fundamental to the early church’s self-understanding. He says, “The idea of the people of God is the oldest and most fundamental concept underlying the self-interpretation of the ekklēsia. Images such as those of the body of Christ, the temple, and so on, are secondary in comparison.”

**Emphasis on identity.** Even if Küng’s evaluation may be a bit overdrawn, the picture of the church as God’s laos (people) is extremely important in the NT, for it gave early Christians a sense of belonging, an identity and destiny that anchored them in the past and assured them of a future.

It was her understanding that she was the people of God that gave Israel a strong sense of solidarity with God and her corporate personality as a community. Yet as Küng shows, there is a movement within the OT regarding this concept. At first the privilege of being the people of God was seen as a present possession. But the prophets proclaimed that due to Israel’s repeated failures the privilege had been lost. Yet they did not leave Israel in this unfortunate state, but promised that God would restore Israel. Thus, what had been a present possession became an eschatological promise.

We see this very clearly in Hosea 1:9-11 and through chapter 2. Hosea proclaims that Israel is no longer the people of God, but at the same time God promises that she will again become the people of God.

**Christians become “the people of God.”** There can be no doubt that the early church saw itself as the fulfillment of these promises. Through Jesus Christ they had become the promised people of God. Yet the concept retained

---

8 Küng, 116.
9 Ibid., 119-20.
10 Ibid., 118.
The Church in Descriptive Figures

its eschatological character as well. As is so typical in the NT there is an "already-not yet" aspect to this concept. The church is the people of God now, but looks forward to being the people of God at Christ's return (Parousia) as well.

It is interesting to see how various NT writers took up this theme of the fulfillment of Hosea's promise. Peter quotes from Hosea to show that Christians have a new identity as the people of God (1 Pet 2:9-11). Paul cites from Hosea to emphasize that in Christ Jews and Gentiles find a new unity as the people of God (Rom 9:22-26). And in his final vision of Revelation John alludes to these words to show that Christians have a destiny to be the people of God forever (Rev 21:3). These references reveal the NT's multifaceted use of the concept of the church as God's people.

As the Romans passage makes clear, the church saw in this concept both continuity with, and distinction from, Israel. The church saw itself as the fulfillment of the promise to Israel, and therefore, as the true Israel (note Paul's repeated emphasis on Christians as the true circumcision in passages such as Philippians 3:3); but it was also to be distinguished from Israel by its inclusiveness. God had now taken a people for Himself "from the Gentiles" (Acts 15:14, NIV).

This image of the people of God is especially important in Hebrews, which shows that Jesus suffered and made atonement for the people to make them holy (Heb 2:17; 13:12) and paints Christian hope in the form of spiritual rest for the people of God (Heb 4:9-11).

Summary. The significance of this image is again rich and varied. It points to the church's continuity with Israel and emphasizes that God has been faithful to His promise. The church is the evidence of God's commitment to His people. Therefore this image shows God's solidarity with His people. But it also points to the resulting solidarity among the people whom God has taken from both Jew and Gentile and made His own. It gives Christians a sense of belonging and community.

At the same time this image, like the previous one, points not only to the earthly community of believers but to the God who is their Saviour. This is a pattern that will be repeated as we move through the figures. Each one tells us not only about the church but focuses on God and His character as well.

Finally it should be noted that even though the modern term "laity" derives from laos (people), nowhere does the NT use the term to distinguish the people as a whole from church leaders or "clergy." In the NT all Christians—both people and leaders—compose the "people" of God.
City: Citizens of Heaven

The Greek concept of "city" was quite different from our own. The city was not merely a geographical location but a power center. Greek city-states were political units that governed themselves and the surrounding villages.\(^\text{11}\)

According to Strathmann, however, by the time of the NT the term *polis* was used without reference to political organisms simply for an "enclosed place of human habitation."\(^\text{12}\) The term appears many times in this secular sense throughout the NT. But it is also used in a specialized way as an image for the church. This usage grows primarily out of the special significance given to the city of Jerusalem in Jewish thought.

The church anticipates heavenly city. In the book of Revelation the evil city Babylon is contrasted with the holy, heavenly city, the New Jerusalem (Rev 17:1, 5, 18; 21:1-2, 9-10). This image was already present in Jewish apocalyptic.\(^\text{13}\) But even though the description of the city is eschatological, John certainly had the church in mind as well. Again we see the "already—not yet" of Christian hope. For John the church of the present, through its life and worship, already anticipated the heavenly city.

There is a similar interplay of "already-not yet" in the book of Hebrews, where the image of the church as a city is especially prominent. This book, as William Johnson has shown, uses the motif of pilgrimage to symbolize the Christian life. The basic ingredients in this motif are separation, place, purpose, and hardship.\(^\text{14}\) Christians are seen as moving on a pilgrimage that includes these four elements and ends with a city whose builder and maker is God. Abraham already searched for this city (Heb 11:10) which God Himself has prepared for the faithful (Heb 11:16).

Hebrews makes it clear that there is no enduring city here on earth. The city which is our goal is an eschatological city: "And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come" (Heb 13:12-14, NIV).

And yet the author has already, in the preceding chapter, spoken of the present church and the assembly of Christians for worship as this city: "But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living

---

\(^{11}\) Hermann Strathmann, "*Polis,*" in *TDNT* 6:517.
\(^{12}\) Ibid., 529-30.
\(^{13}\) E.g., see 4 Ezra 7:26-27 and 2 Baruch 4:3.
God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven” (Heb 12:22-23, NIV).

Again we see that the church is seen as an anticipation of the promised, eschatological city.

**Citizenship in heaven.** Paul plays on the same image when he tells the Philippians that their citizenship is already in heaven (Phil 3:20). The term he uses is *politeuma*, which originally meant “citizenship” but later was used for the semiautonomous colonies in the Roman Empire. Strathmann argues correctly, however, that Paul’s usage in this verse goes back to the earlier meaning without reference to the idea of foreign colonies. If it were the latter, the Christian community would be a heavenly “colony” in the world, whereas Paul is showing that Christians are inwardly foreigners (with relationship to the earthly sphere) but members of the heavenly kingdom of Christ. 

Paul uses a similar image when he speaks of newly converted Gentiles as fellow citizens (*sumpolitai*) of the saints (Eph 2:19). We will come back to this verse, which is rich in various images of the church.

**Summary.** This image of the church as an anticipation of the heavenly city to come, which already holds our citizenship, points especially to the destiny of the church and its distinction from the prevailing cultures of the present world. It shows that Christians are part of a community that has a destiny. This community is a visible, present reality, and yet it is a community on a journey rather than a community that has reached its goal. The journey involves hardship and separation from the prevailing values of a sinful world. But the church is a community of hope, worshiping in the assurance that the heavenly city already exists and will belong to Christians for eternity.

The meaning of this image overlaps significantly with the last of the images that relate to human communities, that of the church as kingdom.

**Kingdom of God**

This section cannot begin to explore the entire concept of the kingdom of God. In fact, the term “kingdom of God” is not primarily an image of the church at all. But we will focus on a few passages where it is evident that the term refers not only to the eschatological reign of God (its usual meaning), but also has significance for an understanding of the church.

**Kingdom defined.** Basically, the “kingdom of God” refers to the reign
The Church in Descriptive Figures

or rule of God that has broken into the earth in the ministry of Jesus Christ as an alternative government with new values in the present as an anticipation of God's universal rule in the future. In this sense the term is by no means identical with the church. Yet kingdom and church are not unrelated.

Dulles is right when he objects to theologians such as Küng and Pannenberg who see the church as merely temporary and the kingdom in contrast as eternal. He says, "The coming of the Kingdom will not be the destruction but the fulfillment of the church." Minear summarizes the relationship well when he says,

The only significant comprehension of the church will be a comprehension that views the human community within its native habitat, within the context of God's Kingdom, within the horizons of the new age and the new world. To be sure, the images of kingdom and of the people of God are not everywhere coterminous, but they can nowhere be separated. There are places where a New Testament writer appears to identify the church and the Kingdom, and other places where distinctions are drawn between the two. But this need not produce confusion if, before one thinks "church," he has already thought "the kingdom of God," or if one makes the ecclesiological term the predicate in a sentence the subject of which is the theological term.

Church lives out the kingdom's values. Although the kingdom is future, the church is called to approximate the kingdom in this world. The church is the place where the values of the kingdom are to be lived out (always imperfectly) in the world among God's people and in His presence. Therefore NT writers at times can use the image of the kingdom in reference to the church. Revelation affirms that God has made His people to be a kingdom and priests to serve Him (Rev 1:6; 5:10). Matthew records that Jesus gives the keys of the kingdom to the church (Matt 16:19). Again, as with previous images, the present church anticipates the future. Nowhere is this more beautifully portrayed than in Revelation 3:21 where the exalted Jesus promises that those who overcome will actually sit on His throne and rule with Him.

No present reign of church. Jesus made it clear, however, that rulership was not the norm for the church in the present. Although the kingdom of God can serve as an image for the church, the general notion of "kingdom" as a secular reality (one which was certainly more familiar to first century readers

17 For a discussion of the meaning of the kingdom of God concept in the NT see the present author's Now and Not Yet (Hagerstown, MD, 1987), 21-28.
18 Avery Robert Dulles, Models of the Church (Garden City, NY, 1978), 109. Dulles goes on to devote an entire chapter to the church and eschatology.
19 Ibid., 127.
20 Minear, 124.
than to twentieth century Americans) is really more an anti-image or contrast image for the church. Earthly kings and rulers lord it over their subjects, but the church follows the example of Jesus, whose kingship is seen in His service (Mark 10:42-45). Of course, in spite of the clarity of Jesus’ contrast, the church throughout history has often misused this image and claimed privileges of rulership for itself.

Summary. The image of kingdom points again to the church as an alternative to the values of the prevailing governments and cultures of the world and an anticipation of God’s promised future. All these images that are related to human communities emphasize God’s leadership over and commitment to the church as well as the fellowship that Christians enjoy together as fellow members of an alternative heavenly government and a community of hope.

The four images we have surveyed thus far are obviously closely related. Perhaps the most basic of them is “people of God.” 

Object Comparisons

Body of Christ

The “body of Christ” figure is certainly the most important image for the church in the writings of Paul, although it is used primarily in only four books—Romans, 1 Corinthians, Colossians, and Ephesians.

This image appears to have been original with Paul. Banks shows that there is no exact parallel in Jewish literature and that, even though the use of the term “body” (sōma) was in the air of the Greco-Roman world, Paul was the first to apply it to a community within the larger community of the state.21

Value of individual member. In Romans and 1 Corinthians Paul uses the image of the body with the local congregation in view.22 As Banks points out, Paul does not say that the local congregation is a part of the body of Christ but the body of Christ. This reveals a very high estimate of the local Christian community.23 Each individual member of the congregation, even the one who might seem the least valuable, is an integral part of the body with a mission to

21 Banks, 69-70.
22 Rom 12:1-8; 1 Cor 10:16-17; 12:12-27.
23 Ibid., 63.
fulfill (1 Cor 12:14-26). In both Romans and 1 Corinthians Paul spells out what some of these contributions are. No two members are alike. There is diversity in the church.

**Mutual dependence.** But these diverse parts are joined together to form one body. There is a unity that transcends diversity. When one member suffers, all suffer with it, and when one member is honored, all rejoice together. This mutually dependent body of members is the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:27).

**Common mission.** This image stresses the harmonious relationships Christians should ideally have with each other within the fellowship of the church and the unity that they find in diversity. But it also points more strongly than any we have yet seen to the common mission that they share. All of this is centered in the local congregation of believers.

**Christ: head of the body.** In Colossians and Ephesians the meaning of the image is much the same, but the perspective is more cosmic, with the church as a whole in view.24 There is also a new emphasis on Christ as the head of the body. The whole body is energized and directed by this head (Col 2:19; Eph 4:16). The body belongs to Christ (Col 2:17), and He includes both Jew and Gentile within it (Eph 2:15-16), making it one body. This is a part of God’s secret plan, now revealed in Christ, to unify all things under the one head, Jesus Christ (Eph 1:9-10).

**Summary.** We see in these letters the same emphases that are in Romans and 1 Corinthians with additional emphasis on the universal dimension of the church, the solidarity between Christ and the church, and the church’s total dependence upon Christ, the head of the church. Again with this image, as in previous ones, we see the dual focus toward both earth and heaven. The symbol points to the character of the Christian community and to the character of Christ, the head of the body, and holds the two in intimate relationship.

It is possible to press this image too far and identify Christ with the church. Griffiths speaks of this tendency to equate the church with Christ’s actual body and offers a helpful corrective when he says, “To me this seems to be pressing a helpful analogy far too far, and dangerously so. As the Reformers denied Christ’s corporeal presence on earth in the face of false sacramentalism, so we should deny his incarnate presence on earth today in the fact of a false ecclesiasticism.”25

Yet we should not see this imagery as a mere illustration and lose the power

---

25 Griffiths, 53.
of the symbolism that makes the body of believers the agent of Christ to do His work by caring for each other and reaching out in mission to the world.

Building: Temple

Integration of believers and God. This image could easily be misunderstood in a culture such as ours where we often think of "church" as a building on a given street where we go for services. In NT times, however, there were no buildings for Christian worship. Worship was conducted in individual homes as we have noted earlier in our study. Thus this symbol points to a group of believers that is being built into a unique community of commitment to God and to each other.

According to Matthew the image goes back to Jesus who spoke of "building" His church on the rock (Matt 16:18). The Greek verb used here for "building" (oikodomeo) is employed throughout the NT in a thoroughly secular, literal sense for building everything from houses (Matt 7:24) to barns (Luke 12:18) to synagogues (Luke 7:5) to tombs (Luke 11:47).

But the term is also used figuratively for the building of a community. Luke speaks of the early church being strengthened or built up (oikodomeo) by the Spirit and growing in both numbers and the fear of the Lord (Acts 9:31). Paul uses building terminology the most frequently. His emphasis is not on numerical growth but on the building of unity and love (Eph 4:16; 1 Cor 8:1). He considered his work a building up of the church (Rom 15:20), or a laying of the foundation so others could build (1 Cor 3:10). He believed that spiritual gifts were given to build up the church (1 Cor 14:12). All this led Paul to see the church as God’s building (1 Cor 3:9).

God’s presence experienced in fellowship. Once this figure appears it is only a small step to the picture of the church as a particular kind of building—a temple, and Paul moves on to take this step (1 Cor 3:16-17). In Ephesians Paul elaborates on the metaphor by speaking of a building resting on a foundation of apostles and prophets, with Christ as the chief cornerstone, rising to become a holy temple (Eph 2:20-21). Peter, drawing on the same imagery, speaks of believers as living stones built on Christ, the cornerstone, so as to become a spiritual house (1 Pet 2:5). John also alludes to temple imagery when he records Christ’s promise to the overcomers in Philadelphia that they will become pillars in the temple of God (Rev 3:12).

We, of course, miss much of the power that this image must have conveyed in the first century. Imagine worshipers gathered in a living room. They have walked past large, impressive temples on their way to worship. It would have been tempting for them to feel a sense of deprivation. But instead, they are led
to see that they themselves are God’s temple. God’s presence was experienced in their fellowship, not in a stone building.

New Testament writers always use naos and not heiron when presenting this image. The latter is the more comprehensive term which includes the whole temple area or any place of sacrifice. On the other hand naos usually refers to the temple building itself, although at times it includes precincts as well. Thus the church is pictured as the actual temple building, made up of individual Christians as stones linked together to form a holy community.

Other pictures inhere in this broader image of the temple as well. In the ancient world wherever there was a temple, there were priests. Implicit in this image of Christians as the temple is the concept of Christians as priests (notice how the two are tied together in 1 Peter 2:4-9). In similar fashion, Christ can be seen both as high priest in the temple and the cornerstone of it.

**Summary.** This entire image points to the church as a community of mutual support that becomes the place of God’s presence. As Martin says, the church is in the world “to facilitate the worship of God.” The image shows that this community is something solid and enduring and that God Himself dwells in it. It reminds Christians that even though God does not dwell in houses made by men (Acts 7:48) He does dwell with people who come together in unity to worship Him and work for Him.

**Flock**

**Strong Old Testament metaphor.** This image finds strong background in the OT. In the Psalms the Lord is the shepherd (Psalm 23) and the people praise God because they are His flock (Psalm 100). In the prophets God is the shepherd who cares for His flock (Jer 31:10). Some of the most beautiful portraits of God’s care for His people draw on this imagery:

Henry tends his flock like a shepherd:  
He gathers the lambs in his arms  
And carries them close to his heart;  
he gently leads those that have young. (Isa 40:11, NIV)

Also in the prophets the spiritual leaders of Israel are called shepherds, and God often has to rebuke faithless leaders who turn out to be false shepherds (Ezekiel 34; Zechariah 11). All of this paves the way for a rich collection of images and irony in the NT.

The Church in Descriptive Figures

It is John, in both the Gospel and the book of Revelation, who most explicitly reveals the irony. Jesus is both the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29) and the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep (John 10:11). When the great multitude gathers around the throne they will never again hunger or thirst or suffer, because the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their Shepherd (Rev 7:17). The church is a flock because it is led by the Shepherd-Lamb.

Portrays true ministry. Jesus, during His earthly ministry, called the disciples His flock (Matt 26:31; Luke 12:32). Various NT authors refer to Jesus as the shepherd and believers as sheep (Heb 13:20; 1 Pet 2:25). But this image also has significance for Christian ministry, for ministers are also referred to as shepherds who are to work under Christ in caring for the flock. Paul tells the Ephesian elders to keep watch over all the flock (Acts 20:28-29), and Peter tells elders to be both shepherds and examples to the flock (1 Pet 5:2-4), just as Jesus had told Peter to feed His sheep and lambs (John 21).

Summary. We see something new in this image. Not only is the solidarity of God with His people powerfully and beautifully portrayed, but the nature of Christian ministry within the church is emphasized. Ministers are to be shepherds who give the same kind of gentle care to the church that has been modeled by Jesus, the Lamb-Shepherd, who gave His life for the sheep.

Family Comparisons

Household of God

The household (οἰκείος) was considered to be the constituent element of first century society, just as the family is today. Although there are many similarities, the first century household was quite different from the modern nuclear family. It was much more patriarchal, often involved a larger extended family, and included members that we would not consider "family," such as slaves, servants, and tutors.

The term οἰκείος is used only three times in the NT, once in a literal sense (1 Tim 5:8; it is also implied in 1 Cor 1:11), and twice as a figure of the church (Eph 2:19; Gal 6:10). In neither of these passages does Paul explain the image. He simply mentions it (along with a number of other metaphors in Ephesians 2) and assumes the hearers will understand.

Most significant metaphor. But these two references hardly exhaust the significance of the figure of the church as household, for there are many other terms that reflect this basic metaphor. Banks says, "So numerous are these, and so frequently do they appear, that the comparison of the Christian com-
munity with a ‘family’ must be regarded as the most significant metaphorical usage of all."^{28}

Throughout the NT the image of God as Father suggests the family metaphor, especially when Paul uses the adoption figure and the Aramaic term *Abba* (Father) in Romans 8. Paul consistently refers to fellow church members as “brothers.” Such references show that household and family metaphors permeated the church’s self-understanding.

The new family. The use of this image certainly goes back to Jesus, who contrasted His bond to His natural family with the bond He had with His followers (Mark 3:34-35). He also promised that those who left home and family for Him would receive not only eternal life but also a hundred times as much in the present age (Mark 10:29-30), an apparent reference to the new household of fellowship one finds in the church. Many early Christians did lose family when they joined the church so that the church quite literally became their new household—the only one they now had.

Summary. Thus this image, though infrequently explicit, permeates the NT. It testifies to the strong bonds that exist between believers and God and among fellow believers. At the same time it challenges believers to find their closest and most meaningful earthly ties in Christian fellowship. As strong as the bonds of family are, the bonds of Christian fellowship and commitment to God are even stronger.

Our final figure is a specialized image from within this broader picture of the church as household, that of the church as a woman, the Lord’s bride or wife.

**Woman: Bride/Wife**

Old Testament imagery. Although Israel is pictured as a woman in various prophets (Isa 54:1; Ezek 16:8), it is in Hosea that this image finds its fullest and most poignant OT expression. Israel is the unfaithful wife whom God cannot let go. He continues to work for her and woo her.

The church. It follows naturally that the church is also seen as a woman, the bride or wife of God. Paul uses this figure when he discusses relationships within the human household. Christ’s love for His wife, the church, becomes a model for the way a husband should love his wife (Eph 5:22-33). Paul can also speak of his desire to present the Corinthians as a pure virgin to their husband, Christ (2 Cor 11:2). But it is in Revelation that the image is most vivid. The pure woman, the church (Revelation 12), is contrasted with false

^{28} Banks, 53.
The Church in Descriptive Figures

believers and enemies of the true church, represented by the harlot (Revelation 17). Through these vivid images the church receives the assurance that as the Lord’s bride she will be presented to God and will live with Him for eternity.

This image emphasizes the love that Christ, the bridegroom, has for His church. She belongs to Him and He will not forget or forsake her. But it also points to the church’s obligation to respond to God with faithfulness. Both Paul and Revelation use the figure to show that what the church believes and how she acts matters. The bride must be pure in her response to the divine husband’s love. The overwhelming privilege of love demands an appropriate response.

A Composite Portrait

We will attempt, now, to summarize the major emphases contained in the preceding images; but we do so with the full realization that such a propositional, left-brain list can never replicate the images themselves. It is one thing to consider rationally such a list; it is quite another to experience the NT metaphors and feel the excitement of a wedding as one worships, or sense the gentle arms of a shepherd as one is nurtured by fellowship with other believers. The metaphors are simply not replaceable. And yet with this in mind we can try to observe the most important directions to which they point. These have been limited to four.

Heaven’s Solidarity With the Church

First, these images point to God and Christ’s solidarity with the church. Pictures of “husband” and “shepherd” show Christ’s love for and commitment to the church. The image of “temple” speaks of God’s presence with the church. And metaphors like “body” and “flock” reveal the church’s total dependence upon Christ.

As we have seen, the images have a dual focus. They point to the nature of the church, but they also point to the character of Christ at the same time. Thus they testify to the close connection between ecclesiology and Christology. The flock is connected with the shepherd, the bride with the bridegroom, the body with its head, the temple with its cornerstone, the kingdom with its king, etc. There is solidarity between Christ and church.

Unity of the Church

Second, virtually all of these figures emphasize the solidarity of believers with each other. They portray a unifying fellowship that transcends distinctions of race, social standing, and gender and provides bonds even closer than those
of family. Whether the picture in view is people, body, family, or flock, this sense of community appears to be much stronger than our typical experience of church and worship today. Members, even in their diversity, are committed to each other and rejoice or suffer together. Of course, a letter like 1 Corinthians shows us that the picture points to the ideal and was not always experienced as reality in the early church.

Mission of the Church

Third, these images challenge the church to responsibility and mission. The church is to be a pure and faithful wife. Every member of the body has his or her unique gifts and work to do. Its leaders are to replicate the care given by the Lamb-Shepherd.

Destiny of the Church

Finally, several of the pictures portray the destiny of the church. The church exists within the present world but transcends it by living according to values that differ from those of the world. In doing so the church is a community of hope, already anticipating the coming kingdom and the eternal city.

Notice that these symbols or figures say little about the structure and polity of the church, nor do they spell out a specific regimen for worship. They point rather to the church’s character and spiritual experience and leave Christians a large amount of freedom in organizing themselves in ways that will actualize this experience.

Contemporary Images of the Church

It is inevitable that the contemporary church will use images that come from its own culture in order to aid its self-understanding. Some of these will be the self-conscious metaphors of theologians who write about the church, while others will be the spontaneous figures of speech that grow out of the common experience of believers.

Strengths/Weaknesses in Noninspired Models

Theologians have discussed various models of the church, evaluating their adequacy. For example, Ralph Martin contrasts the Protestant view of the church as "lecture room" with the Catholic view of the church as "theater." 29

29 Martin, 112-14.
Vernard Eller wants believers to see the church as a caravan on a journey, not a commissary that dispenses salvation. He presents other contrasting images. The church should not be like the Royal Vienna String Quartet offering a professional performance for people to come and watch, but should be more like a barbershop quartet, where believers come for fellowship and participation.

Avery Dulles offers a whole book on models of the church. He includes the church as institution, mystical communion, sacrament, herald, and servant, and suggests seven criteria for evaluating ecclesiological models. They should be (1) based in Scripture (2) and the Christian tradition, (3) have the capacity to give members a sense of corporate identity and mission, (4) foster virtues and values admired by Christians, (5) correspond with contemporary Christian experience, (6) exhibit theological fruitfulness, (7) and enable Christians to relate to those outside their own group. The models must then be blended in a complementary way that recognizes their tension, according to Dulles.

I would like to suggest that there is a legitimate place for nonbiblical models and images, but that these models must be evaluated in relationship to the four directions outlined above toward which the biblical images point. The most adequate models will be those that portray the largest number of these directions and that portray them most clearly. Images must be considered inadequate, or even dangerous, if they run counter to any of these directions.

Take, for example, Eller's contrast between the Royal Vienna String Quartet and a barbershop quartet. Certainly Eller is right; the barbershop quartet image is better because it represents the direction of fellowship. But even its adequacy is limited in that it fails to picture any sense of mission and responsibility. Perhaps a better image would be that of a singing band, where people come together and sing not only for fun and fellowship, but to bless others as well.

I propose that we keep these four directions in view whenever we use models or images for the church and evaluate the adequacy of these images by their correspondence with the four directions.

Case Study: Corporation Model

Let us look at one example of how this criterion might work. Probably no contemporary model of the church is more popular than that of the "corpora-
A whole cluster of specific images grows out of this general model, which has influenced our language, and thus our thinking, in varied ways. Church members are "stockholders," church leaders are "CEOs" who "manage," and the gospel is a "product" to be "marketed," to name but a few.

Yet, when the image of the corporation is weighed against the four directions presented above, it strikes out on several counts as an adequate picture for the church. Even though it might be said to portray people with a mission (the selling of a product), the modern corporation is a very poor model for any kind of solidarity and community. Workers are laid off at will, the high-level mergers and takeovers preclude any picture of commitment, security, or unity. Nor is the corporation an exemplary model of living by a scale of values that goes against the grain of the prevailing culture. The corporation often exemplifies greed and materialism.

In this sense the corporation, like the earthly kingdom, might serve as a kind of anti-image of the church, but only if we are very clear that we are dealing with contrasts, not comparisons. Thus, by our criterion, this image must be viewed as a dangerous one that might lead the church away from its biblical calling. In fact, the subtle influence of such a popular but misleading model might end up being more dangerous than doctrinal heresy because it is both imperceptible and pervasive.

**Conclusion**

The only safe ground for the church is a firm biblical foundation. Even though many of the biblical images do not speak to us as directly as they did to the first hearers, teachers and preachers can educate the church by making these images come alive so that they are sensed and felt and touched as well as understood. We don't live in a society filled with temples, nor do most of us encounter flocks of sheep on a daily basis. But there is enough commonality with our experience that worship and preaching can make the images live so that they move us and draw us toward a vision of the church that is biblical.

Preachers and worship leaders should also be encouraged to create contemporary images that are consistent with the directions of the biblical images. Images are powerful. A few words in a worship service can stimulate imaginations and help believers experience the reality of being a community in solidarity with Christ and each other.

We cannot return to the world of the NT. For most of us, our worship experience will not be in a small house church, for instance. And that is all right. We don't have to worship exactly as they did in the first century to be
authentically Christian. Yet no one can deny that we have plenty of room to grow in the directions that the biblical images would point us. Too often we try to produce that growth by scolding and intimidation, which only creates guilt and discouragement. But images have a power to inspire and motivate. If we can make them live today they will draw us toward solidarity with God and each other, as well as toward a sense of mission and destiny.

---

Bibliography


Michel, O. "*Naos*." 4:880-91.


