

Systematic Theology
Defining the Church (Part 2)
Selected Scriptures
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Well, it's already been a wonderful evening of music as well as baptisms. I hope you rejoice in God's work in these lives. You know, it is just an incredible display of the grace of God to cause a person dead in sin to come to the reality, by the work of the Spirit of God and the Word of God, to come to the reality that they are dead and for the Spirit of God to bring new life into that heart. Well, what a wonderful way, really, to continue our study of the church. Because what we witnessed tonight in the waters of baptism was the reality that God continually adds to His church.

I want to begin this evening by turning to Ephesians 3. Turn to Ephesians 3. I read this portion of Scripture last Sunday morning for our Scripture reading. But I just want to remind you of what Paul says in this truly provocative passage of Scripture. Paul says that he has been given a stewardship, and that stewardship is of a mystery. In biblical terms a "mystery" is something that was once hidden but now by the grace of God, by the power of God, through the Word of God, has been revealed. And Paul says here's the essence of the mystery: it is the church. Notice verse 8:

To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, [I wish we could stop there and take a look at the majesty of that word "unfathomable". Can't be "fathomed", it's "too deep", the "riches of Christ"] and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; [and now he gets to the punchline. Verse 10] so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church....

Here's the mystery. This new creation of God called the church in which Jew and Gentile together come in one body to worship one God, through their common Lord Jesus Christ. Notice who the display is for. To whom does God display this great wisdom in the church? He displays it, verse 10 says, "... to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly *places*." God sets the church on

display as a way to show His glory to heavenly beings. “*This was* in accordance [verse 11] with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord....”

Folks, you and I as part of the church are part of an amazing display, a display designed in eternity past to shower the magnificence of God not just in this world, not just to our neighbors and friends and family, but across the universe to every intelligent being. James Boice, in his commentary on this passage gives me this quote, listen carefully. He says,

“God’s will for you and me is to be the agents of His wisdom, to show that truly we are the capstone of His creation, that men may behold us as the masterpiece of God. We have been redeemed with such a salvation that in the midst of a sinful and crooked world, we can become the sons of God without rebuke, demonstrating the marvelous salvation of which we speak. [Now listen to the person that Boice is quoting] That we may become, as it were, the picture book, [that is, we the church may become the picture book] leading people to the written Book, that they by the Holy Spirit might come to know the Living Book, even Jesus.”

You see, it’s through the church that God puts His glory on display in the world. And because the church is such an important part of the plan of God, because the church matters so much to God, it is foundational that we as believers really understand what it is.

Last week we began our discovery of exactly what the church is, seeking to define the church by looking at the key words. We began by taking a look at the English word, “church”, the Scottish and German, similar words. Those words come from a Greek word, “kuriakon” or “kuriokos”, which you can recognize “kurios”, which is the Greek word for “Lord”. Literally, “kuriakon” or “kuriokos”, rather, means “to belong to the Lord”. The church adopted this as the name of the place they met because they said when we gather together it’s such a holy place that it belongs to the Lord. That’s where the English word “church” has been transferred down to us.

But then we looked, more importantly, at the Greek word in both the Old Testament in the Septuagint, as well as in the Greek New Testament. It’s the word “ekklesia”. It means to “call out” or “to summon”. It means essentially “an assembly”, that’s the key part of the definition, an “assembly summoned or called together”. Now when you look at how that word is used throughout the NT, we basically said there are two primary meanings in the New Testament of “ekklesia”. First of all, it is used to refer to the local church, a local assembly, or assemblies, of

all who profess faith in the Christ of Scripture. And secondly, it's used of the universal church that is, of all professing believers everywhere, the whole body of Christ redeemed.

Theologians sometimes further divide and define universal church by two other terms: visible and invisible. By "visible", they mean all believers everywhere, as we see it. And of course that can include both true and false believers. Every church, every gathering or assembly of professing believers contains both true believers and false believers. There is such a faith, as we learned in James 2, as dead faith. A faith that says, "Yes I believe Jesus is who He said He was, I believe that He did what He said He did, and I believe that believing in Him brings life." But a faith that leaves the life unchanged is not a true saving faith; it is a dead faith and a damning faith.

And so, another category is the invisible universal church. And that is the universal church as God sees it. And that includes only true believers. You see, God has the capacity to look at our church as we gathered, the assembly, and know those who are truly His. So, that's the background of our discussions tonight.

But another way that the New Testament writers, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, help us to comprehend the nature of the church is not only through the key words, but through a number of profound pictures or images. They say a picture is worth a thousand words, and the Scripture is filled with pictures to help us understand exactly what this is, this thing called the church. We know now it's an assembly of people who profess faith in Christ. But there are these pictures. The primary images that Scripture uses to picture the church, and this is definitely not an all-encompassing comprehensive list, it's the list of the ones I hope to touch on, most of them next week and one of them tonight.

We're told that the church is a body, that it's a bride, that it's a building or a temple, that it's a flock of sheep, that it's a household or a family, that it's a royal priesthood, and that it's the pillar and ground of the truth. Tonight, as I said, and next Sunday night, I want to look at those images to see the nuances of meaning that belong to each because it will take our definitions of an assembly of professing believers and fill it out, so that we understand even better what this thing is called the church in the New Testament.

But before we begin to look carefully at one of these metaphors tonight, let me lay down for you some basic ground rules. It's important for you to understand as we look at these metaphors, how to think of them and how not to think of them. First of all, understand and always remember that

God intends all of these images to remind us that the church does not, in fact cannot, exist separate from Christ. Each of these pictures reminds us of a particular way in which we are related to God. But that relation is always in and because of Jesus Christ. So understand these images as we see them will be intimately tied to the Person of Jesus Christ, because we're only an assembling that belongs to God because of the work of Jesus Christ.

Just to make this clear, the church, for example, is called a bride. But the church can only be called a bride because of the nature of her relationship to whom? To Christ, her Bridegroom. All of these images come back to Christ. C. W. Bromley writes,

Christ can never be exhausted by any one description and therefore there is room for a wealth of varied imagery. Christ is the true reality and therefore it is in Him, rather than its faltering and passing manifestation, that the true reality of the church is to be found.

Secondly, if we're going to understand these metaphors, this is very important. Don't just pick one of these metaphors as your primary way of thinking about the church. The church is the church, that's the main New Testament word for it, "the assembly". That's who we are, we're the assembly. And each of these images is intended to add another part of the picture. In the genius of the Holy Spirit, He's provided us several different images that, taken together, give a comprehensive view of the nature of the church.

When I was out in California in the late 80's, I was tasked with the responsibility of overseeing a magazine, *Masterpiece Magazine*, some of you may have seen it. It was a great joy of mine to do that. And part of my responsibility as the managing editor, in addition to working to pull together the articles and editing them and doing all of those things to get it ready for publication, part of my responsibility was inspecting the final product at the printer, as it came off the press, to make sure the registry was right, that the colors were perfectly laid down on the paper so that there was no fuzziness, that we were getting what we paid for from the printer.

On a four-color press, and some of you are familiar with this, on a four-color press there were at that time, the way they did it before the digital age, there were four plates and each plate laid down a different color of ink on that paper. And as the paper ran through the press, the next plate laid down its color over the top of the color that had been laid on by the blanket before. Now if you were to examine a sheet of that print, that newsprint that had run through that press, and only one color had printed, you would get a distorted view of the images on that page; because the

real four-color image was made up of each of those colors, and it could only be seen in its true high-definition when all colors were present. That's how these metaphors work. If you merely look at the church as one them, you miss the magnificence and beauty of how the church is to be seen. We must look at them all together to understand what God intends for us to see. No one image is sufficient to get a complete picture of the church, but together they give us an accurate view or image of what the church is.

Thirdly, remember that these are in fact, metaphors. The church is not a literal body, for example. It's not that the church is one thing when you read the Scripture, and the body of Christ is something else. Instead, the reality of the church, the reality of the assembly, somehow corresponds to or shares characteristics of a human body. Taking you back to your English classes, or perhaps in some cases, if you grew up in places like I grew up, maybe you didn't have an English class that taught this, but when you have a metaphor, the first question you should always ask is, what is the point of similarity? You have a topic and you have an image. The question to interpret a metaphor accurately is to ask, what is the point of similarity between them.

For example, I often use the illustration of Jesus says of Herod, "Go tell that fox..." Herod is the topic, fox is the image. Now the question that you and I have to ask ourselves is: what is the point of similarity? What does Herod and a fox have in common? A long, red tail? You know, you understand, we make that connection immediately, because that's an obvious one. But when you see a metaphor, that's what you're asking. What is the point, or the points of similarity? And when you see these metaphors, understand that's what the writers of the New Testament are doing, they're giving us a picture. So your question should be, what does a body have in common with the assembly of believers?

Finally, number four, don't think of these images as only temporary and fading. But they are forever accurate ways to understand the reality that is the church. Not only are they true today, not only do they accurately describe the relationship that we have to each other and to Christ today, but they will always describe that relationship accurately. They are not temporary and passing, but they are permanent pictures of the reality that is the church. Now, with those ground rules laid down, let's look at these images. Tonight we're going to, so to speak, lay down one color on our press sheet. Next week, Lord willing, we'll lay down several more and by the time we're done, you'll be able to see the full picture that God intended for His church to have.

Tonight, I want us to look specifically at the major image the New Testament uses, the favorite metaphor of the Apostle Paul, and that is to describe the church as the body of Christ. There's been a great deal of conjecture about where Paul got this metaphor. Obviously it was inspired by the Spirit of God, that may explain it entirely. But there seems to be some connection to what Jesus taught about the Lord's Supper. You remember in 1 Corinthians 10:16 and 17, Paul says in interpreting Christ, he says, when we drink together of the cup, we share in the body of Christ. When we eat of the bread, it's as if we share in the body of Christ. It's very likely that this image of the church as a body grew out of that teaching.

Let's look first at the metaphor itself. The church, of course, is likened to a human body. It's used two different ways in the New Testament. It's used as a body in which Christ is the Head, and each individual Christian is some other part of the body. So that's one way it's used, and this is the way it's used most frequently. So, you'll read passages that make it clear that Christ is the Head, for example, Ephesians 1:22 and following says that "He ... gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body...." So, the picture is, Christ is the Head and the church as the rest of the body, us individually as members, parts of His body.

You see it again in Ephesians 4:15, He's the head. Colossians 2:19, some don't hold fast to the Head. So, Christ is portrayed in this metaphor as the Head, and each Christian as a member. First Corinthians 12:27, "... you are Christ's body, and individually members of it." The way this image works is each of you who are true believers, each of us who really belong to Christ, are part of, we occupy some part of, the body of Christ. Again, remember this is an image. We're going to talk about how it applies here in just a few minutes.

Another way the metaphor of a body is used, not only with as Christ as the Head, but us as the rest of the body, but it's also used with the church as the whole body with each Christian representing different members, including the head. Primarily, this use comes in 1 Corinthians 12, where Paul says "you've got an eye and a head, and feet and they're all representing us as individual Christians." So you see both of those pictures, but you get the point. That's the metaphor.

Now, what does this metaphor mean? What are we talking about when we say the church is the body of Christ? Well, if we're saying that the universal church, those who are truly Christ's own, all of those who are His own, can be compared to His body in which each one serves as a part or a member. First Corinthians 12:12,

... even as the body is one and *yet* has many members, [speaking of our human bodies] and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, [it's the same way with Christ, in His body, he says] ... For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free ... we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Notice here how it is that we become a part of the body of Christ. How do you, and how do I become a part of Christ's body, or part of the church? Notice, Paul says we are baptized into that body, and the implication here is that at the very moment of salvation. This isn't talking about water like we did tonight; this is talking about a spiritual reality in which we are baptized into the body of Christ. Ephesians 1:23,

... [God] put all things in subjection under Christ's feet "... and gave Him as Head over all things to the church, which is His body...."

Colossians 1:18 makes, of course, the same point. In this way, we can say each congregation, Or, let's back up and put it this way, the universal church, all true believers everywhere, are Christ's body, and each congregation, or local church can be likened to a local manifestation or expression of the body of Christ with each Christian serving as a part or a member. Understand, by the way, it's not that churches are part of Christ's body. Members of the body as it occurs in the New Testament are always individuals. First Corinthians 12:27, "... you are Christ's body, and individually members of it."

Now, what's the message? What's the importance of all of this? Why even use the image? What is he trying to tell us? This is where we get to the points of similarity. What is it that he wants us to learn about the similarities between a human body and the church, called the body of Christ? Well, first of all, as the Head of the church, Christ provides authority, leadership, and direction in the same way that your head provides leadership and direction to the rest of your body. This point is driven home again and again in the New Testament.

But let me have you turn to Ephesians 1:22. I read it moment ago, but I want you to see it in its context. Paul has just gone through, and it's my hope that when we finish James we're going to come to Ephesians. That's what I'm thinking at this point. But Paul has just come through this amazing first chapter where he's talked about all of the spiritual blessings that are ours in Christ, because we belong to Christ. And he's praying for us, verse 18, that the eyes of our heart would be enlightened, that we would understand the hope of the calling we have, that we'd understand

the riches of the glory of the inheritance that's ours, that we would experience the strength of His power in our lives.

And then he says this in verse 22, God "... put all things in subjection under ... [Christ's] feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church..." As Head over all things to the church. Paul wants us to understand in this metaphor of a body, that Christ is the unrivaled, unequaled, unchallenged Leader of the church. He is its Head, as you and I have a head that directs the rest of the body with what it ought to do. Messages, as you know, humanly speaking, messages in the pathway of our nerves are sent out from the brain to the rest of the body to tell it how to function. This is the image, the message that Paul wants us to get.

Turn to Revelation 1. You see this sort of fleshed out in the life of the apostle John. You remember John was the last living apostle; he's been banished to the isle of Patmos. I've had the privilege to visit there. Probably to work in the salt mines, he's an old man at this point. Probably in his eighties and Jesus appears to him. Notice in verse 12,

[When] ... I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the middle of the lampstands *I saw* one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to [His] feet, ... girded across His chest with a golden sash.

And he goes on to describe the glory of the risen Christ as will soon become obvious to him. But notice the reality behind the picture that he saw, the vision that he had. Verse 19,

[Jesus speaks to John and says I want you to] "... write the things which you have seen ... the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things. As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, [Jesus says, those represent the messengers] ... of the seven churches..." [Probably the leaders of the seven churches of Asia Minor, actual local churches in Asia Minor.]

And Jesus says, "I hold in my hand the leaders of those churches." And He says, "and the seven golden lampstands are the seven churches. And I'm walking among them because I am their Head, I am their Leader, and therefore," He says, 'I want you,' verse 1 of chapter 2, "To the... [messenger] of the church in Ephesus write [this] ..." And it goes through all seven churches with the same formula. Jesus says, "I am the Head, I have every right to direct the assembly of

believers, those who call themselves by My Name, as I choose.” He is Lord, Master, Sovereign of the church.

And He exercises His authority in two ways: through His Word, and through the leaders of the church, the divinely appointed leaders in His church, or elders. Hebrews 13:17, the writer of Hebrews puts it this way, “Obey your leaders and submit *to them*, for they keep watch over your souls [listen to this] as those who will give an account.” An account to whom? An account to the Head, an account to the One who gives directions. When you and I read in the Scriptures about this body, this picture of the church, understand that part of what that is emphasizing is Christ has every right to tell you and me what to do. And He mediates that rule through His Word and through the leaders of the church. Obviously, my authority as an elder stops here with the Word of God, as well.

There’s a second part of the message I think we learn from this image of a body, the church as a body. Since we are fellow members of the body, we are united and therefore, we must strive for real unity. Now I don’t have time here to touch on bigger issues like denominationalism and all of that, maybe at some point we’ll do that, we probably will. But here I’m talking about us right here together. As a local manifestation of this reality of a body we are to strive for unity. Turn to 1 Corinthians, 1 Corinthians 12. We’re going to come back to this chapter several times because here Paul is laying down some foundational teaching about the role of each individual in the church. He’s going to use that foundation to correct the abuse of tongues in chapter 14. But the foundational teaching here in 1 Corinthians 12 is absolutely essential to understand. Notice verse 13. He says, “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.”

He says “Listen, like it or not, you’re connected to me, and like it or not I’m connected to you.” Just as the parts of your body cannot go AWOL from the rest of your body. They can’t say, “I don’t like being here, I don’t like being part of this mess, I’m out of here.” We’re connected, that’s the image of a body. Turn to Ephesians 4 and you’ll see this same picture, the same point, I should say. Ephesians 4:4,

There is one body and one [Holy] Spirit, just as ... you were called in one hope of your calling; [There wasn’t different plans God has, there’s] one Lord, [One Master, one Sovereign] one faith, [That is, one body of doctrine we’ve come to embrace] one baptism, [Probably a reference to believer’s baptism, you saw

witnessed tonight. And] one God and Father of [us] all who is over all and through all and in all.

The point is, we are united, we're in the body, we're connected to everybody else who's in the body. And notice how he applies this. Go down to verse 16, "... from whom [That is, from Christ] the whole body, being fitted and [joined together, or] held together by [that] whichever joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love." How is it, folks, that we are to pursue and maintain unity? Notice verse 16 again. "... from whom ..." That is, from Christ the body is fitted and held together.

The implication here is that while there is a very practical way we're held together we'll talk about in a moment, ultimately Christ Himself unites us, He compacts the members together. Our unity is not an artificial one imposed from the outside. We are part of a single organism that is vitally connected to Christ our Head. But notice the means Christ uses to bring unity. Look back at verse 16, from Him "... the whole body, being fitted and held together [held together how?] by what every joint supplies...." You see, the unity comes as each of us do our part, fill our role as the assignment that we have received in the body.

Let's hurry on. The third message that comes from this image of a body, the church as a body, is that the spiritual growth of the church will resemble that of a human body. Back here in Ephesians 4:12, notice that just as Paul says God gave, or Christ rather gave some as apostles and some as prophets and some as evangelists, and some as pastor-teachers, here are gifted men given to the church, notice the purpose for which they're given. Verse 12, for, here's the reason they were given to the church by Christ "... for the equipping of the saints...." Listen, my job and the job of the elders of this church, is to equip you. We'll come back to this, but our job is to equip you, notice how he continues in verse 12, "... for the work of service...."

The whole idea of a clergy and a laity, with the clergy doing all the work and the laity coming in each week and enjoying the fruits of it, is out of step with the reality of the New Testament and the image of the church as a body. Listen, I'm just a part of the body like you are. But my job as part of the body, and the elders' job as a part of the body, is to equip you to fill your function in the church, or in the body. And you see that same image of growth, by the way, back down in verse 16, the body's held, fitted together by what every joint supplies and as every part works in its proper way it "... causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love." It's only as your body, every part of it functions as it ought, your human body, that it grows. Some of you

have bodies that work very well. But the same thing is true with the church. Only as every part supplies what they're supposed to supply does the body grow as it ought to grow.

Just a couple of more. When we look at this image of a church as a body, understand that it portrays the importance of our depending on one another. In 1 Corinthians 12, turn there for just a moment. I mentioned to you that we'd turn there again, 1 Corinthians 12:25. He says God has put the body together in such a way, verse 25, "... so that there may be no division in the body, but *that* the members may have the same care for one another."

In Ephesians 4:25, we're told not to lie to each other, not to practice falsehood. Why? Because we are members of one another. Imagine your eyes lying to the rest of your body on purpose, so you'll fall for example. It's ridiculous. That's what Paul is saying. We are so interconnected that we have to care for each other; we have to depend on each other. Turn to Romans 12, and you'll see this very clearly. Romans 12:5. Verse 4 says,

For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, [And watch this] and individually members one of another.

Just as members of the church we are connected to Christ, we are also intimately connected to each other. And the image of the body is supposed to remind us that we must be dependent on one another. We must lean on each other, we must serve one another, we must gain strength from each other.

Number five, the picture of a church as a body, with a great variety of parts, reminds us to appreciate the diversity of strengths and gifts in the church. Look here in Romans 12, where you already are, at verse 4.

For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we [in the same way ... have different gifts.] Verse 6, Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us....

God didn't assign the same role to every part of your human body. Every part of your human body has a different role to play. And we appreciate that diversity. I'm glad that I have a liver and not two stomachs, and you are too! And we are supposed to appreciate that diversity not

only in our human body, but also in the church. Appreciate the fact that you're not, that everyone else is not like you. We're all supposed to fill different roles.

And finally, understanding the church as a body, that we've been sovereignly placed in the body, that we're supposed to fulfill a particular function, should motivate us to fill that role. I encourage you, I wish I had time, my time's gone, but I encourage you to read 1 Corinthians 12. Because in 1 Corinthians 12, Paul reminds us that we each have been placed as He desires, as the Spirit desires, to do a particular function. And the differences that exist were assigned by the Spirit of God.

So, here's the application. If you were to look at 1 Corinthians 12:14 to 19, Paul says don't undervalue the gifts, the skill set God has given you, the role, if I could put it that way, that God has assigned you in the body. Don't undervalue that. You play an important role. If you're doing what you've been gifted to do in the church, whatever it is, it's important, just as every part of your human body is important. And in verses 20 to 25, Paul says, "Oh, and by the way, don't undervalue the giftedness of others. Don't imagine for a moment that because you're the mouth," I resemble that remark, "that you don't need the feet." Understand that this was God's sovereign purpose.

Your body, it's an amazing creation. There's some 200 bones that make up your body, 18% of your body weight; 600 muscles, that's about 40% of your body weight; your brain, just its outer surface, has 8 billion cells. You have sets of organs that work in various capacities. The largest organ that you and I have is our skin. If we could take it off and lay it out flat on a surface it would cover about 20 square feet for about a 150 pound person. You also have a heart that pumps 10,000 times a day; you have a network of nerves that runs for thousands of miles through your body. You have a network of blood vessels that if you could take them and put them end to end, would be about 60,000 miles. That's the miracle of that body that you sit in there tonight, what Paul calls your tent.

At the moment of salvation, you and I who are true believers in Christ were baptized by the Spirit into the church, and it is a living organism every bit as complex and every bit as wonderful as a human body, and more so, because we are the body of Christ. Each of us, individually, is connected to Christ in the same way that our bodies are connected to us. What an amazing reality is the church.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, we thank You for Your great wisdom in not only giving us the clear teaching, but also giving us pictures, images that fill out our understanding of all that the church is. Lord, help us to see how much the church matters to You; that Christ promised He would build His church.

Lord, I pray that You would give us hearts that long to fill the role that You have given us in the body of Christ, which is the church. Lord, help us to love the church, those who make it up. Lord, help us to serve one another and to always remember that Jesus Christ is the Head of His church. Help us to respond in obedience to His Word, as our bodies respond to our heads.

We pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.