

Oneness In Christ: Lesson 6

Images Of Unity

Memory Text: “For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ.” (1 Corinthians 12:12)

Setting The Stage: What is a metaphor? A metaphor is an expression that is used to denote something, not from a literal meaning, but a similar, figurative meaning. It is using symbols in place of reality to help us better understand reality.

We use metaphors and symbols in the English language every day. A great example is when we say, “I ran around town looking for a pair of shoes.” Did you literally run with the use of your legs from store to store, several miles apart, or is it a figure of speech to show that you were busy going from one place to another?

If you say, “I froze in my tracks,” do you mean that you actually froze to death standing in place, or did you become totally still because you were paralyzed by fear? The use of metaphors is a way to illustrate a point. Sometimes it can be used as a tool to get us to really think about something, and to see something from a new perspective.

When the Bible writers use various metaphors to describe the church the intent is to illuminate our understanding of its nature, purpose, and function. Within these metaphors we are able to get a clearer picture of how God desires His church to operate, His expectations for His church, and His enabling grace to meet those expectations.

What metaphors does God use to help us understand His expectations for the church? And how do these metaphors help us better understand the unity God desires for His church?

Sunday – The People Of God

Deuteronomy 4:20; 7:6; 1 Peter 2:9

Deuteronomy 4:20: “But the Lord has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be His people, an inheritance, as you are this day.”

Deuteronomy 7:6: “For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth.” (ref. vv.7, 8)

1 Peter 2:9: “But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.”

“The church is about people, but not any kind of people. The church is the people of God, the people who belong to God, who claim God as their Father and Savior, and who have been redeemed by Christ and who obey Him. This image underscores the concept that God has had a people on earth since the introduction of the plan of salvation and that there is continuity between Israel in the Old Testament and the church in the New.” (ABSG, Oneness With Christ, p. 47)

“God acquired the church as His own special possession in order that its members might reflect His precious traits of character in their own lives and proclaim His goodness and mercy to all men.” (The SDA Bible Commentary, vol. 7, p. 562)

Monday – The Household Of God

Matthew 6:9; John 3:5; Romans 8:14-16

Another metaphor the Bible writers use to describe the unity of the church is that of a family. We are God’s children and He is our loving Heavenly Father.

Matthew 6:9: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name.”

John 3:5: “Jesus answered, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.’ ”

Rom. 8:14-16: “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, ‘Abba, Father.’ The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” (cp. Eph. 2:19)

A special characteristic of the church as family is fellowship. Christian fellowship (koinonia in Greek) is not merely socialization but a “fellowship of the gospel.” (Phil 1:5) It involves genuine fellowship with God the Father, His Son, and the Holy Spirit, as well as with believers.

Community. The metaphor family speaks to a caring church where people are loved, respected, and recognized. The family is a place where people acknowledge that they need each other (relationships, helping). Church is a place where talents are developed, where people grow, where everybody is fulfilled.

Accountability. Being a part of a family engenders respect for spiritual parents, watching out for spiritual brother and sisters, and being subject to the care and concern of others.

Love. Each member will have toward each other member a love that brings about a deep loyalty that undergirds and strengthens. Ties between family members can be strong, and the accompanying loyalties often transcend other outside ties (“blood is thicker than water”). Membership in a church family enables individuals who vary greatly in nature and disposition to enjoy and support one another. Church family members learn to live in unity while not losing their individuality.

We won’t betray one another or stab one another in the back with our words or gossip. How can we fulfill the words of Jesus recorded in John 13:34, 35 if we go about thinking the worst of others, never settling our disputes, etc.?

According to a study of more than 500 family counselors, the following are the top traits of successful families: (1) Communication and Listening; (2) Affirming and Supporting; (3) Respecting one another; (4) Developing a sense of trust; (5) Sharing time and responsibility; (6) Knowing right from wrong; (7) Having traditions; (8) Respecting privacy.

“Christians are all members of one family, all children of the same heavenly Father, with the same blessed hope of immortality. Very close and tender should be the tie that binds them together.” (Acts of the Apostles, p. 550)

Tuesday – The Temple Of The Holy Spirit

1 Corinthians 3:16, 17; 1 Peter 2:5; Ephesians 2:21, 22

Another metaphor the Bible writers use to describe God’s church is a temple. It’s an interesting illustration to say the least, but let’s take a look at it.

1 Corinthians 3:16, 17: “Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are.”

Is there any significance in illustrating the church as a temple? When you think of a temple, perhaps you automatically think of the permanent structure built in Jerusalem by King Solomon several thousand years ago.

When Solomon looked over the plans for the temple he saw that he needed a lot more material before he could start to build. Thousands of workers went to work to cut down trees, and there was equally that amount hewing stones out of the mountains. The Bible says, “And the king commanded, and they brought great stones, costly stones, and hewed stones.” (1 Kings 5:17)

As stone was laid on stone, each fitting perfectly in its appointed place, the building gradually took shape. At last, seven years after the work was started, the building was finished, and God showed His approval by filling the temple with His presence.

1 Peter 2:5: “You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

Ephesians 2:21, 22: “In whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.”

Organization. - Living stones that make up the structure. The church isn’t just a pile of rocks that came together by accident. It has form and coherence. Each stone has its proper place. God knows right where to fit/place His “lively stones” so that the church is built stable and strong. Do you know where you fit, where you belong?

Holiness. When Solomon’s Temple had been built, what did God do to mark its completion? He filled the temple with His presence and power.

God’s church is the place of His presence and power and as such is holy. And we’re not just talking about the church building. Who makes up the church? We do. Then Christ must be in us in order for the church to be holy. He carved us out of the world, brought us into His workshop to have the rough edges removed, and finally polished by His divine hand making them glimmer and shine to emit the light of God’s goodness.

“His church is to be a temple built after the divine similitude, and the angelic architect has brought his golden measuring rod from heaven, that every stone may be hewed and squared by the divine measurement, and polished to shine as an emblem of heaven, radiating in all directions the bright, clear beams of the Sun of righteousness.”
(Testimonies to Ministers, p. 17)

Wednesday – The Body Of Christ

Ephesians 2:16; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 1:22, 23

There’s a lot we can learn from this metaphor. First we’ll look at the Bible’s introduction of this metaphor in the NT.

Ephesians 2:16: “And that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity.”

1 Corinthians 12:13: “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.”

Ephesians 1:22, 23: “And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.”

Why does the Bible use this metaphor to describe His church?

The body is an amazing thing. When it functions right it can accomplish many important things. Look at what an adult of an average weight body accomplishes in a 24 hour period: 103,689 times the heart beats; 12,000 miles the blood travels (4x the distance across the U.S. from coast to coast); 23,040 times we breathe; 7-8 liters of air inhaled; 3.25 pounds of food eaten; 2.9 quarts of liquid drank; 7/8th of a pound lost in waste; 4,800 words spoken; 750 muscles moved; .00046 inch of a nail grew; .01714 inch hair grew; 7,000,000 brain cells exercised.

When the various parts of the body fulfill its part, the whole body benefits, doesn't it. Not one body part is insignificant and unimportant to the whole. In 1 Corinthians 12 the different body parts/members represent the various members of the church with their varying gift/s that God has bestowed (see 1 Cor. 12:1, 4-7, 31).

Spiritual Gifts. What happened if the ear didn't know what it was suppose to do, or your leg, or worse yet, your heart? Yet there are members of Christ's body who don't know what role they are to play in the body, and as a result the whole suffers.

Paul addresses that concern, but he shows that the problem may not just have to do with not knowing what the gift given is, but not employing that gift, either because of feelings of insignificance, feelings of inadequacy, or feelings of jealousy (1 Cor. 12:12-20.).

Cooperation. In His love, God has given to each member of His church body at least one spiritual gift that enables that member to accomplish a vital function. Just as what each organ does is vital to the human body, the successful completion of the church's mission depends on the functioning of each of the spiritual gifts given to members. What good is a body without a heart, or how much less efficient is it without eyes, or a leg? If its members withhold their gifts the church will be dead, or blind, or at least incapacitated.

"The secret of our success in the work of God will be found in the harmonious working of our people. There must be concentrated action. Every member of the body of Christ must act his part in the cause of God, according to the ability that God has given him. We must press together against obstructions and difficulties, shoulder to shoulder, heart to heart." (The Review & Herald, December 2, 1890)

"If Christians were to act in concert, moving forward as one, under the direction of one Power, for the accomplishment of one purpose, they would move the world." (Testimonies for the Church, Vol. 9, p. 221)

Thursday – Sheep & Shepherd

Luke 12:32; 1 Peter 5:2; John 21:16; Psalm 23:1

This is one of the most beautiful symbols by which the church of Christ is known. The Lord speaks of His people as a flock, and encourages them with the following words:

Luke 12:32: “Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

1 Peter 5:2: “Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly.” (ref. John 21:16)

Psalms 23:1: “The Lord is my Shepherd I shall not want,” or as one boy put it, “The Lord is my Shepherd, that’s all I want.”

Trust. What is it that you know about sheep? You know that sheep are dumb creatures. You watch them as they pause in front of a stream. They know they can’t jump it or swim it. So what do they do? They jump in anyway. A sheep may get caught in barbed wire trying to break through a fence. And the next day it will try it again, and again...

Sheep stray. Perhaps the main reason Scripture chooses sheep to characterize us, more than any other animal, is because of its well-deserved reputation for straying (Isa. 53:6) and getting lost (Luke 15:3). I’ve read where a rancher will be out in the middle of nowhere and come across a sheep—miles from anyone and anything—and totally unconcerned.

The bottom line is, sheep are dependent creatures. Some animals can cope and thrive without any close supervision. Not sheep. They are very dependent on their shepherd. They cannot live without him. And you and I can’t live without our Good Shepherd either. The flock of God, the church, must acknowledge that there will never be a time that it doesn’t need Christ.

Obedience. Sheep are copycats. A bit of a mix of metaphors here, but I think you get my point. When one sheep decides to start running, they all decide to start running. The flocking and following instinct of sheep is so strong that it caused the death of 400 sheep in eastern Turkey. The sheep plunged to their death after one of the sheep tried to cross a 15-meter deep ravine, and the rest of the flock followed. That’s why it’s imperative for sheep to obey their shepherd who knows how to protect them and keep them safe (John 10:14-16).

Obedience to the Shepherd’s voice, to Christ’s Word and His commandments, will also keep His church safe and together.

Further Thought

“Strive earnestly for unity. Pray for it, work for it...The world needs to see worked out before it the miracle that binds the hearts of God’s people together in Christian love...Union is strength; division is weakness. When those who believe present truth are united, they exert a telling influence. Satan well understands this. Never was he more determined than now to make of none effect the truth of God by causing bitterness and dissension among the Lord’s people.” (Counsels for the Church, pp. 290, 291)