

Figures of the One True Church

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Marks of identification are so important. And whoever first said, “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me,” is dead wrong. Words are among the most powerful things in the world. They not only identify, but they illustrate. They not only brand, but they can either encourage or discourage, hurt or heal.

Words are vehicles of thought. They make it possible for us to “express” ourselves, make things known, to warn, exhort, correct, or manage. They are indispensable to a well-ordered life. Words are life sometimes; sometimes they are powerfully destructive. It all depends on how and when they are used, and by whom.

Figures of speech—metaphors, similes, allegories, etc.—are a vital part of our ability to describe and depict certain aspects of things, based on their similarities.

The Lord’s church is called by several different figures, each of which gives a distinctive flavor as to what the church is and how it functions. It should be noted, first of all, that the church of the Bible is people. “And the Lord added to the church daily such as were being saved,” we are told (Acts 2:47). The church of the Lord is the saved, viewed in the aggregate.

May I call to your attention some of the names by which the Lord’s church is known in the New Testament. They are powerfully significant.

The church is called the bride of Christ (Rev. 21:2; Rev. 22:17). This describes the intimacy of the connection between Christ and His people. They are like a bride—tender, untainted, beautiful, adorned. He loves them as passionately as a groom loves his bride. Like a new bride, He will protect and provide for them, love and care for them.

The church is called the family (Eph. 3:14-15). “These things write I unto thee that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:14-15). The family is the fabric for society; the church is like that family. It is the place where tranquility and peace exist, where growing-up takes place, where there is loving correction; where there is protection from the outside elements; and where there is happiness and joy between the siblings which comprise it.

The church is called the kingdom (Matt. 16:18; Matt. 26:29, Mk. 9:1, Lk. 9:27; Jas. 2:5 etc.). The term kingdom brings to mind the power of the king. He is King. In Him reposes all the authority. He is the ruler of the monarchy, His kingdom, His church. No council, no group of ecclesiastical persons, no human hierarchy exists to rule—only He rules. He is the King. He makes the laws; and He will judge.

The church is called the flock (Isa. 40:11; Jn. 10; 1 Pet. 5:2). This is a pastoral term, implying a shepherd. He identifies Himself as The Good Shepherd (Jn. 10:11). The shepherd leads the flock. The Shepherd will give His life for the sheep; and so He did (Jn. 10:15). The Shepherd knows his sheep; they have an intimate relationship with Him. He will even “call them by name,” and “they hear his voice” (Jn. 10:3). Even the local congregation is referred to in Scripture as “the flock” (see Acts 20:28), and the Elders as subordinate shepherds.

The church is called the body (1 Cor. 12; Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:18, etc.). The figure here is graphic, one where the head is in complete control, dictating each and every movement of the body. Christ is “head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all.” The body does not control the head, but the head the body. Christ not only provides, as the head, control over the body, but growth, health and purity. “But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: from whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love” (Eph. 4:15-16). He is the head; the church is His body. He is, furthermore, the “Savior of the body” (Eph. 5:23).

The church is called His building (Mt. 16:18-f). “Upon this rock I will build my church,” He said, following Peter’s confession of His deity. He is its builder. He not only designed it in His immaculate wisdom, but He built it Himself (see Eph. 3:9-11). His building is adorned by His name, and no other. He is its owner and He dictates what goes on inside it. He is the keeper of this building and He will care for it in His own way. There is strength in this building. It rests on a strong foundation and it will never be destroyed, for it was founded upon Him Who is Everlasting.

The church is called the branches (Jn. 15). Here is the figure of productivity. He is the Vine. The branches draw their sustenance from that vine: they can produce fruit only when they are correctly connected to the true Vine. The fruit we bear is not other branches; they can only come from the vine. But the fruit we bear is the “fruit of the Spirit,” mentioned in Galatians 5:22-23 “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness temperance.” Do you not see that such fruit is impossible without a connection to the Vine?

The overriding commonality in all these different figures of the church is one: intimacy. There is an intimate connection between the Bride and His groom; a loving relation between the Father and his family; an inseparable connection between the King and His kingdom; a love and affection between the Shepherd and His sheep; a totally necessary connection between the Head and the body; a noticeable correlation between the Builder and what He has built; and an indivisible connection between the Vine and the branches.