WHAT ARE A CHURCH AND ITS MEMBERS LIKE?

Do you know what a mixed metaphor is? It’s using two different images that don’t fit together in a single utterance.

You might remember Jiminy Cricket from *Pinocchio* exclaiming, “You buttered your bread. Now sleep in it!” or have heard the phrase, “Take a flying hike.” To this day I sometimes repeat the words of Biff, the thick-headed bully from the *Back to the Future* movies: “Let’s make like a tree and get out of here.”

Then there’s humorist Dave Barry’s description of the 1929 Stock Market Crash: “The nation’s seemingly prosperous economy was revealed to be merely a paper tiger with feet of clay living in a straw house of cards that had cried ‘wolf’ once too often.”

Yet it’s not only the comedy writers who mix their metaphors. Poets do as well, though their mixtures are more subtle. T. S. Elliot opens one of his poems with a line about “forgetful snow,” and William Butler Yeats writes about treading on dreams. Strictly speaking, snow cannot be forgetful, and dreams cannot be tread upon. But the unexpected pairing of metaphors in both cases allows us to see true things that we may not ordinarily see with more literal language.

You might have noticed that the authors of the New Testament often mix their metaphors, and deliberately so like the poets. Think of Paul saying to the Ephesians, “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened” (Eph. 1:18). Hearts don’t have eyes, but mixing them up helps us to see something deep and profound.

PHOTOS OF PARADING FRUIT BOWLS

When the New Testament authors start talking about the church and its members, they push this mixing of metaphors into hyperdrive, like hitting the turbo button on a racehorse. Paul talks about being baptized into a body, as if one could be immersed into a torso. Peter talks about Christians as “living stones,” itself a mixed metaphor, and then he says that these “living stones are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:5). If I had written a sentence like that in my high school English class, my teacher would have picked up his red pen and gone to town. I’m not sure what he would have done in town once he got there, but at least he would have had his red pen with him.

When you open up the Bible and read what God says about the church, you find yourself staring at one big mixed metaphor. We read that the church is like a body, a flock of sheep, branches of a vine, a bride, a temple, God’s building, a people, exiles, a holy nation, a royal priesthood, salt of the earth, the Israel of God, the elect lady, and on and on. The images keep coming, one piled on top of the other. It’s like flipping through a photo album of images. Or maybe watching a parade. Or maybe reaching into a fruit bowl. I guess it’s like looking at a photo album filled with parading fruit bowls.

In the last chapter, we considered the institutional local church: the assembly of believers that Christ instituted for the specific purpose of exercising the keys of the kingdom and making disciples through preaching and the ordinances. That is what a local church is. It’s a key-carrying body established by Jesus for the sake of everyone he has purchased with his blood.

But ending our description here would be like saying a marriage is the marital covenant while saying nothing about all the activities that the marital covenant makes uniquely and wonderfully possible, such as partnership building and physical intimacy. The institutional view needs to be complemented by an organic view, we said. The rules of an institution, mind you, don’t only constrain, they commission. They empower. They build a platform for activity.

The keys of the kingdom, followed by Christ’s Great Commission in Matthew 28, enable Christ’s disciples to grab hold of the wonders of the new covenant and put them into practice on earth. And this is where all the biblical metaphors for the church come into play: body, bride, temple, family, and so forth. We live out our body-ness, our bride-ness, our temple-ness, and our family-ness through the accountability structures of the church’s judicial activity of member affirmation, oversight, and discipline. The institutional language of kingdom and keys, you might say, acts like the bowl that holds all the fruit or the album that features the photos.

Sure enough, Jesus’s kingdom is not metaphorical, at least not in the same way as these other metaphors for the church. Jesus’s kingdom really is a kingdom. He really does rule his people. But the church is not really a human body, a bride in a dress, a temple made of bricks, a family of biologically related individuals, and so forth. Those are metaphors. That’s why we began with the idea of Christ’s kingdom—to help us describe what the church and its members are. But then we need to turn to the organic church, or what a church and its members are like. These members are like a body, like a bride being made ready, like a temple, like a family, like a royal priesthood, and so forth.

That’s why it’s not enough just to say that the church is an embassy of official citizens. When I walked into the US Embassy in Brussels, nobody referred to me as
brother as they do at church. Why do they call me a brother at church? Because belonging to a church is belonging to a family of sorts.

The church is unlike anything on earth. It’s simultaneously family-like, body-like, flock-like—you get the idea. That’s a hard picture to draw, even for the best artists.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BIBLICAL METAPHORS FOR THE CHURCH

Let me make several more points about these metaphors and why they’re so important to understanding church membership.

1. Each one has a job to do for describing something about our union in a church. Each metaphor teaches us something different about what a church and its members are like. To describe the church as a family is to speak about its relational intimacy and shared identity. To call it a body is to say that its members are mutually dependent but have different roles. To refer to it as the temple of the Spirit is to say that God specially identifies himself and dwells with these people. The language of vine and branch communicates the church’s dependence on Jesus and his Word for its life. Do you see?

Think about it in terms of union. The union of a married couple serves a different purpose than the union of two bricks in a building because they are different kinds of unions. But what’s our union within our churches supposed to be like? Like a marital union? A union of bricks? What? Well, we need to borrow words and ideas from all these different images to be able to characterize relationships within a local church. Isn’t that amazing?

So when people ask me, “Is church membership even in the Bible?” I’m half tempted to reply, “No, it’s not in the Bible, at least not in the way that you mean.” The Bible has a much richer and more complex vision of how Christians should live out their unity in local churches. It’s as though we’ve been looking for apples when really we should be looking for whole bowls of fruit.

There’s nothing on earth like the local church.

2. We need all these images for describing a church and its members. If all these metaphors or images have a job to do, then we need all of them. You cannot just pick your favorite fruit from the fruit bowl and leave the rest—“I’ll take the apples and leave the oranges, thank you.” No, you have to grab the whole bowl.

In other words, you should think twice before deciding which metaphor for the church is most important. Some Christians in church history have tried to say that the church is more the body of Christ or more the people of God. But that’s like saying I’m more a husband than a father, or more a father than a husband. I admit, my wife or kids might prefer one or the other, but I’m irreducibly both. You need the categories “father” and “husband” and a number of others to describe who I really am.

Unhealthy churches, even denominations, are sometimes the result of church leaders who have picked their favorite metaphors out of the bowl and left the others—they become all intimacy (family) or all hierarchy (body).

3. Each of these metaphors gets put into practice locally. Every biblical metaphor for the church becomes embodied—puts on a body—in the local church. The family, the body, the temple, the people—all of these descriptions of Christ’s church don’t just float around in the air. They become concrete in particular places. They get put into practice locally.

But don’t all Christians everywhere belong to the family of God? Indeed, they do, but God gives you the opportunity to act like a family with your local church; you treat them first and foremost as your sisters and brothers. Doesn’t the body of Christ extend to Christians throughout the world? Of course it does, but you live as the body of Christ in your local church. One of you gets to be the mouth, one of you the elbow, and one of you the esophagus.

That means you need all of them to describe every living church you have ever encountered. Right there at First Baptist or Second Presbyterian or St. Mark’s Lutheran or Grace Community or The Journey you have the people of God. You have the temple of the Spirit. And you have the body of Christ. You don’t have just an arm or an ankle of Christ’s body.

Paul’s description of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12 provides a great illustration of this. Is Paul referring to the local body in Corinth or to the body of Christ universally when he talks about the body and its members in this passage? Consider the sentence: “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Cor. 12:27 ESV). That sounds local. But earlier in the chapter he had included himself: “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (12:13 ESV). Paul wasn’t in Corinth. So is he talking about the universal church?

The issue is not so difficult when we remember that the universal church is present in the local church. The local church is an outpost of the future universal church. That means Paul leans now in one direction, now in another. When he writes, “The parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable” (1 Cor. 12:22 ESV), I would argue that he’s leaning into an emphasis on the local body. Yet when he writes, “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1 Cor. 12:13 ESV), I would argue that he’s leaning into a universal emphasis. In short, 1 Corinthians 12 is a wonderful illustration of how a local church should begin to embody today what Christ’s end-time gathering will look like.

To state this the other way around, your membership in a local body now presents a picture of your membership in his end-time body. You might be content
for the whole idea of “church” to exist in your head. But Jesus wasn’t so content. He wanted his church and your membership in it to show up in real time. As such, you cannot fulfill your obligations to other Christians and to church leaders without the local church, at least not in the way Scripture calls you to fulfill them. And other Christians and church leaders cannot fulfill their obligations to you without the local church. You need a body of Christ to be the body of Christ. You need a family of God to be the family of God.

How do you fulfill Jesus’s command to “love one another” (John 13:34)? How do you fulfill Paul’s command to “carry each other’s burdens” (Gal. 6:2)? How do you obey Peter’s words, “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others” (1 Pet. 4:10)?

You obey all these commands through your (membership in the) local church.

Here’s another way to think about what’s at stake: How should we respond to the person who claims to be “righteous in Christ” but never pursues righteousness? We would say that he was self-deceived, and we would urge him to repent. Those who have been freely given Christ’s righteousness in turn pursue righteousness (e.g. Rom. 6:2; also 1 John 3:7). By the same token, how should we respond to the person who claims to belong to the body of Christ universally but never actually joins a body of Christ on earth? We should say the person is self-deceived and should repent.

Christ’s body, the Father’s people, and the Spirit’s temple will fully gather in glory. But amazingly you can find imperfect expressions, outposts, or embassies of that gathering right now in the local church.

There’s nothing on earth like the local church—it comes from the end of time!  

4. The metaphors aren’t really metaphors but shadows. You can see this in Ephesians 5. Paul writes, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:31–32 ESV). Paul is talking about marriage, but then he unexpectedly changes the subject. He says marriage refers to Christ and the church. Marriage is a symbol or shadow of Christ and the church. We get it backward if we think that marriage is the reality and that Christ’s love for the church is a symbol of marriage.

It’s as if God, before he created the world, said to himself, “How can I weave into the fabric of creation a symbol or shadow of my Son’s covenant love for the church? How can I proclaim this universally, so that everyone sees it and realizes that they are standing in the shadow of something very, very big?”

Answer: he created marriage. It’s the shadowy outline that points to the real reality—Christ and the church.

The same is true, I believe, for all the biblical metaphors for the church. They are the shadows of something even greater. Think also of Paul’s reference to the heavenly Father “from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name” (Eph. 3:15). God placed earthly fathers on earth so that all the world would have a shadowy outline of what our relationship with the heavenly Father is to be like.

Why do you think God has created brothers and sisters? Again, so that everyone gets a dim sense of the true reality that begins now in the local church and awaits us completely in glory.

What about branches on the vine? It gives us a dim picture of our dependence on the Word of Christ. I trust that in glory our utter, complete, and total dependence on him will become even plainer. Even Old Testament metaphors for the church, like the temple, though pointing backward to the life of Israel, point forward to greater realities in the age to come.

THERE’S NOTHING LIKE IT
Are you beginning to understand why I keep saying there’s nothing in the world like the local church and its members? The relationships that we share in the local church will ultimately prove more interconnected than a physical body, more safe than a father’s embrace, more collegial than brotherly love, more resilient than a stone house, more holy than a priesthood, and on and on we could go.

This is what Jesus has prepared for us in glory, and this is what we begin to practice right now at First Baptist or Second Presbyterian or The Journey. We practice it with all those still-sinful and still-strange people who step on our toes, just as we step on theirs.

What are the local church and its members like? They are like a body, like a bride being made ready, like a temple, like a family, like a royal priesthood . . . but in every case even more!

BACK TO REALITY?
Having said all this, every church member on the planet knows that life in the local church doesn’t always feel this way—so interconnected, so safe, so collegial, so resilient, so holy. In fact, it can feel the opposite.

One woman recently left my own church feeling disappointed and hurt by our church. She wrote to me in an e-mail, “Regardless of whether they are believers or not, the members of my family will go to lengths for me like no church family ever would. And so, honestly, I no longer buy that family and community picture the way I bought it before. The family I’ve been born into and the friends I’ve had for a lifetime will be the people I can truly count on.”

These are the words of someone whose hopes have been dashed. She was taught the church was one thing, and she experienced something very different.

What shall we say about realities like these? Here’s what I said to her:

For starters, I’m sorry. I’m sorry for our sin and the hurt we’ve caused. I trust the sin is real and the hurt is real.

Next, please forgive us. We need you to forgive us, so that we can be reconciled in Christ, even if we don’t belong to the same congregation.

Finally, will you look to the gospel with me? I think of Peter, this rock on which the church is built, promising Jesus that he wouldn’t deny him, and then denying him. Later, Peter wouldn’t eat with an entire class of church members, the Gentiles. Still, Jesus died for betrayers and hypocrites and jerks and racists like this Peter. And Peter is the one who, later, talked about the church as “living stones” and a “spiritual house.” Really, Peter? Have you been so strong, resilient, and spiritual with your brothers and sisters in Christ?

Here’s the good news: it’s not the strength and love of people like Peter that we have to rely upon and trust. It’s the strength and love of Christ. Through his work on the cross, we have been made his body, his family, his temple, his people, his flock, his joy and crown. He has made us what we are, not us. Now, he’s perfecting us to become what we (strangely) already are.

So hang tight. Stick with us. Persevere in forgiveness and love. We’ll get there—not because of us, but because of him.

Your brother in him,
Jonathan

Twelve Reasons
Membership Matters

1. It’s biblical. Jesus established the local church and all the apostles did their ministry through it. The Christian life in the New Testament is church life. Christians today should expect and desire the same.

2. The church is its members. To be a church in the New Testament is to be one of its members (read through Acts). And you want to be part of the church because that’s who Jesus came to rescue and reconcile to himself.

3. It’s a prerequisite for the Lord’s Supper. The Lord’s Supper is a meal for the gathered church, that is, for members (see 1 Cor. 11:20–33). And you want to take the Lord’s Supper. It’s the team flag that makes the church team visible to the nations.

4. It’s how you officially represent Jesus. Membership is the church’s affirmation that you are a citizen of Christ’s kingdom and therefore a passport-carrying Jesus representative before the nations. And you want your representation to be authorized. Closely related to this. . .

5. It’s how you declare your highest allegiance. Your membership on the team, which becomes visible when you wave the flag of the Lord’s Supper, is a public testimony that your highest allegiance belongs to Jesus. Trials and persecution may come, but your only words are, “I am a Christian.”

6. It’s how you embody and experience biblical images. It’s within the accountability structures of the local church that Christians live and experience the interconnectivity of his body, the spiritual fullness of his temple, and the safety and intimacy and shared identity of his family.
7. **It’s how you serve other Christians.** Membership helps you to know which Christians on planet Earth you are specifically responsible to love, serve, warn, and encourage. It enables you to fulfill your biblical responsibilities to Christ’s body (for example, see Eph. 4:11–16, 25–32).

8. **It’s how you follow Christian leaders.** Membership helps you to know which Christian leaders on planet Earth you are called to obey and follow. Again, it allows you to fulfill your biblical responsibility to them (see Heb. 13:7, 17).

9. **It helps Christian leaders lead.** Membership lets Christian leaders know which Christians on planet Earth they will “give an account” for (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2).

10. **It enables church discipline.** It gives you the biblically prescribed place to participate in the work of church discipline responsibly, wisely, and lovingly (1 Cor. 5).

11. **It gives structure to your Christian life.** It places an individual Christian’s claim to obey and follow Jesus into a real-life setting where authority is actually exercised over us (see John 14:15; 1 John 2:19; 4:20–21). It’s God’s discipling program.

12. **It builds a witness and invites the nations.** Membership puts the alternative rule of Christ on display for the watching universe (see Matt. 5:13; John 13:34–35; Eph. 3:10; 1 Pet. 2:9–12). The very boundaries, which are drawn around the membership of a church, yield a society of people that invites the nations to something better. It’s God’s evangelism program.