

## Accidental Ecclesiology

Culture's power to malform Christians is racing at the speed of their internet connection. Our beliefs, affections, and habits are always being shaped. With many Christians neglecting intentional spiritual formation, Scripture and tradition have rarely become the primary sources shaping our theology of the Church or our ecclesiology. The term "ecclesiology" comes from the Greek words *ecclesia* (church/assembly) and *ology* (study of), referring to the study of the Church. In particular, it looks at how we understand the nature and mission of the Church.

All followers of Jesus have some kind of ecclesiology. Unfortunately, our ecclesiology is often accidental. It isn't something we have arrived at with careful study and reflection. Rather, it is something we have assumed and absorbed over the years, dictated by our church and cultural background. Accidental ecclesiology is usually built on our own personal experience instead of the Word of God. As a result, it is never sufficient to offer the kind of resistance needed to fight the cultural pressures driving us toward the wide and easy road.

A submarine needs sufficient counter-pressure to sustain its descent into the depths. Every 10 meters of depth adds another atmosphere of pressure on the sub's hull. At 300 meters, the hull must withstand 30 atmospheres of water pressure, which is about 440 pounds per square inch. The integrity of the hull is essential for survival. In the same way, Biblical ecclesiology offers counter-pressure that helps keep the walls of our lives from crumpling as we follow Jesus together in the world.

As creatures, we inhabit our culture and are being formed by it. As new creatures in Christ, we are invited to follow him as salt and light in our culture. It will be impossible to bring the salty brightness of Jesus to our city if his vision for the Church is secondary to our own accidental ecclesiology. Before we look at Christ's vision for the Church, it will be helpful and sobering to look at some of the cultural forces that shape our accidental ecclesiology.

### 7 Factors Shaping Our Accidental Ecclesiology

#### 1. *Postmodern Epistemology*

Epistemology is the philosophical study of the nature, origin, and limits of human knowledge. What is the difference between justified belief and opinion? In general, postmodern epistemology has shaped our relationship with truth and meaning in profound ways. D.A. Carson writes, "Still, one use of the label 'postmodern' very largely holds the rest of its uses together. This is its use in the field of epistemology. Epistemology is the study of how people know things—or at least of how they think that they know them."

Truth has effectively been relativized and individualized. Telling our own truth and finding our truth has had drastic effects on our participation with the church. An organism and institution that is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets (Eph 2:20) couldn't be more

difficult to stomach for people who each feel the prerogative to define truth on their own terms and who believe any and all truth claims are nothing more than dogmatic power grabs. The apostolic foundation of the Church has definitive substance, and definitive substance is at odds with a choose-your-own-adventure approach to truth and meaning.

Many who still participate in the life of the church, though often nominally, feel free to curate a version of the faith where any truth claim found offensive is cut to make room for a more individualized version of the faith, which often looks more like Frankenstein's monster than the faith once delivered (Jude 1:3). The Church is a mother that often tells us no. She instructs, she disciplines, she guides.

## *2. Resistance to Authority*

The postmodern narrative has generally succeeded in conflating authority with oppression, though much of that narrative was initially a response to structures of authority that had consolidated power in unworthy and corrupt ways. Nonetheless, the idea of authority being nothing more than a power grab, aimed at gaining and maintaining control, can make it difficult to participate in a body with a sovereign head (Eph 1:22), delegated offices (1 Peter 5:1-5), teaching on submission (Heb 13:17), and the infallible Word that is the rule of faith and practice (2 Tim 3:16).

In this moment, it is difficult to believe there is such a thing as good authority that can be used in worthy ways for the benefit of others. Our cultural story has little patience for the claim of Jesus that the great among us will be servants of all (Matt 20:25-28). The very thought that the One who is ultimate authority (John 5:22) might come to be the servant of all while also having the name above all names seems a contradiction too difficult to overcome.

## *3. A Deconstruction Mindset*

In addition, a philosophical movement built upon deconstruction has little in common with the Church Jesus said he would build. Paul wrote to the Corinthians that, according to the grace given him, like a skilled master builder he laid a foundation for the church in Corinth and someone else built upon it (1 Cor 3:10). After decades of deconstruction in culture and in the Church, we have little patience for building anything resembling the institutional life of the Church.

While many missional movements in the church began by deconstructing forms of worship in an attempt to reach non-Christians, the intoxication of deconstruction was too great for many. Forms of worship led to the substance of the faith, and many involved in post-modern missional movements were soon doing their exit interviews for the faith.

The idea that two guys with beards drinking beer forms a church is deconstruction at its finest (and worst). At this point, the helpful teachings of the Reformation on the visible and invisible

Church become unhelpful. It is possible to claim participation in the capital-C Church, while having simultaneously deconstructed the local church to the point of absurdity.

After a couple of decades of deconstruction, Bonhoeffer's words are all too prophetic for our day. "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

There comes a point, and we have reached it, when the essence of the Church, both her form and function, have been so slashed that nothing of the Church remains.

#### *4. Expressive Individualism*

Expressive individualism is perhaps the greatest cultural force shaping our accidental ecclesiology. Today's *summum bonum*, or highest good, that shapes our values and practices is freedom. The freedom that is being sold as "the good life" is radically different than the freedom Jesus offers. Cultural freedom is freedom *from*, and rarely *to*, anything. It is freedom from restrictions, limitations, boundaries, expectations, and commitments. But it is precisely in restrictions, limitations, boundaries, expectations, and commitments that human flourishing is found. The more freedom is pursued as an end in itself, the lonelier and discontent our society grows. We are freed from bondage *to* the Kingdom of God. Freedom from personal restrictions of any kind is incompatible within the common life of the church.

#### *5. Consumerism*

Like toxins slowly leaking into the water table, consumerism is so infused into the fabric of our society we can hardly perceive how deeply it forms our accidental ecclesiology. Church is seen as an exchange of goods and services in the pursuit of personal happiness. Church is a service offered to consumers, and the consumer is always right. We imbibe music, preaching, programs, buildings, and ministries of every kind with little thought to what the Church really is, and our sacred duty as stones in the living temple is forgotten. The focus becomes entertainment, self-help/self-actualization, ease of parking, and a thousand other silly bits of straw that will be burned up.

Much of the religious landscape is dominated by entrepreneurs doing "what works" and consumers buying it, often with little contemplation from either party about what lasts or what is true.

#### *6. Pseudo-Community*

I woke up one day and the core of OKC wasn't the same place it was when I planted Frontline. What was a gritty place had become beautiful. Much of the development of OKC is amazing and

a source of great joy and pride to me as a citizen. I want to grow old and die in OKC and am thankful for much of the resurgence we have experienced in the wake of the OKC bombing.

However, in the beauty there is much danger. You can take a viable shot at a heaven you need no grace to enter, but you might end up with a pseudo community full of beautiful people, in beautiful places, that are interested in the same things you are, all on your own terms. Community becomes based on shared interest and aesthetic appeal. You can come in and out of it on your own terms. When every new cocktail bar and coffee shop puts community in its mission statement, it is easy to forget that Christian community can't be purchased as a \$14 cocktail.

Pseudo community is deeply shaping our accidental ecclesiology. It is not only a lessening of true spiritual friendship, but it is an alternative ecclesia that asks nothing from you but the cost of a craft beer.

### *7. Institutional Corruption and Decline*

The Boomer's children have come of age amidst the decline or collapse of most time-honored institutions. How can you live through the death of your parent's marriage and not have serious reservations about the institution? Fatherlessness has reached cataclysmic proportions. Failures in public education and the crippling cost of higher education have brought about occasional reforms, but mostly just cynicism and mistrust. Our political system has become a parade of narcissistic leaders catering to the fringes on the left and right while the majority of the electorate feels voiceless and disenfranchised. Sex abuse scandals, celebrity pastors, and declining numbers among many denominations help form accidental ecclesiology. Many of the most hostile to the Church have been the ones most hurt inside of her.

Contrary to accidental ecclesiology, the Church matters, and her substance is defined by God and not man.

## **The Church Matters**

### *1. The Church's Builder is Jesus*

And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this **rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.** - Matthew 16:18

He is the builder. This is what Jesus is doing. Certainly not exclusively, but this is the primary means for accomplishing the mission of God. It is a forward movement into the darkness. This is a key element. Jesus is the light that stepped into the darkness. Now His light shines in the darkness through the Church. The implications are huge.

### *2. The Church is the Fullness of Christ*

...that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. **And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.** - Ephesians 1:20-23

The fullness of Christ. What does this mean? Love and power of Jesus is embodied and advanced through his Church. The weightiness of the Church isn't the church itself; it's Jesus. His life, his Death, his Resurrection, his presence.

### *3. The Church Manifests the Wisdom of God*

To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, **so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places** - Ephesians 3:8-10

The great mission of God (to be known and worshipped) is advancing through the Church. The Church is God's great sermon being preached to angels and powers. It's a sermon about love, grace, and power over sin, death, darkness.

## Power of Metaphor

The focus of most studies on the Church is on what the Church does and how the Church does it. In the Reformed tradition, the marks of a true church were defined as pure preaching of the gospel, right administration of the sacraments, and church discipline. That was and is essential for the ongoing reformation and fidelity of the Church. Others add studies on church governance, mission, membership, and flesh out more details on discipleship. This is also incredibly helpful and important. What the church does in gathering and scattering is vital. Working for the “what” of the Church, to be rooted in and shaped by the Word, is non-negotiable. It is also not enough.

Imagine trying to explain the essence of marriage to someone who had never heard about it. They would certainly need to know about communication, intimacy, shared financial stewardship, and the basics of daily partnership. However, it would disconnect the parts from the whole if we were to leave out the profound mystery of a one-flesh union in which two people bring their otherness together to be bound in covenantal oneness. They would need the *why* to give context and weight to the *what*. The same is true for the Church. God’s vision for the Church graciously includes answers to our important “what” questions. His compelling “why” connects and gives greater meaning to what we do in our common life together.

The *why* of the Church brings us into the world of meaning. Without the *why*, the Church will struggle to have a depth of soul. To understand the beauty and importance of the Church, the Bible uses certain metaphors. These metaphors paint a picture of the manifold wisdom of God that is manifested in and through the Church. Facts and concepts often come alive through the use of pictures and poetry. C.S. Lewis wrote, “For poetry too is a little incarnation, giving body to what had been before invisible and inaudible.”

The metaphors God uses for his Church help us see the current reality of the Church, despite her imperfections and frailties, and at the same time they pull us forward into what we are becoming in Christ. These metaphors also shine light on the Church’s identity and the Church’s action expressed from that identity.

Metaphors may create realities for us, especially social realities. A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action. Such actions will, of course, fit the metaphor. This will, in turn, reinforce the power of the metaphor to make experience coherent. In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies... We draw inferences, set goals, make commitments, and execute plans, all on the basis of how we in part structure our experience, consciously and unconsciously, by means of metaphor. – George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*

Even more essentially, these metaphors shine light on the identity and action of the one who is her Head, her Father, and her Comforter.

The revealed secret of God not only concerns the unfathomable majesty of God himself; it also concerns that human society which the triune God elects, sustains and perfects 'to the praise of his glorious grace' (Eph. 1:5). From this there emerge two fundamental principles for evangelical ecclesiology. First, there can be no doctrine of God without a doctrine of the church, for according to the Christian confession God *is* the one who manifests who he is in the economy of his saving work in which he assembles a people for himself. Second there can be no doctrine of the church which is not wholly referred to the doctrine of God, in whose being and action alone the church has its being and action. – John Webster, *On Evangelical Ecclesiology*

Each metaphor highlights the person and work of the triune God and informs and forms the identity and work of God's covenant people.

## Temple of God

The Westminster Shorter Catechism begins with the question, "What is the chief end of man?" The answer: "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." The unique attribute of God's people, surpassing every other mark and attribute, is God himself. God's people are those who know God himself as their life.

I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the Lord their God. - Exodus 29:45-46

God's presence received in reverence and honor is our highest good. His absence is the most acute possible tragedy.

And he said to him, "If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?" - Exodus 33:15-16

At the very heart of God's vision for the Church is his ministry of presence. The Bible is nothing less than the story of God. That story shows God's desire to reveal himself and dwell with his people for their good and his glory. This is a story that is honest about the terror of his absence and the unique and frightening splendor of his presence. There is no more important picture of the unique essence of the Church than the Church as God's temple. In seeing and understanding the Church as temple, we are introduced to God's unique mission and to the core disaster facing humanity, namely separation from our only and highest good, God himself.

### Eden the Garden Sanctuary

The garden of Eden is not viewed by the author of Genesis simply as a piece of Mesopotamian farmland, but as an archetypal sanctuary, that is a place where God dwells and where man should worship him. Many of the features of the garden may also be found in later sanctuaries, particularly the tabernacle of Jerusalem temple. These parallels suggest that the garden itself is understood as a sort of sanctuary. – G. J. Wenham, "Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden" in *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies*

The garden was a place where the gifts of God were enjoyed in abundance. The greatest gift was the Giver himself, who communed in intimate relationship with his people. Genesis 3:8 describes God walking in the garden in the cool of the day. The garden was a place where heaven and earth met and where image bearers and original related to one another in fellowship. God was not cheap or grudging with his presence any more than he was with the gifts he gave. Eden was a garden sanctuary where God walked with man. Adam was to serve as



a sort of kingly priest in the garden sanctuary, offering worship and fidelity to God, and together with Eve carrying out God's mission to fill the Earth with his glory.

Genesis 2:15 says God placed Adam in the Garden 'to cultivate [i.e., work] it and to keep it'. The two Hebrew words for 'cultivate and keep' are usually translated 'serve and guard [or keep]' elsewhere in the Old Testament. It is true that the Hebrew word usually translated 'cultivate' can refer to an agricultural task when used by itself (e.g., 2:5; 3:23). When, however, these two words (verbal [*'ābad* and *šāmar*] and nominal forms) occur together in the Old Testament (within an approximately 15-word range), they refer either to Israelites 'serving' God and guarding [keeping] God's word (approximately 10 times) or to priests who 'keep' the 'service' (or 'charge') of the tabernacle (see Num. 3:7; 8:25-26; 18:5-6; 1 Chr. 23:22; Ezek. 44:14). – G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*

The garden sanctuary of Eden was to be expanded to fill all of the earth with God's glory. His image bearers were to rule as vice regents of God, cultivating and keeping the earth as kings and priests unto God. The earth was to be a garden-city where heaven and earth met. However, Adam failed in his priestly duty to guard the holiness of the garden sanctuary and sided with God's enemy, the serpent.

By obeying the serpent, rather than God, Adam and Eve fail to maintain the sanctity of the temple-garden. Consequently, they are deprived of their priestly status and expelled from the sanctuary complex. No longer do they have intimate access to God; no longer do they live in the garden-temple. All importantly, their actions jeopardize the fulfilment of God's blueprint that the whole earth should become a garden-city. The very ones meant to extend God's dwelling place throughout the earth are excluded from his presence. – T. Desmond Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem*

East of Eden is anything but a sanctuary. Instead of the earth being filled with God's glory and presence, human sinfulness has utterly corrupted every facet of society.

### **Thin Places**

In God's unfolding plan of redemption, he meets the patriarchs in what Celtic spirituality would call "thin places." In these places, the veil between heaven and earth seems thin. With shocking grace, God reveals himself and makes places sacred with his presence. These are not thin places because of unique geography or intrinsic value. They become places where heaven meets earth simply because God condescends to reveal himself in grace.

These theophanies (which means "appearances of God") are moments in redemptive history when God manifests his presence and reveals his purpose. These moments when heaven meets earth help trace the line of God's purpose from the fall to redemption and restoration in Christ. These moments prepare the way for God's unique presence in the tabernacle and temple, and ultimately in Christ and the Church.

After revealing himself to Abram in Ur, God commands Abram to leave his country and kindred and travel to a land God would show him. God promises to bless Abram and make him a blessing, so that all the nations of the earth might be blessed through him. After traveling to the land of Canaan, God tests Abraham on Mount Moriah by commanding him to sacrifice his only son Isaac. After sparing Abraham's son, God again promises to bless Abraham and the world through him.

And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, "By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice." - Genesis 22:15-18

Mount Moriah is a place of presence. Again, like Eden, God comes near to man. It is a place of promise. Though veiled until ultimate fulfillment in Christ, God promises again to bring blessing on a global scale through a human instrument who would fill the earth. It is a place of worship marked with obedience and sacrifice. Both the son, offered and spared, and the ram, offered and sacrificed, foreshadow the temple that would be later built on the same site and ultimately the son who would die on Golgotha.

Again, God draws near and reaffirms his promises to Jacob's father and grandfather to bring a blessing and a filling to the earth through their line.

And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it." And he was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." So early in the morning Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called the name of that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first. - Genesis 28:11-19

The promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are strikingly similar to God's commissioning of Adam and Eve to multiply and fill the earth. Like Eden, Moriah and Bethel become places

enchanted with God's unique presence, though temporarily. Like Eden, Bethel and Moriah become sanctuaries of worship and service to God. Like Adam, the patriarchs serve as representatives of their offspring. Like Adam's commissioning to multiply and fill the earth, the blessing of God's presence is directed outward to the rest of the world.

God created Eden as a garden-sanctuary where his unique presence would abide with his image bearers. Adam was called to function as a king-priest who would represent God in worship and obedience and in guarding and protecting the sacred sanctuary. Both Adam and Eve were called to expand the garden-sanctuary into the rest of God's good creation that had not yet been cultivated. They were called to multiply and fill the earth until all of creation was filled with God's beauty and presence. In their sin and rebellion, they lost their unique relationship with God and were driven from the garden-sanctuary.

God in his grace drew near to the patriarchs. He came to them with his unique presence and power and promised to bring blessing and filling to the world through Abraham's offspring. As the offspring of Abraham grows and multiplies, God abides with his people and relates to his people in the tabernacle—a portable wilderness temple—and in the temple at Jerusalem built by Solomon. We will focus on the temple in Jerusalem.

## **The Temple**

### *A Place of Presence*

As soon as Solomon finished his prayer, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple. And the priests could not enter the house of the Lord, because the glory of the Lord filled the Lord's house. When all the people of Israel saw the fire come down and the glory of the Lord on the temple, they bowed down with their faces to the ground on the pavement and worshiped and gave thanks to the Lord, saying, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever." - 2 Chronicles 7:1-3

### *A Place of Worship*

Then the king and all the people offered sacrifice before the Lord. King Solomon offered as a sacrifice 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep. So the king and all the people dedicated the house of God. The priests stood at their posts; the Levites also, with the instruments for music to the Lord that King David had made for giving thanks to the Lord—for his steadfast love endures forever—whenever David offered praises by their ministry; opposite them the priests sounded trumpets, and all Israel stood. - 2 Chronicles 7:4-6

### *A Place of Sacrifice and Forgiveness*

Then the Lord appeared to Solomon in the night and said to him: "I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a house of sacrifice. When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land. Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayer that is made in this place. - 2 Chronicles 7:12-15

### *A Place of Holiness*

For now I have chosen and consecrated this house that my name may be there forever. My eyes and my heart will be there for all time. And as for you, if you will walk before me as David your father walked, doing according to all that I have commanded you and keeping my statutes and my rules, then I will establish your royal throne, as I covenanted with David your father, saying, 'You shall not lack a man to rule Israel.' - 2 Chronicles 7:16-18

### *A Place of Mission for the World*

Likewise, when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a far country for the sake of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm, when he comes and prays toward this house, hear from heaven your dwelling place and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to you, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and that they may know that this house that I have built is called by your name. - 1 Chronicles 6:32-33

It seems as if the Edenic purpose of God is fulfilled in the building of the temple. As in Eden, God will dwell in the temple with his people, who will worship in holiness. As did Adam in his priestly vocation, the Levites will guard the sanctity of the temple and offer ministry to God and the world. As was expected through the commission to Adam and Eve to multiply and fill the earth, the temple will be a light to the nations, drawing people to God as they see the presence of God with Israel and Israel's unique sanctity as a holy people for God.

As a symbol, the temple perfectly succeeds in pointing beyond itself to Christ. However, it is only as a symbol that it succeeds. Isaiah 1 is one of the many striking prophetic condemnations of Israel's failure. In Isaiah 1, it explains how God's presence has left the temple. God hates their sacrifices, feasts, offerings, and prayers. He hides his eyes from their uplifted hands and closing his ears to their prayers. Jerusalem he now calls Sodom and Gomorrah.

The temple has utterly fallen short and is inherently limited. The sacrifices offered can't remove sin or change the hearts of the sinners. The priests are as sinful as the people. Instead of being a light to the nations, Israel has become just like the nations. Worship is hollow. The temple can't contain God's glory.

But will God indeed dwell with man on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this house that I have built! - 2 Chronicles 6:18

The sacrifices can't perfect the conscience of the worshiper (Heb 9:9). Only the high priest can come into the Holy of Holies and even then, only once a year. Gentiles are on the outside. Women are on the outside. The disabled are on the outside. Limited in space to one city in one nation.

Much of the rest of the Old Testament is filled with prophetic condemnation, exile, and judgement. Yet, in the midst of condemnation God continues to promise to fulfill his purpose to dwell with his people and make the earth his sanctuary. A far better temple is needed.

I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore. - Ezekiel 37:26-28

### **Jesus is the Greater Temple**

Jesus pronounced judgment on the corrupt temple system, which will culminate in 70AD with the literal destruction of the temple. The form and symbol of the temple must give way to the reality: Jesus himself is the temple. He is the person of presence the temple foreshadowed.

So the Jews said to him, "What sign do you show us for doing these things?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking about the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken. - John 2:18-22

Jesus is the ultimate theophany. The thin places of the Old Testament—Sinai, Moriah, Bethel, and the Jerusalem temple—are surpassed in glory and permanence in the incarnation. God has taken on flesh to dwell among us. What was hidden has come to be seen and received. Heaven and earth meet in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He himself is God and perfectly reveals God. He is the greater temple made without hands.

Therefore, not only is Jesus identified with the temple because he is assuming the role of the sacrificial system, but he is also now, instead of the temple, the unique place on earth where God's revelatory presence is located. God is manifesting his glorious presence in Jesus in a greater way than it was ever manifested in a physical temple structure. – G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*

## **Jesus is the Greater Sacrifice**

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God... For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. - Hebrews 9:11-14, 24-26

This sacrifice is greater because of the person sacrificed. This sacrifice is greater because Jesus entered the *true* holy of holies on our behalf, and not a mere copy. This sacrifice is greater because the sacrifice is offered once and for all.

## **Jesus is the Greater High Priest**

This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant. The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever. - Hebrews 7:22-28

Every purpose the temple failed to fulfill comes to fulfillment in Christ. Sinners are cleaned and brought into God's presence. Worship in Spirit and truth is possible. God's mission to fill the earth with his presence and glory finds its eventual fulfillment. The Church is the temple of God, built on Jesus the cornerstone. God is making the earth his sanctuary through Christ and his Church. Ultimately, the new heavens and new earth will be the garden-city sanctuary that Eden was meant to be.

## **The Church is the Temple of God**

The very foundation of the Church is the person and work of Jesus. We exist in and through Christ. The shared identity of the people of God is an identity crafted by his blood. Sacrifice was at the heart of the Old Covenant temple. The cross and resurrection stand at the center of the New Covenant temple. We are people who stand in the costly grace of the cross now and forever. To drift away from the gospel of Jesus is to forget the essence and identity we have received through Christ.

We are baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus. We come to the Table to receive his body and blood. We approach the throne of grace and receive help because the veil of his flesh was torn, giving us access into the holy of holies. A church that departs from the gospel is a church that no longer knows who she is.

The Old Covenant Temple was to be a place of presence, worship, forgiveness, holiness, and mission. The New Covenant temple is a people of presence, worship, forgiveness, holiness, and mission.

### *People of Presence*

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. - Ephesians 2:19-22

Jesus left the Church instructions and traditions, but so much more. The temple and tabernacle were special because of the weight of God's presence. Jesus sent the Spirit to dwell inside of all Christians who, together like living stones, are built into a spiritual house for God. The Church is special because she is the address of the living God on earth. On Pentecost, Jesus sent the comforter to make the Church not just *like* a temple, but truly the temple. Fellowship with God, conviction of sin, power in preaching, the presence of Jesus in baptism and eucharist, gifts of the Spirit, restoration, discipline, worship and prayer, and anything else of eternal significance has life and power because God is present. God is as present with his Church as he was while he walked in Eden. When we gather in expectation and scatter in boldness, we do so because we are the temple of the living God. When we forget that the power of all we do rises and falls on the activity and action of God, we have forgotten our identity as the Church.

### *All the People are Priests*

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. - 1 Peter 2:4-5

Jesus the High Priest has called and gifted a share in his ministry to all those who share in his temple. All are gifted to minister prayer and worship to God and priestly service to the world. To God we offer the obedience and worship he is worthy to receive. Because the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Jesus is the foundation of the temple, we have received the Spirit to offer our lives as living sacrifices. Where Adam failed in his priestly duty to guard the sanctuary of Eden from the serpent, the second Adam—Jesus—crushed the serpent’s head. The Church is invited by Jesus and empowered by his Spirit to take up our cross and die to sin and self.

To one another we offer the ministry of Word and presence. We stand as priests in his house, serving one another in pursuit of holiness. We each use the gifts he has given to build up one another in love. To the world we offer prayers and mission. We come to the Father, through Christ, to offer priestly prayers for the world, seeking his Kingdom and his will for the nations. His temple is to be a house of prayer for all the nations.

### *A People of Holiness*

What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, “I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.” - 2 Corinthians 6:16-18

### *A People of Mission*

The garden-sanctuary of Eden was designed to spread and fill the earth. The promise God made to Abraham was that he would be a blessing to the nations. The temple in Jerusalem was to be a light for gentiles. The Church, as temple, is about God’s mission to fill all the earth with his glory.

God’s presence in the gathered church pushes back darkness.

But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or outsider enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed, and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you. - 1 Corinthians 14:24-25

God’s presence in the scattered church pushes back darkness.

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” - Matthew 28:18-20



## **The Church as temple is an eschatological sign**

The church is a sort of anachronism, not of the past, but of the final future. (An anachronism is a thing belonging or appropriate to a period other than that in which it exists.) She is an outpost of Christ's rule in the midst of his enemies. She is a witness to the world that God's presence is here, now, and his glory will one day cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. The new age has come and will come.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. - Revelation 21:1-3

Christ will return and make all the earth a sanctuary where man dwells with God. The Church as the temple of God is a present witness to that sure future.

## Bride of Christ

God's unique covenant relationship with his people is like a marriage. In love and devotion, God pursued a sacred relationship with his people. He would delight in his people and protect and provide for them. Under his covenant faithfulness, his people were to offer God devotion and obedience, in response to his electing and rescuing love.

Observe what I command you this day. Behold, I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asherim (for you shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whore after their gods and make your sons whore after their gods. - Exodus 34:11-16

God drove out rival nations from the land to preserve Israel's covenantal fidelity. They were to rid the land of altars, pillars, and Asherim, lest the pagan worship of false gods become a snare to Israel, leading them to break covenant with God.

In God's demand for covenant loyalty, his character is revealed. His name is Jealous. This is actually a beautiful revelation of God's nature. He is not jealous out of insecurity or instability. The jealousy of God is rooted in love and holiness. He loves his people too deeply to share them with gods that can't save. He is not interested in joint custody that leaves his people in bondage. In addition, his holiness demands that his people be separated from profane and demonic idolatry. A holy God whose name is Jealous won't share his people with false lovers.

In biblical bluntness, God describes pagan worship as whoring after gods. The sexual nature of pagan worship and the focus of most pagan cults on fertility shines a spotlight on the perverse union with demonic idols that was at the heart of idolatry. To worship anything but the true God is to open the body and soul to intimate connection with the profane. In a prophetic warning that comes to repeated fulfillment in the Old Testament, God warns his people that failure to remove pagan worship from the land will result in the seduction of his people and ultimately in their mirroring their neighbors in whoring after these false gods.

One of the most consistent themes played out in the rest of the Old Testament will be God's good jealousy, Israel whoring after false gods, and God's prosecution of judgement in his jealous anger. The Old Testament is nothing less than a tragic love story between God and his unfaithful wife.

When I passed by you again and saw you, behold, you were at the age for love, and I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness; I made my vow

to you and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Lord God, and you became mine. Then I bathed you with water and washed off your blood from you and anointed you with oil. I clothed you also with embroidered cloth and shod you with fine leather. I wrapped you in fine linen and covered you with silk. And I adorned you with ornaments and put bracelets on your wrists and a chain on your neck. And I put a ring on your nose and earrings in your ears and a beautiful crown on your head. Thus you were adorned with gold and silver, and your clothing was of fine linen and silk and embroidered cloth. You ate fine flour and honey and oil. You grew exceedingly beautiful and advanced to royalty. And your renown went forth among the nations because of your beauty, for it was perfect through the splendor that I had bestowed on you, declares the Lord God. – Ezekiel 16:8-14

His grace adorned his bride with beauty and splendor, only to have her forget the source of her every good. The repeated cycle of rescue and prosperity followed by pride and spiritual indifference to God plays like a broken record in the Old Testament. In her comfort and blessing, God's bride first flirted with and then ran headlong into spiritual adultery with the false gods of the land.

But you trusted in your beauty and played the whore because of your renown and lavished your whorings on any passerby; your beauty became his. You took some of your garments and made for yourself colorful shrines, and on them played the whore. The like has never been, nor ever shall be. You also took your beautiful jewels of my gold and of my silver, which I had given you, and made for yourself images of men, and with them played the whore. And you took your embroidered garments to cover them, and set my oil and my incense before them. Also my bread that I gave you—I fed you with fine flour and oil and honey—you set before them for a pleasing aroma; and so it was, declares the Lord God. And you took your sons and your daughters, whom you had borne to me, and these you sacrificed to them to be devoured. Were your whorings so small a matter that you slaughtered my children and delivered them up as an offering by fire to them? And in all your abominations and your whorings you did not remember the days of your youth, when you were naked and bare, wallowing in your blood.

How sick is your heart, declares the Lord God, because you did all these things, the deeds of a brazen prostitute, building your vaulted chamber at the head of every street, and making your lofty place in every square. Yet you were not like a prostitute, because you scorned payment. Adulterous wife, who receives strangers instead of her husband! Men give gifts to all prostitutes, but you gave your gifts to all your lovers, bribing them to come to you from every side with your whorings. So you were different from other women in your whorings. No one solicited you to play the whore, and you gave payment, while no payment was given to you; therefore you were different. – Ezekiel 16:15-34

Idolatry is adultery, and the source of that adultery is sickness of her heart. Unlike most prostitutes, God's bride pays her lovers for their favors. Though God's love is steadfast, the love of his bride is disordered. She keeps running into the arms of idols.

Therefore, O prostitute, hear the word of the Lord: Thus says the Lord God, Because your lust was poured out and your nakedness uncovered in your whorings with your lovers, and with all your abominable idols, and because of the blood of your children that you gave to them, therefore, behold, I will gather all your lovers with whom you took pleasure, all those you loved and all those you hated. I will gather them against you from every side and will uncover your nakedness to them, that they may see all your nakedness. And I will judge you as women who commit adultery and shed blood are judged, and bring upon you the blood of wrath and jealousy. And I will give you into their hands, and they shall throw down your vaulted chamber and break down your lofty places. They shall strip you of your clothes and take your beautiful jewels and leave you naked and bare. They shall bring up a crowd against you, and they shall stone you and cut you to pieces with their swords. And they shall burn your houses and execute judgments upon you in the sight of many women. I will make you stop playing the whore, and you shall also give payment no more. So will I satisfy my wrath on you, and my jealousy shall depart from you. I will be calm and will no more be angry. Because you have not remembered the days of your youth, but have enraged me with all these things, therefore, behold, I have returned your deeds upon your head, declares the Lord God. Have you not committed lewdness in addition to all your abominations? – Ezekiel 16:35-43

This is a sober promise of judgment on Israel. God will pour out his anger and bring Israel's whoring back on her own head. The very lovers she looks to for her life will devour her like prey. Yet, in the midst of judgement, God promises to do the miraculous. Even though his bride has broken covenant, God will make an everlasting covenant. Even though her sins are grotesque, God will atone for all of them.

For thus says the Lord God: I will deal with you as you have done, you who have despised the oath in breaking the covenant, yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish for you an everlasting covenant. Then you will remember your ways and be ashamed when you take your sisters, both your elder and your younger, and I give them to you as daughters, but not on account of the covenant with you. I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall know that I am the Lord, that you may remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I atone for you for all that you have done, declares the Lord God." – Ezekiel 16:59-63

The New Covenant will be everlasting and God himself will atone for his people's adultery. This is also the theme of Hosea. As a picture of God's unrequited love for his bride, God commands Hosea to take a wife of whoredom and love her. Gomer runs from Hosea's love into the arms of lovers, just as Israel, God's bride, did so often. Hosea is not just about 8<sup>th</sup> century idol worship,

or even the long history of God's pursuit of his unfaithful bride. Hosea is a mirror held up to the human heart.

She goes after her lovers for gain that is both physical and spiritual. Her lovers are where she puts her trust and confidence. In her lovers, she expects to find her bread and water, wool and flax, oil and drink. These necessities and comforts are profound symbols of life, comfort, joy, and security. Trust and confidence, identity and security, meaning and joy are all at the heart of worship. It is to her lovers she looks for satisfaction, filling, covering, warmth, and completion. Her adultery is worship and her worship is adultery.

"That now, I say, upon which you set your heart and put your trust is properly your god." – Martin Luther

God's bride is sick of heart. It seems she can't love God and can't stop loving false gods. The very life she seeks in her lovers is the life her husband alone offers to her.

Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. And there I will give her her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. And in that day, declares the Lord, you will call me 'My Husband,' and no longer will you call me 'My Baal.' For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be remembered by name no more. And I will make for them a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the creeping things of the ground. And I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land, and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the Lord. – Hosea 2:14-20

God is the husband who will allure his bride, and though she deserves judgment he will speak tenderly to her. In his pursuing love, his people's relationship with him will be transformed from spiritual adultery to covenant intimacy.

Israel has mixed up the worship of Baal and God. Worship is just a means of getting the stuff they think they have to have. Their adulterous math is simple. Worship Baal, get rain. Worship God, get rain. What's the difference anyways? God and the gods have become means to an end in their religious economy. Yet, the New Covenant will not be transactional. God will not be called *my Baal* but *my Husband*. He will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be remembered by name no more. His love will change his bride forever. Her disordered loves will be ordered by a love that is stronger even than death.

### **The Bridegroom Comes**

You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.' The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease." – John 3:28-30

John the Baptist frames Jesus's ministry in shocking terms. Somehow God is fulfilling his promises to betroth his people to himself in faithfulness in the person and work of Jesus Christ. John is merely the friend of the bridegroom. If Jesus is anything less than God in the flesh, his ministry would be as another friend of the bridegroom. Yet, Jesus the Son of God, is the bridegroom who has the bride. God has come in the flesh to allure his people and speak tenderly to them in the wilderness.

He anticipates the irony of Israel's indifferent and even hostile rejection of the wedding invitation. But they will not succeed in spoiling the celebration. In fact, the wideness of God's mercy will throw the invitation open to the nations, bringing the bad along with the good, so that the wedding hall is filled with guests. But even for them, a note of warning is sounded. Those who accept the king's invitation must still be properly attired for the occasion or suffer painful expulsion. – Raymond C. Ortlund, Jr., *God's Unfaithful Wife*

The wideness of the invitation, though prophesied in the Old Testament, is one of the great wonders of the New Covenant. The Bride of Christ will be made up of believing Jews and gentiles from every tribe, nation, and tongue.

### **The Bride of Christ**

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. – Ephesians 5:22-33

Marriage is a profound mystery. Though in itself a gift of God, the deeper meaning of marriage, revealed in Jesus, is that marriage itself is a picture of Christ and his church. God didn't look back on marriage after the death and resurrection of Jesus and see useful symbolism to pull into the lexicon of the church. In the very creation of marriage, God was painting a picture of what would, in the fullness of time, move from shadow into the light. Marriage in the garden was pointing beyond itself to a greater and more permanent union. What God has joined together in Christ will truly not be separated.

***Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother...***

Outside of marriage the greatest human bond is between parents and children. God elevates marriage even above the ties of parents and children. In leaving and cleaving, man and woman become the tightest possible bond, surpassing other human commitments and allegiances. Our union with Jesus forms the greatest of all bonds. No political, familial, or social commitment comes near the covenantal bond of Christ and church. Even allegiance to self must die in our union with Jesus. He is ours and we are his. To be a part of his bride is to leave all other competing commitments in the waters of baptism. Jesus said, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple."

***...and hold fast to his wife,...***

Every display of God's affection and delight in the Old Testament finds their fulfillment in Christ, holding fast to his church. Jesus, in the words of Zephaniah, is the Lord your God in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing. The jealous love of God is perfectly manifested in Jesus's unshakeable commitment to finish his work of perfecting his bride in holiness without spot or blemish. He holds fast his bride with his presence, his word, his gifts, and his very name. Jesus delights in his people with an unassailable love that is truly stronger than the grave.

In the logic of Ephesians 5, the husband's calling to love his wife as he loves his own body is a reflection of Jesus's unsurpassed love for his bride. She is indeed his own body. To deny his love for his bride would demand a denial of his own body.

***...and the two shall become one flesh.***

Marriage takes the "otherness" of man and woman and binds them together in a profound unity. Our union with Christ is a greater and more permanent union than marriage. We are in Christ and by his Spirit he is in us. Our very essence and identity are transformed by this union with Jesus.

Union with Christ is central to the writing of New Testament Scripture. To be a Christian is to be joined to Christ in an unbreakable bond that changes everything. In Christ, we are dead to sin and alive to God. We are new creatures in Christ. We are sanctified in Christ. We share in his

suffering. We are established by God in Christ. In Christ, we are sons and daughters. In Christ, we are one. We are seated in heavenly places in Christ. We have a future and hope in Christ. In Christ, the dead will be raised. In Christ, we have an infinite supply of grace and righteousness. In Christ, we stand adopted, justified, and will be raised with Jesus in glory and honor.

How does this shape the identity and action of the church?

**The Bride responds to God's grace in Christ with devotion, affection, and passion.**

The marriage of the lamb is no loveless marriage. We are swimming in a bottomless sea of mercy. The love of God has been shed abroad in our hearts. In the finished work of Jesus, we are called into the great commandment to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, and strength. This is not a one-dimensional love that uses only its mind. Nor is it a sentimental love that denies the mind and strength. The experiential reality of the Spirit invites the people of God to know the love of God that surpasses knowledge. The Bride must not just know about the bridegroom. She must actually know him.

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. – Ephesians 3:14-19

The corporate life of the church certainly includes rigorous study of doctrine and agreement with the faith once delivered. The church is not less than the people of truth. She is more. The kind of experiential knowing Paul describes is fitting for a healthy marriage. Marital intimacy is often described as a knowing. Paul is asking for power not just to grasp the truth of the gospel but to have a Spirit-wrought intimacy with Jesus in the depths of our being that the gospel makes possible. To know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that we may be filled with the fullness of God. The intimate delight of bride and bridegroom described in The Song of Solomon, like all marital intimacy, points to the depth of communion and delight Christ and his Bride enjoy.

In this reality the church's calendar, liturgy, spiritual disciplines, groups, and gatherings take on new meaning. We gather not just to learn more about Jesus, but to meet with him in devotion. Word and sacrament bring the presence of the Bridegroom into our midst in fresh ways, even as we wait to see him face to face when he returns. Our covenantal union with Jesus is renewed as we break bread and lift the cup. We hear from our Head as the Word is preached that we may follow his leadership with respect, submission, and love.

Every church and every Christian will experience desert seasons. When affections and passion for Christ grows dim, when the manifest presence of God is not enjoyed, the Bride must seek.



Even in the desert, we cultivate longing for Jesus. In his hiddenness, longing and devotion deepen the corporate life of the church as we seek his presence in renewal.

I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had turned and gone. My soul failed me when he spoke. I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he gave no answer. – Song of Solomon 5:6

The church must be ever on guard against lesser loves that threaten to seduce away from pure devotion to Jesus. As the church gathers and scatters, she must remember she does so as beloved bride. She has been and will be pursued by the lover of her soul. She will not find her bread and water, wool and flax, and her oil and wine with any other lover. The Bride must not only guard the truth, she must also love and maintain the works of love as she waits for the bridegroom's return.

I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. – Revelation 2:3-5

In stark contrast to a moralist framework regarding sin, the Bible shows sin for what it truly is—spiritual adultery. Sin is not merely an arbitrary list of taboo behaviors. At its heart, sin is settling for lesser loves while rejecting the Lover of our soul. Christ keeps the faith with his Bride and calls his Bride to resist temptation and repent quickly.

### **Ministers of the gospel are friends of the bridegroom.**

Leaders in the church are certainly a part of the Bride of Christ. They are, at the same time, friends of the bridegroom, working under Jesus to help walk the church down the aisle for the Great Day.

I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me! For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. – 2 Corinthians 11:1-3

This is helpful for ministers on a few levels.

First, the church is not the minister's bride. She belongs to another. No minister of the gospel is to take her glory for his own. She does not belong to him, but to Christ.

Secondly, a minister of the gospel must not allow secondary concerns to take prominence over the simplicity of the church's purity and devotion to Jesus. So many things want the attention of the minister. His chief job in ministry is to cultivate, in Word and Spirit, bridal devotion to Jesus.

Thirdly, Paul's description of "feeling a divine jealousy" for the church reminds us that the role of a minister is not just intellectual. His teaching, preaching, prayer, and discipleship must continually be rooted and re-rooted in the very heart of Christ for his bride. Paul doesn't just think about divine jealousy for the church, he feels it. Being rooted in Christ's affection, devotion, and jealousy for his bride helped Paul endure suffering in his ministry. Feeling divine jealousy for the church awakens the minister's soul afresh to the wonder of the gospel.

### **The Bride is a waiting community.**

Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, 'Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise answered, saying, 'Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.' And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he answered, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.' Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. – Matthew 25:1-13

The bride is betrothed to the groom and awaits his return. The waiting Jesus describes is an active and hopeful waiting. The church is called to wait in prayer, in mission, and in the pursuit of holiness for the great day.

Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure"—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are the true words of God." – Revelation 19:6-9

At the beginning of the Bible, God gives the gift of marriage to our first parents. At the end of the Bible, marriage finds its ultimate and final meaning in the marriage of the Lamb. The whole Bible is a love story from beginning to end. The church of Jesus Christ will demonstrate the holy and jealous love of God for all eternity.

Pastorally, the biblical story lifts up before us a vision of God as our Lover. The gospel is not an imperialistic human philosophy making overrated universal claims; the gospel sounds the voice of our Husband who has proven his love for us and who calls for our undivided love in return. The gospel reveals that, as we look out into the universe, ultimate reality is not a cold, dark, blank space; ultimate reality is romance. There is a God above with love in his eyes for us and infinite joy to offer us, and he has set himself upon winning our hearts for himself alone. The gospel tells the story of God's pursuing, faithful, wounded, angry, overruling, transforming, triumphant love. And it calls us to answer him with a love which cleanses our lives of all spiritual whoredom. – Raymond C. Ortlund, Jr., *God's Unfaithful Wife*

## Household of God

In speaking of this desire for our own far off country, which we find in ourselves even now, I feel a certain shyness. I am almost committing an indecency. I am trying to rip open the inconsolable secret in each one of you—the secret which hurts so much that you take your revenge on it by calling it names like Nostalgia and Romanticism and Adolescence; the secret also which pierces with such sweetness that when, in very intimate conversation, the mention of it becomes imminent, we grow awkward and affect to laugh at ourselves; the secret we cannot hide and cannot tell, though we desire to do both. We cannot tell it because it is a desire for something that has never actually appeared in our experience. We cannot hide it because our experience is constantly suggesting it, and we betray ourselves like lovers at the mention of a name. Our commonest expedient is to call it beauty and behave as if that had settled the matter. Wordsworth's expedient was to identify it with certain moments in his own past. But all this is a cheat. If Wordsworth had gone back to those moments in the past, he would not have found the thing itself, but only the reminder of it; what he remembered would turn out to be itself a remembering. The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came through them was longing. These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshipers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited.” — C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*

I begin with this quote not because Lewis is specifically writing about home but because the longing for that “far off country” is frequently experienced as a strange homesickness. It's not so much a desire to return to our family of origin as much as a feeling of being unsettled where we are. Even if things are relatively good and stable, the ache can sneak up unexpectedly. Something is missing.

That ache of homesickness doesn't validate the story of the Bible any more than any subjective experience validates the objective truth of Scripture. The opposite is true. The story of Scripture validates the ache. No naturalistic anthropology can explain the existential angst that well-fed human beings carry.

We long for a place that is safe, permanent, and our own. The millions of immigrants and refugees crossing seas and borders should remind us of our common humanity. This longing for a place isn't just a biological need for food and shelter. People want a home that offers more than mere survival.

We long for a place and for a people. “To find a face that is looking back at you,” as Thompson wrote. We are both terrified of and desperate to be loved at the end of the day. When the

curated mask of career and productivity comes off, is there anyone there to receive us as our most basic selves? I heard someone say that the difference between hearing “you are mine because I love you” and “I love you because you are mine” makes all the difference in the world. A place without a people you belong to doesn’t mean much. A place and a people together is a home.

All of this is more than evolutionary instinct reminding us that we freeze to death easily and don’t have claws so we better team up. The longing for a people and a place is the search for home. That search is common to humanity. The best homes are temporary and imperfect shadows of what we long for. The worst homes are evidences of how badly we need home. Home, a place of refuge and rest, and a people we belong to is a fundamental human desire.

HOME feels like such deep magic because of our past and future as God’s people. The story of the Bible doesn’t make much sense if we remove how important home is to the narrative.

### **Past: Cast out of our dwelling place with God.**

The garden where our parents were placed was alive with prosperity and presence. Their home went infinitely beyond minimum biological necessities. The prodigality of God’s reckless generosity created gifts of every kind to be freely enjoyed. The place itself was bursting with life. The greater enchantment of the garden was *presence*. Life and Love Himself walked with our parents. Gifts were given, and the Giver was greater. Their clothing was his majesty. In the light of his face, there was no shame in their nakedness. They knew and were known. Though not mentioned in the creation account, Luke describes Adam as the son of God. Eden has all the fundamental ingredients of home.

Their rebellion brought homelessness of the most profound kind.

He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life. –  
Genesis 3:24

East of Eden we do everything in our power to get back to the life of that place of peace.

There are two inescapable truths for people:

First, place matters. Eden was a place. People are spatiotemporal beings. We are the only creature on this planet who shapes a home for more than survival. We want warmth and beauty.

Second, we are relational. The most magnificent home can feel like a cold tomb without depth of relationship. The enchantment of Eden was far greater than the visual aesthetics. The warmth of that place was found in the harmony of the relationships. The most vital relationship was their communion with God as their life.

The rest of the Old Testament recounts God's promise to bring his people into a land flowing with milk and honey. This is, again, a glimpse of home. The very sweetness and sustenance of the land is a reflection of the presence of God among his family. The tragedy of Genesis 3 plays out repeatedly. People are unable to live with God. They keep running away from their true home in him. They possess the land and are dispossessed repeatedly. Without an intervention from God, human beings are cursed to wander homeless east of Eden.

### **Future: Brought into an eternal dwelling place with God.**

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." – Revelation 21:1-4

In the new heavens and new earth, the dwelling place is again enchanted with God. It is a place of such profound presence there is no need for the sun to light the way. It is a place that again goes far beyond minimum standards and needs being met. The security and beauty of this place is almost unimaginable east of Eden. Never again will there be mourning, crying, or pain. The thorns and thistles are gone.

And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son." – Revelation 21:5-7

The tree of life guarded by a flaming sword has given way to a spring of water that flows with free and yet costly grace. The thirsty ones who have stopped trying to craft their people and place in their own strength are now sons and daughters and brothers and sisters, living together as family with God. This is home is forever.

How is it possible to move from east of Eden to the new heavens and new earth? What does God do to bring his people home and make them a family? What does this mean for the church?

### **God the Father**

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at

work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. – Ephesians 2:1-7

The Father is rich in mercy. He is motivated by love, even when we were dead in sin (homeless/cast out). He made us alive together with Christ by grace (he is the sender or initiator of this family). He seated us with Christ. Why? So that in the ages to come he can show his unmeasurable kindness to us in Christ. This explains so much of our human longing for HOME. We were created to enjoy the love and belonging that only a perfect Father can provide.

Our definition of God must be built on the Son who reveals him. And when we do that, starting with the Son, we find that the first thing to say about God is, as it says in the creed, “We believe in one God, the Father.” – Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity: An Introduction to the Christian Faith*

## **God the Son**

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. – Ephesians 2:11-17

By his shed blood, Jesus brings near those far from God. He is our peace. Peace with God and peace with one another. He makes Jews and Gentiles *one* in his broken flesh. He reconciles us to God and one another. He comes as the herald of peace. Jesus is the older brother who leaves his Father’s side to search and rescue the prodigal in the pig pen.

## **God the Spirit**

For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of

the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone. - Ephesians 2:18-20

This family is born by the Spirit, not blood. The Spirit moves in the preaching of the gospel of peace. He gives conviction, faith, repentance, and the new birth. He makes believing Jews and Gentiles into the household of God. The foundation of that house is the apostles and prophets, and Christ is the cornerstone, now and forever.

### **The Ethos of Love**

The Church is a household built on the Love of the Father, through the work of the Son, in the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The church as household of God is a controlling metaphor in Scripture. We are a people, and our place is with God. The ethos of this home is love.

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. – 1 John 3:14-18

This is our family system, thanks to Jesus.

Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity. Honor widows who are truly widows. But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God. She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day, but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives. Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach. But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. – 1 Timothy 5:1-8

The relational framework of the church is the framework of God's household or family. The church is home.

So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith. – Galatians 6:10

### **What does this mean for the church?**



Bio family is important, but relativized. Marriage is held in honor. Children are told to obey their parents. Fathers are commanded to not provoke their children.

Yet, Matthew 12 says:

While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. But he replied to the man who told him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." – Matthew 12:47-50

Through the gospel, God brings people together in his family, and his family is THE definitive family that shapes and directs our blood families, not vice versa. While marriage is held in honor, so is singleness. Singleness in Christ is a holy vocation that serves the mission of God.

I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband. I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord. – 1 Corinthians 7:32-35

Children are still a gift from the Lord, and parenting is a way to participate in filling the earth with God's glory. However, multiplication and blessedness is no longer tied to biological offspring, but to covenantal participation in the great commission.

For thus says the Lord: "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off." – Isaiah 56:4-5

"Sing, O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her who is married," says the Lord. "Enlarge the place of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes. For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left, and your offspring will possess the nations and will people the desolate cities." – Isaiah 54:1-3

Christ, who gave up biological offspring, is the blessed *eunuch* and fruitful *barren one*, and those in him share in his multiplication.

In addition, there is a great need, not only for formal offices and gifts of grace in ministry, but for the familial ministries of mothering, fathering, brothering, and sistering. This is perhaps the most neglected part of the discussion of gender roles in the church.

Look at Lydia's sistering of weary Paul and Timothy.

And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us. – Acts 16:15

Paul was a spiritual father to Timothy.

To Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors, with a clear conscience, as I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. As I remember your tears, I long to see you, that I may be filled with joy. – 2 Timothy 1:2-4

Older women are commanded to teach (mother) younger women.

Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled. – Titus 2:3-5

## Body of Christ

In a particular place and at particular time, Jesus walked to his hometown, Nazareth. He entered an ordinary synagogue, and with his calloused carpenter's hands, he opened the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. With a human mouth, in his Galilean accent, Jesus read the text that would describe his ministry of presence.

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." – Luke 4:16-21

His incarnational ministry will be a ministry of sight, speech, touch, and hearing. The invisible and unclean will be seen and cleansed. Cries for help will be heard. Questions will be answered. At a touch from his hand, fevers will break, limbs will be strengthened, blind eyes will see. He will see bent and broken bodies. He will see the secrets and longings of the heart. His words will cut hard hearts like a knife. Over meals, prostitutes and tax collectors will have the burning hope of holiness ignited in their souls. His presence will be a blinding light that will terrify demons and illuminate the lost. His ministry will be local and limited, never traveling very far from his hometown. He will carry out his ministry in his body. People will see, hear, and feel the presence of Jesus.

The ministry of Jesus shows us the importance of presence. We learn to care for the local and the specific; not just humanity but real human beings, not just the world but Jerusalem, Judea, and the ends of the earth. Luke's account of the Spirit-filled ministry of Jesus moves from the presence of Jesus in local places to the presence of Jesus through his body, the church, in local places.

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. – Acts 1:1-2

The ascension of Jesus is not the end of the ministry of Jesus. The Spirit-filled church is the very body of Jesus on Earth. The church, empowered by the Spirit, is called to continue the ministry of his presence in the world. Jesus is still to be seen, heard, and felt in and through the church.

This metaphor highlights 5 ecclesial dynamics.

## **1. Jesus's Identification with His Body**

Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. – Acts 9:3-5

Christ nourishes and cherishes his body, the church.

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. – Ephesians 5:25-30

## **2. The Body's Identification with Jesus**

Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he? – 1 Corinthians 10:14-22

He is our head, our source, our very life.

## **3. Our Participation with One Another**

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift... And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building

up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. – Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16

We experience catholicity with the one church and unity within the local church.

#### **4. Our Unity and Diversity**

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. – 1 Corinthians 12:12-26

We are baptized into Christ’s body, the church.

#### **5. Our Participation with Jesus in the World (Jesus’s ministry of presence in and through the church)**

##### **In Suffering**

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you,

to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. – Colossians 1:24-26

### **In Word**

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. – Romans 10:14-17

### **In Touch**

The New Testament talks about the laying on of hands, anointing with oil, greetings with holy kisses, Paul being embraced by the leaders at Ephesus with weeping. Jesus’s ministry of touch continues through his body.

### **In Sight**

Jesus’s body is to continue Jesus’s ministry of seeing the invisible: the poor, the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the sick, those in distress and the mourning. The church is to see what Jesus saw.

### **In Deed**

Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. – 1 Peter 2:12

### **In Locality**

The Bible mentions many local and regional churches by name. Including the church at Ephesus, Rome, Corinth, Philippi, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Antioch, Philadelphia, Laodicea, Iconium, Jerusalem, Athens, Berea and many others. Over 20 different cities, multiple regions, nations, and communities are mentioned by name. Jesus’s body is a visible people. His body is in time and space showing the world the glory of Jesus. This doesn’t mean there isn’t an invisible dynamic of church. It does mean that just as Jesus’s body during his ministry had substance and took up space his church also has substance and takes up space. Jesus can be seen in his church.