

The Church You Can Read About in the Bible
The Nature of the Church #2
The church is the body/bride of Christ.

Intro: This year one of our themes is "The church you can read about in the Bible."

In our first lesson we looked at what the church is.

In our second lesson we looked at Jesus' promise to build His church.

In our third lesson we learned how people can become a member of the Lord's church.

Now we are looking at the question, "What did God intend that the church be and do?" What was His purpose for establishing the church? What is their mission or work?

One way to answer that question is to look at the way the church is described in Scripture. In our first lesson we saw that it is described as the temple of God.

That designation suggests that:

There is a transition from the physical temple to the spiritual temple in God's overarching purpose.

God is living in us and walking among us as His people.

We must be a unified people.

We must be a holy people suitable for God's indwelling and presence.

We must be a sacrificing people.

The church is also described as the body of Christ.

In Paul's treatise on the purpose of God he shows that the result of God's planning in Christ is the church of Christ. He focuses on the relationship of Christ to the church.

"And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fulness of Him who fills all in all." (Ephesians 1:22-23)

Similarly in Colossians Paul speaks of the reasons for Jesus' preeminence. One of those again is His relationship to the church.

"He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything." (Colossians 1:18)

Paul would apply the concept of the body of Christ also to the local congregation in Corinth.

"Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it. (1 Corinthians 12:27)

He would even take the metaphor down to the individual level to encourage a moral life.

"Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? May it never be!" (1 Corinthians 6:15)

But what does God want to say about the church by calling it the body of Christ?

First it may be helpful to think of the origin of the figure of the church as the body of Christ. Some scholars find the origin of the expression in what they call "corporate personality;" however I would cast my vote for a simpler explanation. It appears to have been formed from the analogy of creation.

In Ephesians 5 Paul presents the fullest development of the church as the body of Christ; and he sees the relationship of Christ to the church as analogous to the relationship of Adam to his wife Eve.

In the garden God formed Eve from the body of the Adam and joined them as husband and wife, causing Adam to refer to Eve as "bone of his bones and flesh of His flesh."

Similarly then the church is the body of Christ, formed as it were from Him and existing as His body/bride.

This leads then to some important concepts about the church.

The church as the body of Christ affirms that Jesus is the loving head and provider of the church.

It pictures Jesus in his role as head and Savior of the church.

"For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. (Ephesians 5:23–24)

It sets forth the loving nourishment and provision that Jesus makes for His church.

"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her; (Ephesians 5:25–26) for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are members of His body." (Ephesians 5:28–30)

The church as the body of Christ affirms that the church is to be subject to Christ in everything.

Just as the body depends upon the direction of the head, so the church depends upon Christ for leadership or direction; and must be subject to Him.

"But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything. (Ephesians 5:24)

The church as the body affirms that He saved us in order to bring us in holiness into His eternal presence.

The church as Jesus' body/bride will at last be united with Him forever in the eternal kingdom; but he seeks a bride that is holy.

"that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless. (Ephesians 5:26–27)

The church as the body of Christ affirms the essential unity of God's people with God and one another.

The very analogy of head and body would suggest a picture of unity. Paul shows us that each of us should seek to be "one" with Jesus.

"FOR THIS CAUSE A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER, AND SHALL CLEAVE TO HIS WIFE; AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH. This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church. (Ephesians 5:31–33)

Though Genesis 2:24 is most naturally understood as describing the union of the husband and wife, Paul indicates that a great mystery is revealed in these words; what Moses wrote would typify the union of Jesus with His body/bride.

They are organically one with Him.

"There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling;" (Ephesians 4:4)
Here is God's answer to denominationalism--not many competing and differing organizations; but one body consisting of all the saved.

They are spiritually one with Him.

Last week Alex read to us the high priestly or intercessory prayer of Jesus. Remember again Jesus' prayer:

““And the glory which Thou hast given Me I have given to them; that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, that the world may know that Thou didst send Me, and didst love them, even as Thou didst love Me.”
(John 17:22–23)

The church as the body of Christ means that each member understands the need to love all other members and fulfill their God-given role in the body.

Paul would enlarge upon the concept of the unity of the body by making this very point to the Corinthians. Their disunity and competitive spirit was the exact opposite of what the image of the body would suggest. Paul wrote:

"For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing,

where would the sense of smell be? But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. And if they were all one member, where would the body be? But now there are many members, but one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; and those members of the body, which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our unseemly members come to have more abundant seemliness, whereas our seemly members have no need of it. But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, that there should be no division in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it." (1 Corinthians 12:12–27, NASB)

The church as the body of Christ means that the church is a means of Jesus' continuing presence on earth.

If we are the body of Christ, then we are in a real sense the instruments by which Christ works in this world.

"Now if Timothy comes, see that he is with you without cause to be afraid; for he is doing the Lord's work, as I also am." (1 Corinthians 16:10, NASB)

If we are the body of Christ, then our sufferings fill up the measure of His sufferings.

"Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body (which is the church) in filling up that which is lacking in Christ's afflictions." (Colossians 1:24)

It would appear Paul could think of himself as a member of the body of Christ, experiencing the sufferings of Christ that remain for His church.

Conclusion: The description of the church as the body of Christ will give us real clarity about the nature of the church--what it is to be and do. The church shows an understanding of its nature when we submit to Jesus as head, carrying out His work, loving and caring for one another as members of His body.