

“The Church’s True Image”

May 10, 2015

Intro: Happy Mother’s Day

Pix worth a thousand words. Some of the most influential pictures are not those in frames, but images that we carry in our minds—images of ourselves. A person’s life is greatly impacted by the way he views himself (victim mentality vs. overcomer). Well, God has given the church certain images that we should use to rightly think of ourselves (in relationship to God, each other, and this world in which we live). In fact, the church is so multi-faceted that it takes multiple images to fully understand the nature of the church.

Bottom line: The church will not function according to God’s design until it views itself through her God-given image. *So how should we think of ourselves as the church?*

1. We should think of ourselves as the family of God.

(Gal 4:4-7; 2Cor 6:16-18; I Tim 5:1-2; I John 3:14-18; Matt 12:49-50)

This image of the church highlights the deep love and fellowship that should flourish among believers. We share a common family-like identity. And it begins with God establishing Himself as our Father by adopting us to be His children.

Gal 4:4-7—“*But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the **adoption** as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.*”

Adoption includes a legal change of status. We take on the name of our new father and become His heir. Talk about a change of identity! In 2 Cor 6:18 the Lord says, “I will be a Father to you and you shall be sons and daughters to me.” The context of 2 Cor 6 involves yet another metaphor of the church as a temple. 2 Cor 6:16-18—“*We are the temple of the living God; just as God said, “I will dwell in them and walk among them; And I will be their God, and they shall be My people. “Therefore, come out from their midst and*

be separate,” says the Lord. “And do not touch what is unclean; And 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.”

Notice here that the family of God is born out of a covenant in which we are called to purity. In other words, as God’s children we should be distinctively pure because God is our Father and He has called us into a covenant relationship in which we are to reflect Him.

Being a adopted into God’s family means that we now have spiritual siblings—brothers and sisters. In I Tim 5:1-2, Paul describes how we should relate to each other as family.

1 Tim 5:1-2—“*Do not sharply rebuke an older man, but rather appeal to him as a father, to the younger men as brothers, the older women as mothers, and the younger women as sisters, in all purity.*”

The idea that Paul is portraying here is that we are to treat one another with honor; the same honor that a child should give to his parents; the honor that brothers and sisters should give to one another. Notice that once again we see a call to purity, especially as it relates to viewing younger women in the body as sisters. In other words, the level of sexual purity that is assumed by a young man toward his sisters is the same way in which young women should be viewed in the church.

These family relationships are so essential in the church, that I John 3 uses them as a test of true spiritual life.

I John 3:14-18—“*Do not marvel, brethren, if the world hates you.*

14 We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death.

15 Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

16 We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.

17 But whoever has the world’s goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?

18 Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.

John is saying that the natural response of the world is to hate true believers. We have opposing values. Our message of holiness doesn't compliment natural cravings. Our message of grace doesn't compliment self-centered living. Yet, fellow believers will love one another sacrificially. John calls us to manifest that love, God's love, in our fellowship by laying down our lives for each other and generously meeting each other's needs—serving one another with words, action, and truth.

Take note that these family relationships in the church are so essential that they may even supersede the bonds of biological families. Jesus indicated that this was true for Him in Matt 12:50 where He said, "*For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother.*"

So what does a local church look like as the family of God? It is a place where honor is the foundational attitude in every relationship. It is a place where love is deep and fellowship is meaningful. Some people approach the church as though it is an open exhibit; you just show up, take in the show, and then leave. Or they may approach it like a social club in which everyone is friendly, but deep, true-life questions are too intruding. But that's not a biblical view of the church. Being a church family is more than just being friendly. It's a place where love allows us to be real, even when real it ugly. Of course, we won't love perfectly on this side of heaven and so we need the admonition of Rom 12:10—"*Be devoted to one another in **brotherly love**; give preference to one another in honor.*" Sometimes siblings fight—but we stay together, we work it out, because we are family. This means living truthfully with one another and extending grace to one another—not just once, but as a lifestyle.

As a family, we have a commitment to meeting one another's needs—even putting them ahead of our own (Phil 2:3-5). It's this kind of love for one another that mark us as followers of Jesus in this world (John 13:35). Living like a family should be a witness to the world where love is desperately lacking.

I hope you are beginning to see that relationships in the family of God are not just optional—they are primary. This is one of the reasons we want to encourage as many as possible to be a part of a Bible study or Life group. Not only so we can grow in the Word together, but also to have opportunity to be the family of God together.

2. We should think of ourselves as the bride of Christ.

(Eph 5:22-33)

Brides are in a world all of their own. Their whole existence revolves around preparing to be wed to their groom. In a very similar way, our preoccupation as the bride of Christ should be to prepare ourselves for Jesus, our bride-groom; to have a single-hearted passion for Jesus as our bride-groom.

Turn with me in your Bibles to Eph 5:22-233 which is not only an important passage about marriage, but also an important text about the church as the bride of Christ. It's important for you to realize that the church was not made to resemble marriage. Rather, marriage was meant to resemble the church. In other words, marriage is to be a reflection of an even more foundational relationship between Christ and His bride.

[Eph 5:22-33]

Let me highlight just three essential realities for the bride of Christ:

a. *As the bride, the church is to live in reverent submission to Christ as her Head* (vs. 23-24; cf. vs 33).

The church is not an independent agent. We are called to loyal obedience and singular devotion to Christ. Practically it means not only being passionate students and doers of the Word, it also means being devoted to prayer, always seeking the leadership of our Master. This is a good place to be because...

b. *As the bride, the church is under the covering of her Savior who sacrificially loves, and nourishes her* (vs. 25)

This is why our submission to Christ is clothed in gladness. We have a Savior who selflessly sacrificed His own life to rescue us and continues to nourish us with cherishing love.

What impact should this have on us as the bride of Christ? We should be overflowing with abundant hope. Not only do we have the Great King for our leader; not only do we have the most virtuous husband as our nurturer; but add to that the great anticipation that our bride-groom is soon coming to snatch us out of these slums where the violence of sin domineers to usher us into his kingdom of joy—where He is making all things new (Rev 21:5).

c. Christ, the bride-groom, is progressively preparing His bride for the glory of holiness (vs. 26-27).

It's important to remember that the end product of holiness is not some gloomy, sterile, religious face. No! The end product of holiness is joy!! Freedom from sin, shame, guilt, and condemnation; delighting in what is best and most virtuous and therefore most satisfying.

Now see what Christ is doing in [vs. 26 & 27] for His bride. One of the things I teach young men in premarital counseling is that one of the basic needs of every bride is to know that she has a cherished place in her husband's heart that no other woman has access to. This is one of the ways that a husband sanctifies his marriage. Not only by cherishing and honoring his wife as special, but refusing to entertain anything that would defile their marriage; warring against lust; saying no to pornography every time, avoiding flirtatious women like the plague. By doing this, he is regarding and protecting his marriage as pure.

In an even more profound way, Jesus sanctified/purified His bride by dying to remove the stain of her sin so that she could be clothed in His own pure, radiant robes of righteousness.

How should this impact the way we live as the bride of Christ? We must continually subject ourselves (bring ourselves under) the sanctifying, purifying, cleansing of the Word as we await the marriage feast of the Lamb.

So what does it mean for the church to see herself as the bride of Christ?

It means living with a singular affection for Christ, just as a bride has eyes only for her groom. It means being preoccupied with making ourselves ready as a pure bride to see Jesus. In other words, there can be no syncretism; no blending of the world's values in our betrothal to Christ; no flirting with the world. In 2 Cor 11:2, Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, "I betrothed you to *one* husband, so that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin." Paul here is warning them to not be led astray from "the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ." In other words, stop living like you are single and available to the flirtatious temptations of this world.

Being the bride of Christ means forsaking our independence to gladly come under His loving authority, and learning to embrace the sanctifying, cleansing power of God's word for a growing purity in our lives. We must see ourselves as a hope-filled bride, refusing to be pessimistic in these slums knowing that Jesus is making all things new for us!

Being the bride means having a growing passion for purity, not only in our individual lives, but also in our fellowship. At times this will require the corrective and restorative process of church discipline for the purpose of maintaining the church's purity. More often, it means speaking the truth in love and always it requires teaching and training one another for growth in godliness.

Church, you are the bride, one with Christ in hope and purity.

3. We should think of ourselves as the temple of the living God.

(1 Peter 2:4-12)

While I cannot unpack all of the richness of this passage today, let me make a few observations about our identity as the temple and priesthood of God.

[1 Peter 2:4-12]

Vs. 2 refers to us as living stones, individually, which together make up a spiritual house or temple. Vs. 6 alludes to Christ, as the Cornerstone, the reference point to which all the individual stones are aligned. The temple is

known as the place where God's presence dwells. It is designated as a place of purity and worship.

Not only does Peter refer to us as the temple of God, but also as the priesthood that ministers within the temple. In vs. 9 he calls us a "royal priesthood" designated to "proclaim the excellencies of [God] who called [us] out of darkness into His marvelous light." Priests had a two-fold function. On the one hand they were a representative of God to the people, while on the other they represented the people before God, offering sacrifices. They were mediators. Their lives were designated to God-honoring worship. In the OT, the priests were Levites who were not to consider themselves as having any earthly inheritance because the Lord was their inheritance (Deut 18:2; Josh 18:7). We are called to serve God in a similar way.

Imagine viewing ourselves as the priesthood of God. Our calling in life, as believers, is to make known the excellencies of God; to be worshipers in heart and life, rejoicing in the mercy of God that snatched us out of darkness to bask in the light of God (vs. 9-10). Heb 13:15—"*Through Him then, let us continually offer up a **sacrifice of praise** to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name. And do not neglect doing good and sharing; for with such **sacrifices** God is pleased.*"

Do you view your purpose in life to make much of God, to make the true God known among the people in your sphere of influence? Do you view your life as set apart to God? You are a servant of the Lord whose life is to be marked by purity. [vs. 12] Do you view yourself, like a Levite, as not being tied to this earth as your inheritance, but living your life to gain maximum spiritual inheritance.

Living like priests, with Christ as our High Priest, is the way in which we conduct ourselves as the temple of God. We not only serve the Lord; the Spirit of the Lord dwells in us and so we must keep ourselves pure so that God's renown will not be defiled.

The way for the church to function as the temple of God, is for each member to view himself as a temple of God in the sense of I Cor 6 where Paul writes, "*Flee immorality...do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your*

own? For you have been bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body" (vs. 18-20).¹ Wherever we go and in whatever we do, we must realize that we represent the presence of God whose Spirit dwells in believers and is to be honored with a reverent, holy, grace-filled life.

Illus: "The presence of God was in that church!"

When we function well as the temple of God, there should be an evident awareness of the presence of God among us, producing reverence in all purity and holiness with joy.

Trinity, God has called us to function in this community as the family of God, the bride of Christ, and the temple of the living God. How might the Lord be speaking to you today, personally? What needs to happen for these images to be a reality in your life? Take a moment to consider how you might personally take an active step of obedience in response to God's calling on your life.

¹ Cf. I Cor 3:16-17