



The Church (At our best).

INTRODUCTION

Most people don't have a hard time with Jesus. Sadly, the same cannot be said about the church. There is a chasm between how people perceive Jesus and how they view the church. This is an absolute tragedy. It's an absolute tragedy because the church belongs to Jesus. The church is God's idea and so it will not just be discarded. If the gates of hell shall not prevail against it then our worst won't either. At its best, the church embodies and continues the ministry of Jesus. At its best, the church carries out God's mission. At its best, the church is a worshipping and serving community of love and acceptance and forgiveness making disciples, living out Jesus' teachings. At its best, the church facilitates an encounter with God. It's a refuge of hope. It models a way of life together that attracts, inspires, and influences. What if we embraced more of what we are supposed to be authentically and scripturally?

This Table Talk looks at five major images of the church in the New Testament with two major hopes: First, that exploring them might help us sure-up our own understanding as Jesus followers of what the church is and what it means to be a part of it. Second, that exploring them might help us close the gap between how people experience the church and how they experience Jesus because they are in fact experiencing Jesus in and through his church.

Body

Bride

Temple

Family

Field



The Church

Body of Christ

Opening Prayer

Gracious God, we pray for your Church. Fill it with all truth, in all truth with all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in anything it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ your Son our Savior. Amen

(adapted from prayer by William Laud in Anglican Tradition)

Opening Question: When was a time that you were not able to move or use a part of your body due to injury or surgery? What was that like?

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:12-17; 26-27

Christ is just like the human body—a body is a unit and has many parts; and all the parts of the body are one body, even though there are many. We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body, whether Jew or Greek, or slave or free, and we all were given one Spirit to drink. Certainly the body isn't one part but many. If the foot says, "I'm not part of the body because I'm not a hand," does that mean it's not part of the body? If the ear says, "I'm not part of the body because I'm not an eye," does that mean it's not part of the body? If the whole body were an eye, what would happen to the hearing? And if the whole body were an ear, what would happen to the sense of smell?...If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part gets the glory, all the parts celebrate with it. You are the body of Christ and parts of each other.

Discussion

1. Where have you seen the gap between what people think about Jesus and the church?
2. What resonates with you with the image of church as the Body of Christ?
3. What's hardest to understand about that image?
4. What does it look like for the church to *move* like bodies are designed to do? What happens when we don't?
5. What does it look like for the church to *embody* the presence of Jesus on earth? What happens when we don't?
6. What does it look like for the church to be composed of connected and contributing parts? What happens when we aren't?
7. How might this image help us close the gap between what people think about Jesus and how they experience church?

Big Idea

If the church is to reclaim and live into the reality of being the Body of Christ, we must remember that bodies are designed to move and the church must be moving together on mission for God. Also, just as Jesus embodied God's presence in the world, the church as the Body of Christ must embody the very presence of Jesus on earth now. Finally, the church as the Body of Christ must value and use the unique giftedness of our members (body parts) for full functioning!



THE CHURCH

Bride of Christ

Opening Prayer

Gracious God, we pray for your Church. Fill it with all truth, in all truth with all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in anything it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ your Son our Savior. Amen

Opening Question: What is a vivid memory from either your own wedding or someone else's?

Scripture: Ephesians 5:25-32; Colossians 3:12-14

As for husbands, love your wives just like Christ loved the church and gave himself for her. He did this to make her holy by washing her in a bath of water with the word. He did this to present himself with a splendid church, one without any sort of stain or wrinkle on her clothes, but rather one that is holy and blameless. That's how husbands ought to love their wives—in the same way as they do their own bodies. Anyone who loves his wife loves himself. No one ever hates his own body, but feeds it and takes care of it just like Christ does for the church because we are parts of his body. This is why a man will leave his father and mother and be united with his wife, and the two of them will be one body. Marriage is a significant allegory, and I'm applying it to Christ and the church.

Therefore, as God's choice, holy and loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Be tolerant with each other and, if someone has a complaint against anyone, forgive each other. As the Lord forgave you, so also forgive each other. And over all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

Discussion

1. How does the metaphor of the church as the bride of Christ challenge or resonate with your understanding of the church's identity and mission?
2. What implications does this metaphor have for our behavior and commitments as a church community?
3. What are some areas where the church may have become "unholy married" to other things instead of Christ?
4. Consider the idea of "dressing like Jesus sees us," with qualities like compassion, kindness, and love. How can we intentionally "clothe" ourselves in these virtues?
5. How can we as a church create a community so beautiful in its love and actions that others are drawn to Jesus through us?
6. How might this image help us close the gap between what people think about Jesus and how they experience church?

Big Idea

The image of the church as the bride of Christ reflects an intimate union of self-giving love where there is deep partnership and shared purpose. The image is also a call to faithful living as well as a reminder that the church is not perfect but is being made beautiful by Jesus and called to show forth beauty to the world.



THE CHURCH

God's Temple

Opening Prayer

Gracious God, we pray for your Church. Fill it with all truth, in all truth with all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in anything it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ your Son our Savior. Amen

Opening Question: What makes a place sacred or holy?

Helpful Background: Both the tabernacle (a travelling tent where God's presence dwelt when Israel was in the wilderness) and the temple in Jerusalem were designed specifically to point toward God dwelling with humanity as in the Garden of Eden. The Garden of Eden or God's good creation itself was seen as the original temple, the place where heaven and earth overlapped! (If you have time, it may be helpful to watch the "Temple Biblical Theme" video on The Bible Project: <https://bibleproject.com/videos/temple/>)

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 3:16; 1 Peter 2:4-5

Don't y'all know that y'all are God's temple and God's Spirit lives in y'all?

Now you are coming to him as to a living stone. Even though this stone was rejected by humans, from God's perspective it is chosen, valuable. You yourselves are being built like living stones into a spiritual temple. You are being made into a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Discussion

1. How does the metaphor of the church as God's Temple challenge or resonate with your understanding of the church's identity and mission?
2. Reflect on a time when you felt God's presence in a church community. What made that experience significant?
3. If the temple was a place to encounter God's presence, what are some ways the church helps people encounter God?
4. What are some things that get in the way of the church fostering this holy encounter?
5. The temple was a place for refuge and prayer. What does that look like to be a community of refuge and sanctuary?
6. God gave the blueprints for the tabernacle and temple. Where do we see the blueprints for the church? What would you say are God's blueprints for the church?

Big Idea

Everything about the temple in Jerusalem was designed to point people to the Garden of Eden and the center of God's dwelling with God's people. Jesus redefined the temple as his body, and after his resurrection, the church became God's temple through the Holy Spirit. As such, the church is supposed to be a community where people encounter God's presence. The church is God's design, not humanity's creation and Jesus is both the cornerstone and blueprint. The church as God's temple should also reflect the holiness of the temple by living differently.



THE CHURCH

God's Family

Opening Prayer

Gracious God, we pray for your Church. Fill it with all truth, in all truth with all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in anything it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ your Son our Savior. Amen

Opening Question: What is your “strangest” family tradition or story?

Scripture: Ephesians 2:14-22

Christ is our peace. He made both Jews and Gentiles into one group. With his body, he broke down the barrier of hatred that divided us. He canceled the detailed rules of the Law so that he could create one new person out of the two groups, making peace. He reconciled them both as one body to God by the cross, which ended the hostility to God. When he came, he announced the good news of peace to you who were far away from God and to those who were near. We both have access to the Father through Christ by the one Spirit. So now you are no longer strangers and aliens. Rather, you are fellow citizens with God's people, and you belong to God's household. As God's household, you are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

Discussion

1. How would you summarize the argument being made here in this passage?
2. What tension do you imagine behind the scenes between Gentiles (Non-Jew) and Jewish Christians?
3. In the Old Testament, God's family was Israel. How has Jesus expanded this family?
4. How does the image of church as God's family land with you? Is it helpful? Complicated?
5. A sense of belonging to a family can shape identity. How has being part of a church community shaped who you are today? How might it do a better job?
6. The image of church as family highlights the church as imperfect but a place to learn love. How does being a part of a church teach us how to love better?
7. The church as God's family should bear resemblance to Jesus. How might the church better reflect his life and character?
8. Baptism into God's family means committing to one another in love. How might this challenge the way you interact with church members...even ones different than you?

Big Idea

From early on in the Bible, God demonstrates a desire to use family as a part of God's mission. Israel, though failing and dysfunctional at times, is described as God's family. Jesus expands this idea of family through his life, death and resurrection to include Gentiles too. As God's family, the church should be about open and formative belonging. Though broken (just like families are), the church does teach us how to love better. And, if the church is God's family, then we should bear a family resemblance to Jesus in our life and practices!



THE CHURCH

God's Field

Opening Prayer

Gracious God, we pray for your Church. Fill it with all truth, in all truth with all peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in anything it is amiss, reform it. Where it is right, strengthen it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ your Son our Savior. Amen

Opening Question: If you had a farm, what would be your main crop?

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Brothers and sisters, I couldn't talk to you like spiritual people but like unspiritual people, like babies in Christ. I gave you milk to drink instead of solid food, because you weren't up to it yet. Now you are still not up to it because you are still unspiritual. When jealousy and fighting exist between you, aren't you unspiritual and living by human standards? When someone says, "I belong to Paul," and someone else says, "I belong to Apollos," aren't you acting like people without the Spirit? After all, what is Apollos? What is Paul? They are servants who helped you to believe. Each one had a role given to them by the Lord: I planted, Apollos watered, but God made it grow. Because of this, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but the only one who is anything is God who makes it grow. The one who plants and the one who waters work together, but each one will receive their own reward for their own labor. We are God's coworkers, and you are God's field, God's building.

Discussion

1. What resonates with you with the image of church as God's field?
2. What problem is Paul confronting using this image for church? Where do you see this playing out today?
3. What does it look like, as the church, to trust that "God gives the growth?"
4. Have you ever been part of a church community where you felt genuine spiritual growth? What contributed to that experience?
5. What does it look like for a church to be "fertile soil" for people to put down roots and bear fruit?
6. What kind of fruit does a healthy field that is church produce?
7. It was Jewish law for farmers to leave the edges of fields unharvested to provide space for the vulnerable to partake and participate in God's blessings and provision. What might this look like for the church as God's field?
8. Is your church a place where vulnerable people feel welcomed and provided for? How do you know?

Big Idea

Fields were essential to life in the ancient Near East. The Bible frequently uses agricultural imagery—from describing Israel as a vineyard that God planted—to Jesus's parables about the Kingdom as a mustard seed. Paul writes to a divided Corinthian church, using field imagery. As God's field, the church belongs to God who gives growth. The church should also be a place of fruitfulness and life. And, at its best, the church should be with and for the vulnerable and marginalized.



THE CHURCH

(At our best)

Wrap-Up

What is the biggest thing God is saying to you after this study and these conversations?

What are you going to do about it?

What are your next steps?