

Biblical Pictures of the Church

I. A collage of pictures

- What is the church? God answers with metaphors: pictures of what his church is like.
- Method: put all of the pictures together to make a collage. Then we can see the glory of the church from all the angles God has revealed.
- Some of the pictures reveal whole storylines.

II. The pictures

- The church is God's kingdom (Matt 13:47).
 - Each Christian is a citizen of the kingdom of God (Phil 3:20). Jesus is the king.
 - People from all nations can be citizens (Ps 87:4–6; Eph 2:19).
 - We are stewards of God's land: the glorious country which is the new Jerusalem (Deut 8:7–10; Ps 48).
 - Related metaphors: church as nation (1 Pet 2:9), city (Ps 48; Rev 21:2).
 - Practical payoffs: honoring Jesus as king over every other authority; unity of believers across international borders; Jesus renews all of life.
- The church is a company of sojourners in a foreign land.
 - We are exiles and strangers (1 Chr 29:15; Heb 11:13; 1 Pet 1:17; 2:11). We don't belong in the old creation city (Babylon), which is doomed to destruction (Rev 18).
 - Related metaphors: church as God's holy colony on earth (1 Cor 15:49), God's chosen remnant from a lost humanity (Rom 11:5).
 - Practical payoffs: not confusing the country of our sojourning (the USA) with our true country; longing for our new creation home.
- The church is God's family.
 - Each Christian is a child (brother or sister). Jesus is the older brother. We are joint heirs of the kingdom (Rom 8:17)!
 - Related metaphor: the church as God's darling boy (Exod 4:22–23; Deut 1:31; Jer 31:18–20).
 - Practical payoffs: we are greatly loved and honored! We should care for each other like family (Acts 2:44–45; 1 Tim 5:3–16). Older saints should act like mothers and fathers to build up younger saints (Tit 2:3–4). We should honor our Father and the stewards of his house (Tit 1:7). No one should feel like an orphan or a barren person (Isa 54:1; 56:3).
- The church is God's bride.
 - Jesus is the groom. The church collectively (not individually) is the bride.
 - Israel committed adultery flagrantly and repeatedly against God, so God divorced her (Jer 2–3; Ezek 16; 23). But God caused both husband and wife to die when Jesus died. The church is now raised anew as a spotless virgin (Rom 7:1–4; 2 Cor 11:2). We are engaged to be married and are looking forward to our wedding day on the last day (Rev 21:2, 9).
 - Related metaphors: we are God's inheritance, his treasured possession (Deut 7:6; 26:18; Ps 2:8; 28:9).
 - Practical payoffs: shuddering at the evil of sin (it's adultery against our divine spouse); not idolizing relationships with the opposite sex (sex and marriage are just shadows of the real marriage).

- The church is God's temple, where his glory dwells.
 - Israel became a house that was defiled with false worship. God tore the building down (Jer 1:10), and refounded us in Christ, who is the cornerstone (Eph 2:19–22). We are now under construction; pastors are builders who need to work with good materials (1 Cor 3:10–15). Already the Holy Spirit has come down to fill us (Acts 2). We are the storage place of God's oracles (Deut 17:18–20; 31:26; Rom 3:2; Jude 3); the pillar and support of the truth (1 Tim 3:15).
 - Practical payoffs: a high view of the church; not despising it.
- The church is God's flock of sheep (2 Sam 7:7; Ps 28:9; 79:13; 95:7; 100:3).
 - God is our shepherd. We are not terribly smart. We need constant care. God gives us everything we need and protects us from harm (Ps 23).
- The church is God's beautiful plant: grape vine or olive tree or fig tree.
 - Jesus is the stem or trunk. We are the branches. God planted us in good soil (Jer 2:21; Luke 13:7–9), but Israel did not yield good fruit (Isa 5:1–5; Ps 80:8–13; Matt 21:19). God uprooted Israel and replanted her in Christ as a fruitful vine (John 15), a towering cedar (Ezek 17:22–24), a humble but rapidly growing mustard plant (Matt 13:31–32).
 - We derive our strength from God. We are organically one with each other. Branches that do not bear fruit are cut off (John 15:6). Branches that do bear fruit are pruned (John 15:2).
 - Practical payoffs: sink roots deep into the means of grace (Ps 1:2–3).
- The church is God's army (Num; Josh; Rev 19:14).
 - God/Jesus is the champion who has won the battle (1 Sam 17; Ps 47:3; 60:12). We fight in his victory (cf. WWII after D-Day), with his armor and weapons. He teaches us to fight (Ps 144:1).
 - Practical payoffs: militant mindset: we are at war against the powers of darkness. Until you die, you need to wear (spiritual) combat boots.
- The church is God's choir (Ps 96:1).
 - Jesus is the worship leader (Heb 2:12). We sing in harmony with the church throughout the ages (Rev 5:13; 7:10; 14:3; 15:3).
 - Practical payoffs: sing! We were made for worship.
- The church is God's party.
 - God spreads the feast (Isa 25:6; Luke 15:23). We eat and sing and dance and have a great time (Deut 12:12; 14:26; Ps 23:5; Rev 19:7).
 - Whole-hearted celebration is the only possible response to God's great salvation (Isa 12:1–6; 25:9; 26:1; 27:2; 29:23; 30:19, 29, 32; 35:10; 42:10; 43:21; 44:23; 48:20; 51:3, 11; 52:7–9; 55:12; 61:11; 65:13–14; 65:18–20; 66:14).
 - Practical payoffs: The Lord's Supper is the foretaste of this feast. No moping or being a party-pooper. Death to gnosticism!
- Others to intrigue you: we are God's eaglets (Deut 32:11); God's helmet (Ps 108:8); God's gardeners (Gen 2:15); God's ark (1 Pet 3:20); God's magnificent sash (Jer 13); a basket of delicious figs (Jer 24:1–7). No end to the richness!

III. Reflections and applications

- What happens when a church loses its sense of its glorious identity?
- Why are all the pictures important? How do they balance each other and help us avoid error?