

The Church – God’s Temple

There are many ways in which the church is described in the New Testament. One prominent metaphor is that of a building – in particular, the “temple”.

A short history of God’s temple...

In the Old Testament God’s people were blessed to have God dwell among them. This happened via the ‘tabernacle’ (or ‘tent’), then via the Jerusalem temple. Both were constructed with the most precious materials and described in great detail. It is hard to capture the significance of this – but see 1 Kings 8:10-13 & 27-30.

A significant element in the tragedy of the Exile was the destruction of the temple. The prophets however, promised a new temple from which blessing would flow (eg. Ezekiel 40-48), and to which people from all nations would come to worship and pray (Isaiah 56).

When Jesus came, he called his own body “this temple” (John 2:19-21), and he is described as having ‘tabernacled’ with us (John 1:14).

In the final vision of the new heavens and new earth in Revelation 21 & 22 there is no temple at all (see 21:21). There is no need for a dwelling place for God, because then “God’s dwelling is with humanity, and he will live with them” (Revelation 21:3).

Now: The Church as God’s temple

Read 1 Corinthians 3:16-17

1. How / why can Paul call the church at Corinth “God’s Sanctuary” (The sanctuary was the focal point of God’s dwelling within the temple complex).
2. What implications does the apostle draw from this insight? (Along with verse 17, consider also the context shown in verses 3 & 4).
3. How might we apply this to ourselves and our own church?

Read 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1

4. How do verses 16 -18 deepen our understanding of the church as God’s sanctuary?
5. What implication does the apostle draw from this insight?

Read Ephesians 2:19-22

6. What further details are added here to our picture of the church as God’s temple?
7. What implication is drawn in the letter to the Ephesians? (See especially 4:1-4).
8. How should understanding our church as God’s temple change our attitude and behaviour towards it? What other implications might follow?

The Church – Christ’s Body (Part 1)

The most prominent New Testament image of the church is the body of Christ. In this discussion we will focus on what use is made of this in Ephesians. In the next study we will look at 1 Corinthians 12.

1. Read Ephesians 1:20-23. What do we learn here about the relationship between Christ and the church? (Do you think “church” here refers to the church gathered in heaven, or to a local congregation?)

2. Now read Ephesians 4:1-16
 - a. From verses 1-6, why should we work hard at keeping the “unity of the Spirit”? What will this involve?

 - b. From verses 13-14, what does a mature church ‘body’ look like? (To help ‘sharpen’ your thinking, try and also think of examples of immaturity in churches. What do immature churches need to grow?)

 - c. In each of these sections, what has God done or what is God plan for the growth of the “body”?
 - i. Verses 7-10

 - ii. Verses 11-12

 - iii. Verses 15-16

 - d. How might this passage challenge common assumptions about the job descriptions of ‘pastors and teachers’ and the role of church members in growing the church?

 - e. What do you think “speaking the truth in love” might look like for you in our church? (see also 4:25)

3. Are their ways this teaching might apply to the way your own group functions and grows?

4. From what you have seen in this study, for what can you thank God? What would be good to pray for each other, for our whole church, and for churches everywhere?

The Church – Christ's Body (Part 2)

1. What different gifts (ability/talent/strength) has God given the people of our church? Make a list of gifts and think about the ways in which you have benefited from these.
2. Read 1 Corinthians 12. According to verses 1-11, what do all members of the church share in common? In what ways do we differ and why?
3. Paul uses the image of the body to illustrate and apply the idea of many different gifts in one church. From verses 12-31...
 - a. Is the local church at Corinth a body, part of a body, or only like a body? Why?
 - b. What should characterize a properly functioning church?
 - c. How will a church become like this? (See also chapter 13)
 - d. To what extent can/should this be applied directly to your small group?
4. It is clear in verses 14-20 that every member belongs to the church and has something to contribute, but in practice people sometimes feel like they don't. Why do you think this happens?
5. How/when might we communicate 'I don't need you' (v 21-21) to others? How can we avoid this?
6. What needs are not being met (or opportunities not being taken) around our church? Are there ways that you could contribute? What would help you to do this?
7. Can you think of ways everyone in your group can contribute to the life of the group?
8. Spend time praying for each other and for our church. Give thanks for our unity and diversity. Give thanks for particular people who serve you. Ask God to help you play your part in the life of the body.

The Church – Christ’s Bride

In this series of studies we are looking at the main images of the church used in the New Testament. So far we have examined the church as God’s temple and as Christ’s body. In this study we will consider what it means for the church to be the bride of Christ.

The background to this image is found in the Old Testament, where the prophets speak of God and Israel in terms of a marriage relationship. God set his love upon Israel and delighted in her as his bride (Jeremiah 2:2), yet Israel was unfaithful, ‘prostituting’ herself to other gods (Ezekiel 16, Hosea 1-3). God however promised that once again he would rejoice over her “as a groom rejoices over his bride’ (Isaiah 62:5).

1. The image of a bride is a powerful one. What features of a “bride” and her relationship with a groom immediately spring to mind for you?

2. The image is used in 3 places in the New Testament: 2 Corinthians 11:1-4, Ephesians 5:22-33 & Revelation 19:6-10, 21:1-2 & 9-11. Read each of these passages and try to build a picture to answer these questions...
 - a. What (from the text itself) does the image teach us about how to think about God and his church?

 - b. What impact do you think the use of the image is designed (by the original writers) to have on our emotions and our ‘affections’ (ie. what we love and hate)?

 - c. What implications are drawn from the use of the image for our lives now?

 - d. Does the New Testament picture the church as currently ‘betrothed’ (promised as a bride for Jesus), or is she already married? When is it envisaged that the wedding has or will happen?

3. Is there any hint in these passages that being ‘the bride of Christ’ means that church representatives should not marry in this life? What would you say to someone who thinks this way?

4. In what ways can we, as Jesus’ bride, prepare now for the great wedding day of Lamb?

5. Pray in response to what you have learned in this study. Give thanks that Jesus prepares us to be beautiful for him on the great wedding day. Ask for God’s help to live in a way consistent with this.

The Church – God’s Household

In this series of studies we are looking at the main images of the church used in the New Testament. So far we have examined the church as God’s temple, Christ’s body, Christ’s bride and in this study we will look at the church as God’s household.

1. Some of us have happy experiences of being part of a ‘household’, others not so happy. What are the benefits of being part of a well functioning ‘household’?

In our culture households most often consist of the ‘nuclear’ family. In the world of the Bible however, ‘households’ seem to include a father, his wife, extended family and slaves (ie. household servants). The New Testament repeatedly refers to the church as God’s household. In this study we will look at 4 passages.

2. Read Ephesians 2:17-22. Why do you think Paul adds “and members of God’s household” in v19? What extra weight or meaning is conveyed?

Optional Extension: Read God’s promise to David in 2 Samuel 7:1-5 & 11b-13. Can you see any connections with Ephesians 2:17-22?

3. Read 1 Timothy 3:14-16.

- a. What do you think it means that God’s household, the church, is the “pillar and foundation” of the truth?
- b. In what ways does understanding the church as God’s household make sense of the qualifications of church leaders (see esp v 4-5 & 8-12) and the Instructions in 5:1-2 & 3-8

4. Read Hebrews 3:1-6.

- a. What position does Jesus hold in God’s household?
- b. What is this knowledge meant to motivate us to do? (See also 3:7-14)

5. Read 1 Peter 4:12-19.

- a. What new perspective does this bring on being God’s household?
- b. Why are we told this? (ie. What response does the passage call on us to make?)

6. How does what you have seen in this study about the church as God’s Household make you feel? What could you pray about in response?