

Ecclesiological Metaphors Then and Now

When New Testament writers speak about the community of those who put their faith in Christ and join together in fellowship, they use metaphors and picture language far more than explicit, propositional instruction.

This brief paper will explore these metaphors and pictures and show that their basic contour suggests church as a worshipping community of believers committed to each other, to God, and to God's kingdom. It will then turn to contemporary images used both consciously and unconsciously for the church today, and ask whether these are consistent with the New Testament images.

New Testament Images

Numerous studies have explored the use of images for the church in the New Testament. Probably the most extensive is Paul Minear's monograph, originally published in 1960 and republished in 2004.¹ He 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 this monumental work. Judgments differ as to which of these images is most important. Some point to the "body of Christ" figure as most important, whereas Kung holds that the "people of God" is primary,² and Banks makes "family" "the most significant metaphorical usage of *all*."³

Of course, even the word "church," which is used to translate the New Testament term *ἐκκλησία* (*ekklesia*) itself is in some sense metaphorical. In Greco-Roman usage it referred to any group of people gathered together for some purpose. This secular usage is preserved in the New Testament by Luke in Acts 19. Twice he refers to the rioting crowd as *ekklesia* (19:32, 41), and once he uses the term for the legal assembly that will be required to resolve the problem.⁴ Even though the term "church" has become a designation for us, obviously its semantic domain was both

¹ Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, forward, Leander E. Keck (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004).

² Hans Kung, *The Church*, Trans. Ray and Rosaleen Oekenden (New York, 1968), p. 119-120

³ Robert J. Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting* (Grand Rapids, 1980), p. 53.

⁴ The common homiletical practice of drawing lessons from the etymology of being "called out" is never explicitly mentioned in the New Testament and does not seem to be part of NT thought. As is usually the case, usage is more important than etymology.

more diverse and more pictorial within the New Testament. We, for example, would never use the term to refer to a group of rioters on the street, and New Testament readers would never have thought of *ekklesia* as a building or a complex organizational structure. The translation “church” therefore hardly conveys what New Testament readers would have pictured by the term. Perhaps “congregation” or even “gathering” would be a translation closer to the original.

In a previous paper I explored various New Testament images for the church and came to the conclusion that if images are limited to those which (1) have multiple attestation by more than one author, (2) are explicitly used for the post-resurrection community, and (3) have at least one extended treatment within the New Testament, the primary images break down into three categories as follows:⁵

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)

In an excellent major study in AUSS, John McVay, president of Walla Walla University, suggests five “clusters” of biblical metaphors:⁶

Corporal:

The Church as Body

Architectural:

The Church as Building/Temple

Agricultural:

The Church as Plant/Field/Vineyard/Vine

⁵ John C. Brunt, *The Church in Descriptive Figures*, Presented to the Biblical Research Committee and available on the web at https://adventistbiblicalresearch.org/sites/default/files/pdf/Brunt-church_in_Descriptive_figures_0.pdf.

⁶ John K. McVay, “Biblical Metaphors for the Church and Adventist Ecclesiology,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 2, (2006), p. 285-315.

Martial:

The Church as Army

Familial and Marital:

The Church as Family and Bride

Some of the New Testament metaphors for church really serve as anti-metaphors. For instance, when the church is seen as an army, the emphasis is on the contrast between typical armies and one that makes faith its shield the Spirit its sword (Ephesians 6:11-16). Even the image of Kingdom of God, which in the New Testament is never identical with the church, contrasts God's people with the typical kingdom, for in God's kingdom the leaders don't lord it over their subjects but serve them (Mark 10).

In my earlier study I concluded that these metaphors in the New Testament point to four main emphases about the church. First, they point to solidarity between God and the people of God. God comes to dwell with them. They are a body whose head is Christ (and only Christ) and a temple where God lives.

Second, there is unity among believers in Christ. Walls between Jew and Gentile are broken down. Although there is diversity, the diverse members of the body function in harmony. God's people are fellow-citizens and family. When we think of Richard Rice's trilogy of believing, behaving and belonging, there is a strong emphasis on the belonging aspect and being part of a family.⁷

Third, the church has a mission to make disciples. The army metaphor points to this, as well as explicit instruction such as Matthew 28:18-20. Also the body metaphor is tied to Paul's advice about spiritual gifts and the need for each to be involved in service, although not all in the same way.

Finally, metaphors such as citizen and kingdom point to the transcendent and triumphant future of the church. The church is not in its final form on this earth. The bride is making herself ready for something more. Yet the present life and worship of the church already anticipates and participates in this future.

Within the scope of this paper we can take time to look at only one illustrative passage. It is one that mixes several metaphors, yet all of them are held together by pictures of family and belonging. The passage is Ephesians 2:19-22. The metaphors include church as a community of citizens, church as household, church as building, and church as temple. But notice that all these metaphors utilize words that have the οἶκος root which means "house" or "home."

Ephesians 2:19-22

⁷ Richard Rice, *Believing, Behaving, Belonging: Finding New Love for the Church* (Roseville, CA: The Association of Adventist Forums, 2002).

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens (παροικοι), but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household (οικειοι) of God, built (εποικοδομηθεντες) upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure (οικοδομη) is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together (συνοικοδομειθε) spiritually into a dwelling place (κατοικητηριον) for God.

As you can see, although the metaphors are mixed, words with the same root are used throughout to tie them together so that the dominant metaphor here is home or household. Jews and Gentiles, who were alienated, now come together in one household, built into a common home (building), which turns out to be a temple, made of people rather than stones, where God dwells among them.

Contemporary Images

Given both the evocative power of images (they cannot be translated fully into propositions) and the distance between our present culture and the cultural situation of the New Testament, (even a familiar picture like “home” was very different in the first century world) it is inevitable that we will create our own metaphors from our cultural situation to help us understand the complex nature of the church. These fall into two categories: images that are consciously posited and those that become part of the unconscious language of Christian discussion of the church.

Some theologians have specifically encouraged thoughtful attempts to think of new metaphors. For example, Ralph Martin contrasts the Protestant view of the church as "lecture room" with the Catholic view of the church as "theater."⁸ Vernard Eller wants believers to see the church as a caravan on a journey, not a commissary that dispenses salvation.⁹ 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 gathering of barbershop quartets, where the goal is fellowship and participation.¹⁰ Avery Dulles offers a whole book on models of the church. He includes the church as institution, mystical communion, sacrament, herald, and servant and argues that these models must then be blended in a complementary way that recognizes their tension.¹¹

⁸ Ralph P. Martin, *The Family and the Fellowship: New Testament Images of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 112-114.

⁹ Vernard Eller, *The Outward Bound: Caravaning As the Style of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 11ff.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21ff.

¹¹ Avery Robert Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1978), p.198-199. Dulles suggests seven criteria for evaluating ecclesiological models.

In addition to explicit suggestions for contemporary models or metaphors, there is the common language used by church leaders and members that suggest, often without conscious reflection, our understanding of what church is. In fact, there is a circular dynamic at work. The language we use demonstrates our view of what church is all about, but the use of that language also reinforces our thinking and helps create reality. Therefore it is important to consider our unconscious ecclesiological images.

As I listen to the language of church members and hear professionals at pastoral conferences, I notice that most images and metaphors cluster around two aspects of American culture: business and entertainment. One need only measure the amount of space given to these two elements of our culture in the *Los Angeles Times* each day to know how much they influence our thinking. Thus it is not surprising that when we think of church the language of business and entertainment/media is prominent.

First consider the language of business. A decade ago there was much literature on marketing the church. Today the emphasis has changed to “branding” the church. Recently we had an entire day in our pastors’ meetings on this concept. The idea is that each church has to find its niche, and then brand itself through its publications, graphic design, and even worship language to reflect that brand. If you Google “branding the church” you will get 5,540,000 results. The gospel is the product that is to be marketed through branding. In addition, we increasingly adopt business terms such as CEO, market share, and stockholders in discussions of church. Denominational entities are called “headquarters,” and make “strategic plans” with “KPI’s” (key performance indicators),¹² all terms that come from the world of business.

The language of entertainment is also prominent. Members now often refer to the front of the church as the “stage.” As more and more churches live stream services the language of the studio is increasingly heard. In one church where I preached recently my instructions called for me to meet in the “green room” at a given time

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.

¹² The strategic plan voted at the 2014 Annual Council for the five year period of 2015-2020 includes over 60 KPI’s such as, “Each conference, mission, and region outside the 10/40 window has a five-year plan for achieving a 30% increase (over five years) in the number of new groups of believers.” *Reach the World: Proposed Strategic Plan 2015-2020*, (Silver Spring, MD: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2014).

for “make up” and a review of the “script” by the “production manager.” And although this was a large church, I had a similar experience in a 100 member church.

How do we determine whether the language that reflects these images is helpful or dangerous? Obviously no metaphor is perfect, and there are aspects of church that are analogous to both business and entertainment.

Yet when compared to the basic contours of the New Testament images, these two clusters of images have problems. Though the corporation 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, and mergers and takeovers preclude commitment, security, or unity. Nor is the corporation, which so often exemplifies greed and materialism, an exemplary model of living by a scale of kingdom values. I suspect that our business images of the church cause most members to give far more importance to corporate church structures and distant administrators than they deserve, and correspondingly less significance to people gathered as a praying, worshiping community in family-like fellowship.

Likewise there are dangers in the language of entertainment. It suggests worship as a spectator sport where a few worship players entertain the audience. The “mediaization” (to coin a word) of the church goes against the values of solidarity, unity, and mutual cooperation in mission to which New Testament images like family and body point. With the prominence of media and entertainment images and language it is hardly surprising that every week there are people who call around to various churches to see who is preaching and what musical features there might be so they can choose the best Sabbath morning show for the week.

I have a twofold plea. First, let’s pay more attention to our metaphorical language about church and make sure it reflects and helps create a reality that is consistent with the basic contours of the New Testament images. Second, let’s be creative in thinking about new images and metaphors that might help us reflect and create a reality that is keeping with New Testament values of God’s presence, unity, mission and journeying toward God’s ultimate vision.

I asked several fellow pastors to try creating their own metaphors for what church ought to be. Their suggestions varied from a spiritual Starbucks, Alcoholics Anonymous, the “hood” or barrio, and a continuation high school, to a Cheers-like bar where everybody knows your name and their always glad you came. I challenge you to try and create your own metaphors that might be helpful in communicating what church ought to be.

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