

Images of the Church
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
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50 years ago or so, a New Testament scholar named Paul Minear wrote a book called *Images of the Church in the New Testament*. In it he surveyed all the different metaphors and similes used to describe the church. Every time a gospel or an epistle or the book of Acts compared the church to something else he wrote it down and reflected on its meaning. How many comparisons do you think he found? Would you believe 96!!!!?? 96 images of the church in the New Testament! So are you ready for a 96-point sermon? Maybe not. There will only be 4 sections to our sermon tonight; 4 separate meditations, each focusing on just one of these images. I've chosen four images that tell us something about the nature and the purpose of the church.

Family. The first image is one that mostly teaches us how to relate to each other. How should we look at the people sitting beside us in the pew, the people gathering around us for coffee after church, the people scooping casseroles beside us at pot luck suppers? They are family of course. They are brothers and sisters. One of the most prominent New Testament images for the church is church as a family. Actually, there are only two places where the church is *directly* compared to a family: Galatians 6 and I Peter 4. But the metaphor is massively supported by all the family *lingo* used in the Bible. God is referred to as 'our Father' in every NT book but one (3 John). In his letters, Paul constantly refers to his readers as brothers, which is a family image. In the gospel of Mark, Jesus says 'those who follow me are my mothers and brothers.' And in our passage, loving one another as brothers and sisters is viewed as the sign of a truly faithful church. We are the family of God and the people sitting around you are your brothers and sisters.

I think there is something very no-nonsense, very down to earth about seeing one another as brothers and sisters in a family. It strikes me that the love between brothers and sisters is the most practical kind of love out there. I think of how it was with my own brothers and sisters. We loved each other, sure, but there was absolutely nothing misty and sentimental about it. We had a blast with each other as kids. We would play together, tease each other, make up games together: I remember playing hide and seek in our neighborhood, playing cards on the dining room table, wrestling in the living room, building sand castles at the beach. There was all kinds of love and connection. But there was a lot of fighting too. Countless arguments, tears, hysterical accusations, my youngest brother used to fly into a purple rage and attack me with his fists, my other brother once broke a coke bottle over my head in a grocery store. Linda's brother called her 'squirrel bait' most of her middle school years. Sounds like brothers and sisters, doesn't it?

Sounds like the church too. Brother and sister love is a combative sort of love, a completely unsentimental sort of love, but it is a strong love. We drive each other nuts sometimes, we fight sometimes, but in the end we still love each other and stick together. How do we relate to one another in the church? We are the family of God. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. We can be completely exasperated with one another, but at the bottom we are bound together by the love of the Father, and that's something that is bigger than us all.

The Israel of God: In his book on church images, Paul Minear uses this passage to introduce another image applied to the church: The church is the Israel of God. That's an image not only suggested here, but also in Hebrews 8, and in the gospel of Matthew. The church is the Israel of God. If the first image told us how to relate to one another in the church, this image teaches us how to relate to our past. It brings us face to face with the important question: How are we

related to the Old Testament people of God? What is our relationship to Israel and the Jewish people?

There are three different ways Christians have understood the relationship between Israel and the church. The first way is the view that sees the church as a replacement for Israel. This position goes something like this: God started with Israel and tried to make a people out of her, but she rejected him. Israel was a complete disaster, so God scrapped Israel, sent Jesus, and started the church. The most extreme form of this replacement theology comes from the ancient heretic Marcion, who rejected the Old Testament entirely, and thought we should only read the New, the Old being corrupt and done. Obviously we don't agree with him. But there are more moderate, accepted versions of replacement theology too. A few years ago when I was on vacation, I went to a Reformed church. At that Reformed church, the minister preached an otherwise excellent sermon, but at one point he said, "*God planted the vine of Israel and that vine failed bear fruit. So he cut that vine down and planted a new vine, Jesus Christ.*" That's replacement theology. That's not what the Bible teaches. Replacement theology has had its political ramifications too. For years it was a dominant theological position in Europe and provided fertile ground for anti-Jewish feelings. This theology didn't cause the holocaust, but it was certainly part of what caused that horrible event.

The second way to look at Israel and the church is what people call 'two covenant theology.' In this view, God's promises to the Jewish people all still stand, alongside of God's promise to the church. There are two promises, two peoples of God, two tracks to the covenant. There is Israel, and then there is the church. This view is the view held by many large evangelical churches. It's also the view behind the Left Behind books. In this view, any Old Testament prophecy that mentions Israel still applies to today's nation of Israel. If the Bible promises that Israel will be supreme among the nations, that means that Israel will be supreme among the nations. If the Old Testament promises that Israel shall have the land from the Jordan to the Mediterranean Sea, then the modern Jewish state should occupy the land from the Jordan to the Mediterranean Sea. If God says about Abraham's descendants, 'whoever curses you I will curse,' that means if we don't want to be cursed, we always have to take Israel's side in modern political disputes. This theology obviously has massive implications for modern politics, and people who hold it tend to be unquestioning supporters of whatever Israel does.

In the Reformed church, we have a different view. Based on passages like this one, we think all those OT Israel prophecies have been fulfilled in Christ and His church. In our view, the Church is not separate from Israel on a different covenant track, the church is not a replacement for Israel, the church IS the Israel of God. Through Jesus Christ the church is the fulfillment of the promises of God. It's not a completely new tree, we grow up out of the stump of Jesse. Abraham is our Father, Sara is our Mother, the Old Testament is our family album; the modern Jewish people are our estranged cousins who left the family in a huff, but they are still related. The language Paul uses in Romans 11 is that of a tree. Old Testament Israel is the story of the beginning of the tree of salvation. That tree grows and eventually, it flowers into the Messiah, Jesus Christ. This is just how God planned it. Now we are grafted into that tree, we are grafted into Christ through baptism and so now we are part of the Israel tree. We are the Israel of God!

What is our relationship to the past? The church did not begin 2000 years ago at Pentecost. Our roots go back to the day when God said to Abraham, "Abraham, your descendants will be like the stars, and the whole earth will be blessed through you."

Exiles and Citizens. We've looked at how we relate to one another; we've looked at how we relate to the past; these images teach us how we relate to the world around us. I bring two to the

table because there are two sides to the story of how the church relates to the world and these two images reflect both sides of the answer.

Who are we in the world? 1 Peter 2 says we are exiles. “Beloved as aliens and exiles, I urge you to abstain from the desires of the flesh.” The church is an exile community; that means we are trapped in hostile enemy territory, away from our true home. We are in enemy territory and that means, like Daniel when he was an exile in Babylon, we need to resist the rulers of this age, not bow down to their idols, not take in all the delicacies they offer us; we need to keep ourselves separate, distinct. All the Bible passages that call us to guard against the desires of the flesh, all the passages that warn us not to be conformed to the world reinforce the image of a church in exile.

Ephesians strikes a different note however. “You are no longer strangers and aliens, you are citizens with the saints, and members of the household of God.” You are citizens, not aliens, says Paul. Now I admit, when Paul speaks citizenship language here, he is talking more about the relationship between Gentiles and the people of God, and less about the relationship between church and the world. But in Ephesians, to be a citizen is to be united with Jesus. To be a citizen is to be united with him who has everything under his feet and fills all things. To be a citizen is to belong to the one who rules this world. When we say we are citizens, we are citizens of the Kingdom of God, and that Kingdom is right here right now. Our world belongs to God! This is my Father’s world! When you understand yourself as a Kingdom citizen, you don’t flee from this world, you try to reclaim it for its rightful owner. When you see yourself as a Kingdom citizen, sin and evil are invaders, and your job is to cast them out so that justice and righteousness can reign. Seeing yourself as a citizen is different from seeing yourself as an exile.

So which of these biblical images do we listen to? The answer is both of course. We are citizens and exiles. We need to have both sensibilities in this complex world. Our Christian Schools capture the best of this tension well. When we educate our children in Christian schools, we teach them to be Kingdom citizens. We educate them from a Christian perspective in all subjects, so that they can go out and embody their faith as scientists and engineers and historians and business people, so that they can embody the truth that our world belongs to God! But, if we’re honest about things, we know that as our schools prepare children, they also pull them back at some distance from the rest of the world as part of that instruction. The world is full of corrupting ideas and terrible temptations, and our young children aren’t equipped to sort all that out yet, so we keep them apart, we teach them that they are different, we give them an exile consciousness so that they won’t just swallow society’s ideas about power and money and sex and freedom. There is some exile consciousness in the Christian schools too.

We are exiles! A Christian leafing through Cosmopolitan magazine, a Christian watching a horror movie should have a deep sense of, I’m a stranger here. We are citizens! Jesus is Lord of this world and he wants every square inch of creation reclaimed for God.

Branches on the Vine. How do we relate to each other, how do we relate to history, how do we relate to society, and now the critical question: How do we relate to God?

Jesus’ familiar image helps us here: He is the vine, we are the branches, we are to remain in him, and so bear fruit. Often this image is misunderstood. We hear Jesus talk about bearing fruit, we hear him say that any branch that does not bear fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire, and we start wondering about our fruit production and hoping that we won’t be thrown into the fire. We start thinking about all the sick we haven’t visited, all the naked we haven’t clothed, all the poor we haven’t helped, all the opportunities we’ve simply let go and feel our anxiety rise.

That's too bad because Jesus didn't mean these words to create anxiety, he was trying to relieve anxiety. He said all this so that our joy would be complete.

You see, Jesus spoke these words to the disciples in the upper room, right after he told them that he was leaving them to go to his Father in heaven. This made the disciples very anxious. What are we going to do!? How will we live without Jesus beside us in the flesh? How will we keep from falling apart? How will we manage to stand up against all the forces set against us? Jesus' words are an attempt to calm the anxious disciples. "Don't let your worries overwhelm you," says Jesus, just focus on this one simple thing: *Abide in me*. Whatever you do, whatever you face, whatever is tempting you or threatening you, in all times and in all places, *abide in me*. *Just do this one thing: abide in me*. I am the vine, I love you, abide in me, and you will bear much fruit. In the simplest terms possible, Jesus tells his worried disciples to stay in his love and in his words and they will always be okay.

Of course, that doesn't mean all their problems will be solved, and all their troubles will go away. If they abide in him, it doesn't mean that they will never experience darkness, danger or disappointment. The disciples will soon find out that there will be some heavy weather that will come against this vine. But if they remain in him, they will not only survive these storms, they will overcome them. On their branches will be leaves and flowers and fruit.

Heaven knows that we get anxious when we look at the chances and changes in our life. Jesus word is for us too. *"I know the road is hard. I know the storms are heavy. But as the Father has loved me so I love you. I am the vine! I have overcome all of the storms of this world, even the storm of death. Just do this one thing: Abide in me and together we shall live."*

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