

Lesson 3  
THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH  
BASED ON DESCRIPTIVE TERMS APPLIED TO THE CHURCH

INTRODUCTION:

- 1) As noted in the first lesson, the Messiah has a people.
  - a) God's covenant is made with a chosen people; his kingdom rules over a faithful and obedient people.
  - b) This lesson will expand on the meaning of the covenant people in Christ.
    - i) We will consider first descriptions that emphasize the community or corporate aspect of the people of God in Christ.
    - ii) We will then consider images of the church drawn from the natural or physical world.
- 2) Of first importance, it must be noted that the characterizations of the church in the scriptures bring it into relation to deity.
  - a) Some bring it into relation with God the Father – people of God, Family of God.
  - b) Some bring it into relation with to Jesus Christ – body of Christ, vine, sheep.
  - c) Some bring it into relation with the Holy Spirit – community filled with the Holy Spirit, temple in which God dwells through the Holy Spirit.
- 3) All of the principal descriptions of the nature of the church give prominence to Jesus as Lord over the church.
  - a) If the church is the people of God, it is the people of God *in Christ*.
  - b) If the church is the community of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is the gift of the *resurrected Christ*.
  - c) The figures of speech that relate the church directly to Christ give him the preeminence.
    - i) He is the whole body, or where distinguished from the body, he is its head.
    - ii) In the family of God, he is the elder brother, the Son over the household.
    - iii) He is the husband of the church, his bride.
    - iv) He is the vine and the rightful heir and representative of the owner of the vineyard.
    - v) He is the shepherd of the sheep and that gate into the sheepfold.

- vi) He is the cornerstone of the new spiritual temple in which God dwells by the Spirit.
- vii) The church is the assembly of God's people gathered in Christ's name.

BODY: Descriptive Terms Applied to the Church.

- 1) Descriptions that emphasize the community or corporate aspect of the people of God in Christ.
  - a) The People of God.
    - i) As we learned in the first lesson, this is a term that emphasizes continuity with the Old Testament.
      - (1) To be the people of God carried the promise that he would live among them (Lev. 26:11-12; Ezek. 37:27).
      - (2) The description "people of God" defined the character of the people and identified who was their God.
    - ii) The Greek word for "people" is *laos*, from which English derives the word "laity."
      - (1) In modern usage we contrast the laity with the professionals.
      - (2) In the Bible, the *laos* is the whole people, not a part (not even the largest part).
      - (3) In reference to the church, this is a chosen people, a people with special status and dignity because of their relationship with God.
      - (4) The people is a priesthood (1 Pet. 2:9), not contrasted to it.
    - iii) The most important thing said about this people in 1 Pet. 2:10 is that it is God's. See Titus 2:14.
      - (1) The defining characteristic of this people is that it is the "people of God."
      - (2) Divine possession is their peculiar, distinguishing feature.
      - (3) The accent falls on God's creative activity, his choosing, his saving work, his possession (1 Pet. 2:9).
      - (4) He is the one who made it a people (1 Pet. 2:10) and not just a collection of individuals or a group organized around a false or lesser principle.
      - (5) There is much concern today about what gives a person identity; for the church, identity comes from belonging to God.
    - iv) Implications of being the people of God.

- (1) The church must be separated from the conduct characteristic of the world. Since you are God's people (2 Cor. 6:16), therefore you must live as God's people (2 Cor. 6:17) in order truly to be God's people (2 Cor. 6:18).
  - (2) To be the people of God gives a sense of importance and purpose to life.
  - (3) The church can never be merely a free association of likeminded religious individuals.
    - (a) It is not a democracy.
    - (b) Persons sometimes try to make a congregation into their own image.
    - (c) Instead, they need to be fashioned into the image of Christ.
  - (4) There are false (and potentially sinful) principles of unity around which people organize themselves.
    - (a) Persons find their sense of identity from citizenship in a nation, being of the same race, sharing a certain occupation or economic status, adhering to a particular political doctrine, participating in a certain social class, sharing the same level of educational attainment.
    - (b) The church is intended to transcend all of these bases of unity.
    - (c) True peoplehood is to be found in God through Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11).
- b) The Body of Christ.
- i) There was a people of God from Abraham; there is a "body of Christ" only after the resurrection.
  - ii) Body of Christ in Romans and 1 Corinthians.
    - (1) Paul initially used the body imagery in order to deal with the plurality of individual members who together are part of a corporate whole.
    - (2) The same themes found in Romans 12 are more fully developed in the letter to Corinth (1 Cor. 12:12-27).
      - (a) In 1 Cor. Paul elaborates on what it means to be united to Christ as he expresses concern for the community as a whole (1 Cor. 12:12).
      - (b) In Romans he says that Christians are one body; in 1 Cor. He says that Christ is the body and Christians are the members of the body.
      - (c) Unity is presented first; the body is one.

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- (i) The oneness includes diversity.
  - (ii) Each member has a different function, each function is necessary, and each part needs the others.
  - (iii) Instead of dissension there should be mutual care for one another.
- iii) The Head and the Body in Colossians.
- (1) Colossians (and Ephesians) identifies the church with the body of Christ, but unlike Romans and 1 Cor. Colossians (and Ephesians) calls Christ the “head” of the body.
    - (a) When we read “head,” we tend to think of the physiological function and anatomical importance of a body’s head, or we think in figurative terms of a “head of state.”
    - (b) Neither approach comports with Paul’s use.
  - (2) In Jewish corporate personality, the head stood for the whole.
  - (3) The distinctive use in Colossians is seen in 1:15-20, which proclaims the superiority of Christ over the cosmic powers.
    - (a) In Hebrew and in Greek, one meaning of the words for “head” was “beginning, origin, or source.”
    - (b) That seems to be the meaning in Col. 1.
    - (c) This understanding gains support from the other reference to the church as a body in Colossians (2:19).
    - (d) Growth of the body derives from its head, the source here of sustenance as well as of life.
  - (4) The church has its point of origin in Christ.
    - (a) It takes its rise from the saving work of Christ.
    - (b) The crucifixion made him the foundation of the church.
  - (5) The remaining use of the word “head” in Col. (2:10) contains the idea of preeminence or authority, and that is the meaning of headship in Ephesians.
- iv) The Head and the Body in Ephesians.
- (1) Colossians emphasizes the preeminence of Christ; Ephesians emphasizes the importance of the church.
    - (a) Even with the exalted view of the church in Ephesians, the superiority of Christ in this book is even greater.
    - (b) One meaning of the word “head” was first in rank, leadership, or authority.
    - (c) That meaning coincides with what is said in Ephesians about Christ as head of the church.

- (2) Ephesians states some of the same ideas about the body found in Colossians and 1 Corinthians.
  - (a) There is one body (Eph. 4:4).
  - (b) In the one body both Jews and Gentiles are reconciled to God (Eph. 2:16).
  - (c) Christ saves the body (Eph. 5:23).
  - (d) We are members of his body (Eph. 5:30).
  - (e) The church grows as the whole body works properly (Eph. 4:16).
  - (f) Christ is not only the source of the growth, but is the goal of the growth (Eph. 4:15).
  - (g) He is the head of the church (Eph. 5:23).
  - (h) His treatment of the church is the model of leadership for husbands in relation to wives (Eph. 5:23-30).
- v) These passages about the church as the body of Christ indicate that the church is more than the sum of its human parts.
  - (1) The church has a prior reality in Christ, and that is the spiritual, heavenly dimension of its being.
  - (2) Christ exists before the church, and the church comes to existence through incorporation into him.
  - (3) The church exists as Jesus Christ exists, but he does not exist only as the church exists.
  - (4) As an earthly entity, the church is the people; but it is a people with a divine origin in the call of God, a supernatural basis in the redemptive work of Christ, and a spiritual life from the Holy Spirit.
- vi) Titles shared by Christ and his body.
  - (1) Chosen or elect. Luke 23:35; 1 Pet. 2:4; Rom. 8:33; Titus 1:1; 1 Pet. 1:1-2; Rev. 17:14.
  - (2) Holy. Acts 3:14; 4:27; Rom. 1:7; 16:15; 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 5:3.
  - (3) Beloved. Matt. 3:17; 17:5; Rom. 1:7; Eph. 5:1; Rom. 9:26-26; Col. 3:12; 1 Thess 1:4; 2 Thess. 2:13.
- vii) Importance of these shared titles.
  - (1) These shared titles indicate that Christ's people share his messianic dignity.
  - (2) The church is the messianic people.
  - (3) The church as Christ's body becomes attached to him, incorporated into him.

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- (4) Thereby, they become what he is – chosen or elect, holy, and beloved.
- viii) Implications of being the body of Christ.
- (1) The church is where Christ is, where he is preached and confessed, where he is working and obeyed. Christ is the creating and sustaining force of the church.
  - (2) The reverse side of this is that Christ is present in the church. Such is the closeness of solidarity of Christ with his people that they are assured of his presence in their corporate life.
  - (3) Christ is greater than the church. He is not confined to the church; he is not necessarily where a “church” is. Christ is the only indispensable “part”; indeed, he is the whole.
  - (4) Christ is the central reality of the church. The church is made up of those who take their life from him. Christ’s people find meaning and existence from him.
  - (5) There is no salvation outside of Christ (Acts 4:12; Eph. 5:23).
  - (6) The church is a people, nothing more or less, but a particular kind of people – the saved or redeemed people, the people of God in Christ.
  - (7) The church develops in obedience to Christ (Eph. 4:15). It is always subordinate to him in “all things” (Eph. 1:22f).
  - (8) There is only one body (Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12). This means that within the body there is to be no discord (1 Cor. 12:25), and there is to be sympathetic interest and mutual care (1 Cor. 12:26). Nearly all of the references to the church as a body have the theme of unity.
  - (9) Christ’s presence in the world is represented by his people. The church continues the ministry of Christ in the world. [This will be discussed more fully in a later lesson.] The different functions in the body represent a diversity contributing to unity (1 Cor. 12:28-30). Each member has a contribution to make to the growth of the whole (Eph. 4:16).
  - (10) The church is important (Eph. 1:23; 2:16; 5:23), as important as one’s body is to oneself. The imagery emphasizes the social solidarity and priority of the group. Even as one cannot understand the human body by starting with the individual parts, so one cannot understand the church by starting with the individual Christians. This imagery coincides

with the other descriptions of the church in calling attention to is “corporate” nature.

- c) The Community of the Holy Spirit.
- i) The new age of the Holy Spirit was heralded in the ministry of Jesus.
- (1) The Holy Spirit was active throughout the life and work of Jesus, and he fully possessed the Holy Spirit.
  - (2) As the Messiah sent by God, Jesus “speaketh the words of God: for he giveth not the Spirit by measure” (John 3:34).
- ii) The Spirit in the life and work of Jesus.
- (1) The birth of Jesus was accomplished by the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:18, 20).
  - (2) The Holy Spirit came on Jesus at his baptism (Matt. 3:16).
  - (3) The Holy Spirit launched Jesus’ ministry (Luke 4:1, 14) and set the character of that ministry (Luke 4:18, quoting Isa. 61:1).
  - (4) Jesus’ miracles, especially his control over evil spirits, were performed by the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12:28).
  - (5) The resurrection was by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 1:4; 8:11).
  - (6) Jesus gives the Holy Spirit. During his ministry Jesus gave the disciples power (Mark 6:7) but not the inner presence of the Spirit. By the resurrection, he became a life-giving spirit (1 Cor. 15:45; John 7:38-39). In his capacity as Messiah, Jesus bestowed the Spirit on his disciples (John 20:22; Acts 2:33).
- iii) The Holy Spirit in the Church.
- (1) The Spirit is the life of the church.
    - (a) If the church is the body of Christ, the Spirit of Christ is the life of the body.
    - (b) Just as a body without the spirit is dead, so without the Holy Spirit there would be no church, no community at all.
  - (2) The church, however, was not first a body into which God poured the spirit as the living content.
    - (a) To the contrary, it was the coming of the Spirit that created the church (cf. Acts 2 and 11:15).
    - (b) As Jesus was born of the Holy Spirit, so was the church.
  - (3) The Spirit is not like a contractor who builds a house and leaves it for new owners.
    - (a) Indeed, unless the Spirit takes up residence and fills the vacuum left when sin is forgiven and evil driven out, other evil spirits will fill a person’s life (Luke 11:24-26).

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- (b) So with the Spirit who continues to give life to the church, and that life is the life of Christ.
- (c) The church is the community of the Holy Spirit.
- iv) The Holy Spirit in the life of the church.
  - (1) Baptism. 1 Cor. 12:13; Titus 3:5.
  - (2) Sanctification. 1 Cor. 6:11; 2 Thess. 2:13; 1 Pet. 1:2.
  - (3) Christian growth. Gal. 5:22-23.
  - (4) Love. Rom. 5:5; Gal. 5:22.
  - (5) Joy. 1 Thess. 1:6.
  - (6) Morality. 1 Cor. 6:9-20.
  - (7) Serving God. Rom. 7:6.
  - (8) Worship. John 4:23-24; Phil. 3:3; 1 Pet. 2:5; 1 Cor. 14:15.
  - (9) Prayer. Eph. 6:18; Jude 20; Gal. 4:6; Rom. 8:26.
  - (10) Preaching. 1 Thess. 1:5; 1 Pet. 1:11; Eph. 6:17.
  - (11) Guarding the truth. 2 Tim. 1:14.
- v) Implications of being the community of the Holy Spirit.
  - (1) The church as the community of the Spirit practices spiritual unity. It is united because members possess the same Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13).
  - (2) The church as the community of the Spirit recognizes the equality of believers, since they all possess one and the same Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13). The diversity of function in the body does not exalt one part above others.
  - (3) The church as the community of the Spirit is the foundation for Christian ethics and discipline (1 Cor. 6:1-20; Gal. 6:1).
  - (4) The church as the community of the Spirit has but one Teacher (Matt. 23:10). The churches must hear what Jesus, through the Spirit, says to them (Rev. 2-3). Christ is the source of revelation and truth (John 14:26; 16:13-15).
  - (5) The church as the community of the Spirit must test the many spirits that are at large in the world (1 John 4:1). Not every claimed manifestation of the Spirit is the work of the Holy Spirit of God.
- 2) The Nature of the Church in Terms of Certain Human Experiences.
  - a) The Family of God (1 Tim. 3:15).
    - i) “House” referred not only to the dwelling place but also to the dwellers in the building, the “household” or “family.”
      - (1) This usage for the church is found not only in 1 Tim. 3:15, but also in 1 Peter 4:17, where the household of God is “us,” and



- Hebrews 3:2-6, where Moses is contrasted as a faithful servant in God's house with Jesus as the Son over God's house, "whose house are we."
- (2) "Household" seems to be the primary imagery for the church in Hebrews.
  - (3) The members of the household (Eph. 2:19) share a common faith (Gal. 6:10).
- ii) According to this family imagery for the church, God is the Father over his house; indeed, he is the source and pattern of human fatherhood (Eph. 3:14-15).
- (1) Although there is a sense in which he is the Father of all (Eph. 4:6; cf Acts 17:28), the usual biblical language speaks of him as Father in relation to his spiritual children (John 1:12-13; 1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18).
  - (2) For them there is access to him as Father in prayer (Matt. 6:6-9; Rom. 8:15); to them he gives his love (1 John 3:1); to them he gives his fatherly provision (Matt. 7:7-11) and fatherly discipline (Heb. 12:4-11).
- iii) Another family image used to describe the relationship of God with his people is that of husband and wife.
- (1) This imagery is used frequently by the Old Testament prophets for God and Israel (e.g., Jer. 2:2; Ezek. 16:8-14; Hos. 2:1-31).
  - (2) The bridal imagery is appropriated in the New Testament as a description of Christ as the bridegroom and the church as his bride.
    - (a) This teaching is most extensively developed in Eph. 5:22-33, where the loving care and leadership of Christ is matched by his people's response of submission and desire to please him.
    - (b) The relation between Christ and the church is presented as the model for human marriage.
  - (3) For those who must give up their earthly family in order to follow Jesus or to proclaim the gospel, he makes the promise that in this life they will receive a hundredfold – "brothers and sisters, mothers and children" (Mark 10:29-30). These are the "brothers and sisters" in the family of God by reason of possession of the same Spirit of God (Rom. 8:14-16; Gal. 4:5-7)
- iv) Christ as Son and Christians as Children.
- (1) Christ is the son over his father's house (Heb. 3:6).

- (a) He was declared the Son of God at his birth (Luke 1:35).
  - (b) His sonship was declared again at his baptism (Luke 3:21-22).
  - (c) The title is especially associated with Jesus' resurrection and exaltation (Mark 14:61-62; Acts 13:33-34; 1 Thess 1:10).
  - (d) He was designated "Son of God" by the resurrection through the Spirit (Rom. 1:4).
- (2) Christians are children of God by adoption (Gal. 4:4-6).
- (a) This sonship is accomplished by faith and declared at baptism, when the Spirit is received (Gal. 3:26-27:4:6)
  - (b) The designation of Christians as children of God is not associated with natural birth, but baptism, the new birth (John 3:5); thus, the association of Jesus' sonship with his birth and his baptism is combined in the case of Christians with their baptismal new birth.
  - (c) Baptism is also a resurrection (Col. 2:12).
- (3) Sons are heirs. Thus in the parable of the wicked tenants the son of the landowner is designated the heir, and the tenants kill him in order to obtain the inheritance (Mark 12:6-7).
- (4) An inheritance to be received is a normal corollary of the language of sonship or children.
- (a) The children of God are "heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:15-17).
  - (b) The child of God is an heir of God (Gal. 4:5-7).
  - (c) This is because of identification with God's son himself (1 Cor. 1:9).
  - (d) Christians possess the inheritance because of their incorporation into Christ.
- (5) Through incorporation into Christ his people become what he is, in this case "sons of God" or "children of God" (Gal. 3:26-27).
- v) Brothers and sisters of Christ.
- (1) Jesus declared that his true family was not his mother and brothers according to the flesh, but those who do the will of his father (Matt. 12:46-50).
  - (2) "The brothers" became a common designation for the Christian community.
  - (3) The term identified a sense of family solidarity among those not related by blood.

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- (4) God is not ashamed to be called their God (Heb. 11:16).
- (5) Christ is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters (the plural includes “sisters”) (Heb. 2:11).
- b) Agricultural images.
  - i) The Vine and the Vineyard.
    - (1) Solidarity and union between Christ and his people are expressed in Hebrews by sharing the same flesh and blood, in 1 Cor. and Romans by the body, is expressed by John under the imagery of the vine (John 15:1-11).
      - (a) The body has many members; the vine has many branches (better, perhaps, “twigs”).
      - (b) Jesus is the whole; his disciples are part of him.
      - (c) He exists without his disciples, but his disciples cannot exist apart from him (John 15:2, 4-6).
      - (d) All the twigs together do not make a vine; only as joined to Christ and receiving nourishment from him will they bear fruit.
    - (2) Jesus drew on this imagery in three of his parables.
      - (a) The laborers in the vineyard (Matt. 20:1-16).
      - (b) The two sons (Matt. 21:28-32).
      - (c) The rejected tenants (Matt. 21:33-46).
  - ii) The Sheep and the Sheepfold (John 10:1-18).
    - (1) The description of people as sheep is not at all complimentary, but the point is not to describe human nature but to affirm something about God.
    - (2) As a shepherd cares for his sheep, so God cares for his people. (Ps. 23; 78:52; 80:1; Isa. 40:10-11).
    - (3) John 10:1-18 identifies Jesus in several roles related to the sheep in addition to the good shepherd who gives his life for the sheep.
      - (a) He is the door or gate to the sheepfold (John 10:7-10) through whom one must enter for protection and go out for pasture. Only through Jesus is there entrance into the safety and security of the sheepfold.
      - (b) He is the shepherd (John 10:11-18) who leads and knows the sheep and whose voice they know (John 10:2-5).
    - (4) This theme also emphasizes unity – there is to be one flock and one shepherd (John 10:16-18).
- c) An Architectural image.

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- i) A building (1 Cor. 3:9).
  - (1) While the word “church” in the Bible refers to a people, not a building, the church is compared to a building.
  - (2) In comparing the church to a building, Paul compares his work to that of a “skilled master builder” who laid the foundation on which other preachers had built (1 Cor. 3:10; cf. Rom. 15:20).
  - (3) The unique foundation of this spiritual building is Christ (1 Cor. 3:12; cf. 2 Tim. 2:20-21).
  - (4) Christ promised to “build” his church (Matt. 16:18).
  - (5) That the imagery of the foundation can be applied to Jesus (1 Cor. 3:11), the apostles (Rev. 21:14), and the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20) is a reminder that illustration can be used in different contexts to teach different lessons without being contradictory.
  - (6) Individual Christians are the stones built on Jesus, the living stone (1 Pet. 2:4-5), to make a spiritual house.
- ii) The Temple.
  - (1) The building to which the church is most often compared is the temple.
  - (2) The significance of temples was that they were the house of deity.
  - (3) The thought of Christ’s body as a temple is the basis for the description of the church as a temple.
  - (4) The words of Christ that he would build another temple not made with hands (Mark 14:58) parallels the promise that he would build his church (Matt. 16:18).
  - (5) The imagery of the temple is frequently applied to the church.
    - (a) 1 Cor. 3:16-17 refers to the local church as the temple of God.
    - (b) The climactic statement on the church as the temple of God is Eph. 2:19-22.
      - (i) Once more the emphasis is on the people – “citizens” and “members of the household.”
      - (ii) Only now the church is viewed as universal, not local.
      - (iii) The unity is that of races, Jews and Gentiles.
  - (6) God meets people in forgiveness in the church.
    - (a) The tabernacle and then the temple was the place of the sin offerings and where the people received forgiveness (Lev. 4-5; 16).

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- (b) The church is the community of the saved, the people who receive, proclaim, and live by the reconciliation effected by Christ.
- (7) The passages on the church as a temple emphasize that it is God's.
  - (a) The church as a temple is connected with the presence of God (2 Cor. 6:6-18, of Christ (Matt. 18:20), and of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16).
  - (b) God dwells there, and that makes it holy.
  - (c) Christ is the cornerstone of this new temple.
  - (d) The indwelling of the Holy Spirit has moral and doctrinal consequences about conduct and unity.
  - (e) Individuals in the church are living stones in whom the divine presence dwells and so must conduct themselves accordingly.
  - (f) The church as the temple is where believers experience the presence of God.