

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Broadcast Date: 26 February 2016

No. T0978

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The Ministries of Peter, Paul and John: The Ministry of Paul - The Church

Some people are known for a single issue. They have a passion and desire for one thing in particular that is evident to all and permeates all that they do. Think of Martin Luther King and I'm sure almost everybody will think of his work in fighting for racial equality. Mention Florence Nightingale and people will think of the "Lady with the lamp" and a nurse during the Crimean War. Muhammed Ali was known for his boxing. Not all reputations are necessarily positive. David Cameron seems very concerned not to be remembered as the prime minister who led Britain out of Europe or participated in the breakup of the United Kingdom. Legacy is an important matter for some people. How will they be remembered? As I said, some people seem to end up being remembered for one single issue that drove them in their lives.

The Apostle Paul was not such a man. Our current series on *Truth for Today* is about the key ministries of Peter, Paul and John, three of the key figures in the early church. This morning I have the privilege of speaking to you about Paul's teaching on the church. It's certainly true that this is a truth that Paul explains and writes about many times and perhaps develops a doctrine of the church more than any other of the New Testament writers. But it would be wrong to think that Paul had nothing to say about anything else. He certainly had things to say about family life, work, money and personal conduct, but this morning we are going to think about a subject that was clearly very important to him - the church.

Have you ever thought that it's a remarkable thing that Paul was the one whom God used to explain about the church in more detail? If you're familiar with Paul's history, you might remember that before he became a Christian, whilst his name was still Saul, he hated the church. Listen to how the book of Acts records it in Acts 8:3. *"As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison."*

Saul, in his religious zeal as a Pharisee sought out Christians and arrested them, determined to do his bit in wiping out the teaching of the Gospel. But just a little later in the book of Acts, Saul is converted and his name changed to Paul (See Acts 13:9). How remarkable! What a testimony to the grace of God! This man who had just days earlier been persecuting the church became a believer. In fact, he was converted even whilst he was on his way to find more Christians to arrest and imprison (see Acts 9:1-9, Acts 22:3-11, Acts 26:12-18).

It just goes to show how remarkable the Christian Gospel is, and the changing effect it can have on people's lives. Once Paul realised that Jesus Christ really was alive, he was never the same again. We today can be thankful for this because Paul's conversion, all those years ago on the way to Damascus, was the starting point for the teaching contained in many of the books of the New Testament. Most of what we know about the significance of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus comes as a result of things God taught Paul after his conversion (see Galatians 1:12-17).

Listen to how Paul describes the change in his life as a result of his conversion when he writes to the Galatians. *"For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it ... But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles"* (Galatians 1:13, 15).

Maybe some of you listening to the broadcast this morning are new to the message of the Bible and like Saul, are sceptical about the claims of Christians concerning the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. My prayer is that God in His grace would reveal His Son to you just as He did to Paul. I haven't time this morning to go through all of the things God teaches us through Paul, but why not find a copy of the Bible and read through the New Testament to find out for yourself.

As I've already said, it's an amazing fact that Paul, the man who so persecuted the church, would be the person to teach us so much about the church. He writes in 1 Corinthians 15 of his shame because of this fact, *"For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God"* (1 Corinthians 15:9)

Two of the three Scriptures we've quoted so far teach us something very important about the church. They contain the phrase *"the church of God"* (Galatians 1:13, 1 Corinthians 15:9). That's so crucial. The Bible tells us that the church is

God's church. It's not the church of a pastor, or a denomination, or even the church of England. The church belongs to God. It is His church and we do well to remember that. I don't say that to criticise any particular church groups, but rather to remind us all of the wonderful fact that God has His church (see Matthew 16:18). Mankind may have come into all kinds of difficulties and disagreements, leading to various denominations, but God has one church, and He is in charge of it.

I'm sure you can appreciate that it would be impossible to develop everything that Paul says about the church in a twenty minute broadcast this morning. Paul has a lot to say about the ways a church should function, particularly in 1 Corinthians. He has lots to say throughout his letters about the kind of activities a church should be involved in. In addition, there are lots of sections of Paul's letters where he doesn't directly speak about what we might understand as "church activities", but by the use of phrases like "we", "together" and "one another" he clearly indicates that these instructions should be worked out in a corporate way. But I have no time to develop these thoughts further. What I want to do this morning is to consider three pictures Paul uses to describe the church and, by thinking through the implications of each picture, I hope we will both learn something about the church and be challenged about our role within it.

The three pictures we will consider today are:

1. A Body;
2. A Bride; and
3. A Pillar

I think each of these pictures has a different emphasis, although of course, there is overlap between them. When we think of the church as a body, I think the emphasis is mainly on our interaction between Christians. When it comes to the church being pictured as a bride, the focus is on the church in its relation to God, and in particular to the Lord Jesus Christ. Then when we think about the church as a pillar, the key point is our testimony in an unbelieving world.

We should be clear that, in each of these pictures, it's not a particular local church that Paul has in mind. He is speaking about the whole church, all true believers, any time, any place. So we could never think that the church we meet with is **the** bride of Christ, or **the** body of Christ, for example, but simply that we, along with churches all over the world make up a part of Christ's bride or Christ's body. Having made this point clear, we should remember that what is true of the church in its most global sense, should still be reflected in our local churches. So, although the practical points considered together this morning apply most generally to the church as a whole, we'll want to ask ourselves whether they are true of the churches we attend.

We also need to keep in mind that when Paul speaks about the church, he is always speaking about collections of individuals. Sometimes we think of churches as buildings, but Paul never speaks of the church in this way. For Paul, the building was just a convenient place for the people (or the church) to meet in. There is no real need to be fussy about words but let's remember that Paul would never speak of "going to church", rather he would speak about meeting with the church. As I say, I'm not so concerned about the form of words we use, which can be influenced by many things. Let's just keep in mind that we are more focused on the people we meet with than the building we meet in.

A Body

Let's consider our first image then, the church is described as the body of Christ. Perhaps Paul's letter to the Ephesians contains the most prolonged development of this idea. At the end of Ephesians 1, Paul writes, *"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"* (Ephesians 1:22-23).

I'm sure that it's significant that the first thing that Paul reminds the Ephesians about regarding the body of Christ is that Christ is the head of it. We always do well to remember that. God the Father has put all things under the Lord Jesus' feet. The Lord is the Head of the church. That's a reminder to us not to let personal preferences have too strong an influence on our involvement in a church. It's also a reminder to let Christ have His proper place when we gather together. Perhaps the greatest point to learn about the church from Ephesians 1:22 is that it is acknowledging Christ as the Head that brings us together as a church. Our joint acknowledgement of Him as Head is greater than any differences we may bear.

This point is further developed in Paul's next references to the church as the body of Christ. In Ephesians 2, Paul writes about Gentile believers, who were once "strangers from the covenants of promise", but had now been united with the Jewish Christians. This is how he puts it in Ephesians 2:1-16, *"For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity."*

Paul emphasises this further in Ephesians 3:6 when he says, *“that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel”*.

Paul's point in these verses is to emphasise the fact that Jewish and Gentile believers had become part of the same group. In Old Testament times, although it was possible for Gentiles to align themselves with Israel and enjoy some of God's blessings, God's dealing was in a very specific way with Israel. But now God had united peoples of all nations! There was not to be a Jewish church and a Gentile church. Instead all were to be united in one body. All were to be heirs of all of God's promise. Jesus Christ reconciled both groups to God through the cross. This is such a key point. The Lord's work on the cross tore down the barriers that had previously kept men separate. He dealt with all mankind's biggest problem, that of our sin, and reconciled us to God through the cross. All men can be reconciled to God on that same basis and on no other.

The force of this passage today can be lost since we don't feel so much the aggravation between Jewish and Gentile believers. This isn't a problem most Western Christians face. But I think the principle of the verses we've considered has many useful implications for us today. Although we don't often talk about Jewish or Gentile believers, we can be clear from this passage that there should be no racial barriers within the church. The church is not a church just for people of one nationality or culture. **All** have been reconciled to God in **one** body through the cross. Let's strive within our churches to be welcoming places for people of all nationalities and cultures and, to the extent that we're able, ensure that our practices and traditions don't unnecessarily exclude those who are different to us.

Similarly we can think of any number of differences that have the potential to separate people. Recent political decisions in the UK and in America show so clearly divisions of opinion amongst the citizens. Yet in the church it should be that even people with deeply held political conviction can be united in Christ. Whatever your convictions about current affairs, you can sit down in unity at the Lord's Table with those whose opinions differ.

We could go on and think about social differences, cultural differences, stylistic preferences and possibly many more. The simple truth of the Bible is that what unites believers in Christ so far surpasses any differences we may have. Of course, we read this clearly in the Bible, but let's consider our own lives to check we really live it out.

Paul teaches us more about the church as the body of Christ in Ephesians 4. He is now moving on to describe some practical functions of the individuals within the body of Christ. Let's read Ephesians 4:11-12, *“And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.”*

Paul's point is that individuals within the church are given gifts by God. These gifts are not given for personal gain or to give the individual a reputation, but instead for the edifying of the body of Christ. This is pursued further in Ephesians 4:16. Paul has just reminded them that Christ is the head of the body, and then says: *“from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.”*

You can sense the emphasis on togetherness in Ephesians 4:11-16. God has given each believer a gift and they are to use it to cause growth in the body. Can I press this point home a little more this morning? God has given you a gift. You may think it small and insignificant, or you may think you have a very important gift. Either way, make sure you take every opportunity to build up the body of Christ. Never use your gifts to demonstrate your own greatness. Don't use them to show others up. Use them as Christ intended, to build up His body. For some, this may be through teaching the Scriptures, for others it may through showing kindness to a stranger. Perhaps it could involve taking a meal to a friend who is overwhelmed with work or visiting someone who is sick in hospital. Perhaps someone needs the encouragement of a well-chosen verse of Scripture. Use the gifts God has given you to build up His body.

Similar thoughts to those we've already considered about the body of Christ are found elsewhere in Paul's writings. It would be time well spent for you to consider reading Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Colossians 1:18-24, Colossians 2:11-19 and Colossians 3:15. If you didn't catch all of those references, you can find a transcript or recording of this message on the *Truth for Today* website (www.truthfortoday.org.uk). Although you'll find similar verses to those we've thought about, Scripture never repeats itself unnecessarily so you'll find much to repay your study in these verses.

A Bride

Let's move on to our second image of the church in Paul's writings, that of the bride of Christ. I need to be clear that Paul doesn't actually use this expression. It's used in Revelation by John, but never by Paul. But I think we'll see that the image of a bride is clearly in Paul's mind. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 11:2, *“For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.”*

Paul wants to present the Corinthian believers as a chaste virgin to Christ. Certainly he is using an imagery, but the implication is clear. He wants the conduct of these Corinthian Christians to be nothing other than holy and devoted to Christ. In a similar way to how a bride longs for her groom, the church is to long for Christ. The Corinthian believers weren't to go chasing off after other things, but keep themselves pure for Christ. He was to be the object of their longing. I wonder if we could honestly say that was true in our own lives? Would it be true of us that we could be presented to Christ like a chaste virgin? Perhaps not so much as we would like, but we thank God that He loves us anyway and is gracious towards us. May the Lord increase our longing for Him and our desire to be pleasing to Him.

One of the most famous passages in Paul's writings that links the relationship between Christ and the church to that between a husband and wife is found in Ephesians 5. Let's read Ephesians 5:25-29 together, *"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church."*

The main thrust of this passage is to teach husbands how they should behave towards their wives, and that's a necessary lesson for us to learn. Perhaps any husbands listening to the broadcast this morning might like to reread Ephesians 5:25-29 and reflect upon the challenging responsibilities God gives us. But I just wanted to draw to our attention this morning what the passage says to us about how Christ feels about the church. First, we are told that Christ loves the church just like a good husband should love his wife. In fact, that's not entirely true. Christ's love for the church is not based on a model of a husband's love for his wife. It's the other way round. Husbands are to model their love on the great example of Christ's love for His church. That really just emphasises the extent to which Christ loves His church. Better than even the best of husbands! There is a relationship between Christ and the church that is even more intimate and even more loving than the best of marriages. We've already thought in 2 Corinthians 11:2 that the church is to behave like a bride keeping herself for her husband and longing for him. We would point out here that the church is not asked to keep longing for an imperfect husband who may or may not disappoint. The church's relationship is with the very best of husbands. His interest is in nourishing and cherishing us. He wants to sanctify and cleanse. Did you notice that He does that through His word? That is all the more reason to keep on reading the Bible. Why not read it daily to find out what the Lord wants to teach you in order to sanctify and cleanse you!

One final verse in which Paul likens the relationship between Christ and the church to a marriage is found in Romans 7:4: *"Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another - to Him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God."*

Here the emphasis is again on our being linked to Christ. When we became a Christian, we left our old life behind and found our affection drawn towards Christ. We've not given up something good and got something bad. We've turned towards Jesus Christ, who died and was raised from the dead. We've been "married to another" so that we could bear fruit to God. The image of the church as a body reminded us of our responsibilities towards each other. The image of the church as a bride reminds us of our responsibilities towards the Lord Himself.

A pillar

One final image in Paul's writings then. The church is a pillar. Paul writes to Timothy and says, *"I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory."* (1 Timothy 3:15-16)

Having reminded Timothy that the church is the church of the living God, Paul reminds Timothy that the church is a pillar and ground of the truth. I understand that in those days, pillars could be built for little else other than to be something that could be admired and so that people would see the greatness of the person who built it. Perhaps that is the idea Paul had in mind. The church is to stand for all around to see the greatness of God. Pillars are a sign of strength. The church is to stand as a strong testimony to the truth of God. Our churches ought to be known for standing for the truth. We must stand for truth about God. That's clear from the verses we read. We can't allow wrong things about God to be taught. We stand firm for what is true. We've run out of time to develop this any further, but let's finish our meditations on the church this morning by challenging ourselves about how we interact with other believers as the body of Christ, about our devotion to the Lord as the bride of Christ, and about our testimony in the world around us as the pillar and ground of the truth.

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