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The Whole Church—A Brief Biblical Survey¹

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I The Origin of the Church

If we think of the church as the community of people who confess Jesus of Nazareth as Lord and Saviour, and who seek to live as his followers in the power of the Holy Spirit, then the historical origin of that community, defined in relation to Jesus Christ, must be traced back to the day of Pentecost in the New Testament. However, Christians believe that the church is a community that has been called into existence by God, a people constituted by God for God's own purpose in the world. And the roots of that calling and constitution go much further back than Pentecost. If we want to understand what happened in the Gospel and Acts, we have to set this New Testa-

ment story in the light of Israel in the Old Testament. That means going back to Abraham. But then we shall discover that we can't understand Abraham either unless we set him in the context of all that happened before him. So all in all, it really would be best to start at the very beginning—not with the birth of the church, but with the birth of the world. We need to look briefly at Genesis 1-11.

The Bible begins with the story of creation. The universe we inhabit is the creation of the one, living, personal God, who made it 'good'. He created us in his own image, to rule over the earth on his behalf, with spiritual and moral responsibilities: to love and obey God, to love and serve one another, and to enjoy and care for the rest of creation. However, with the entrance of sin and evil into human life, all of these dimensions of our existence have been fractured and distorted. We chose to rebel against our creator, and substitute our own moral autonomy for his authority. We live with all manner of personal and social sin—fear, anger, violence, injustice, oppression and corruption. And

¹ This is adapted from my article in Alister McGrath, *The New Lion Handbook, Christian Belief* (Oxford: Lion, 2006), pp. 208-259.

we exploit, pollute and destroy the earth he told us to care for. The climax of this sad catalogue of human sin comes with the story of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11. To prevent a unified humanity acting in total arrogance, God divides human languages with the resultant confusion of communication. But the further result is that by the end of this part of the biblical story, we find a humanity that is fractured, divided, and scattered over the face of the earth that is under God's curse. Is there any hope for the world—specifically for the nations of humanity?

God's answer to the question posed by Genesis 1-11 is the story contained in the rest of the Bible, from Genesis 12 to Revelation 22. It is the story of God's work of redemption within history. It centres on the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And it comes to its climactic finale in the return of Christ and his reign over the new creation. The remarkable thing is that this whole Bible story begins and ends with the nations of humanity. In Genesis 11 they were united in arrogance, only to be scattered under judgement. In Revelation 7:9 they will be gathered as 'a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language.' This final picture of the nations in Revelation, however, is actually a portrait of the church—the multinational community of God's redeemed humanity. And its multinational nature goes back to the promise God made to Abraham, that through him all nations on earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:3).

So the church, considered as the community of God's people throughout history, fills the gap between Babel and

the new creation. This is the community that begins with one man and his wife (Abraham and Sarah), becomes a family, then a nation, and then a vast throng from every nation and language. This is the church in its fully biblical perspective.

What can we learn about this community from the account of its earliest beginning in the call of Abraham? Three things stand out in the promise and narratives of Genesis, three things that should be essential marks of the people of God in any era: blessing, faith and obedience.

A Community of Blessing

Blessing was God's first word, as he successively blessed his own acts of creation in Genesis 1. After the flood, God blessed Noah and made a covenant with all life on earth. But repeated sin and failure seemed to reinforce only the language and reality of God's curse. Where can blessing be found? God's answer is to call Abraham and to promise to bless him and his descendants. So this new community stemming from Abraham will be the recipients of God's blessing. There is a fresh start here, for humanity and creation. But blessing is not just passively received. Abraham is also mandated to 'be a blessing' (Gen. 12:2). The covenant promise God makes to him is that all nations on earth will find blessing through him. It will take the rest of the Bible to show how this can be fulfilled, but it does mark out this community as those who both experience God's blessing and are the means of passing it on to others. Blessing received and blessing shared, is part of the essence of the church.

A Community of Faith.

'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness', says Paul (Gal. 3:6), echoing Genesis 15:6. Hebrews also strongly highlights Abraham as a man of faith (Heb. 11:8-19), having earlier said that 'without faith it is impossible to please God' (Heb. 11:6). So the community that stems from Abraham must be marked as a people who trust in the promise of God, rather than trusting in their capacity to build their own future security (as they tried at Babel). This is why one common name for Christians is particularly appropriate—they are simply 'believers'.

A Community of Obedience.

Because of his faith, Abraham obeyed God; he got up and left his homeland at God's command. And when he faced the supreme test of sacrificing the son who embodied all God had promised him, he was willing to obey even then, though God intervened to stop him. So at the climax of that narrative, God re-confirms his promise to bless all nations because of Abraham's obedience (Gen. 22:15-18). So Hebrews 11 and James 2:20-24 set Abraham's obedience alongside his faith as proof of his authentic relationship with God.

The church, then, in tracing its roots back to God's call and promise to Abraham, finds here some of its key identity marks (we shall see more later). It is the community that not only experiences God's rich *blessing* but also is commissioned to be the means of blessing to others. It is the community that lives by *faith* in the promise of God, and proves that faith by practical and sometimes sacrificial *obedience*.

II The people of God in the Old Testament

If the church as the biblical people of God began with Abraham, then we need to give some attention to the Old Testament part of its story. We need to see how some of the things that Israel believed about themselves in their relationship with God and the world are strongly reflected in what the Christian church believes about its own existence and mission in the world. So we shall list some of the key concepts in the Old Testament that governed Israel's sense of identity, and in each case see how the New Testament shows that the church has inherited the same self-understanding.

Election

The foundation of Israel's faith was that God had chosen them as his own people. They were the seed of Abraham whom God had chosen and called. They were not a nation who had chosen to worship this particular god. Rather, this God had chosen them as his particular people. They would not exist at all apart from that divine choice and calling. Two things need to be said immediately.

First, the Israelites were not to imagine that their election by God owed anything to their own numerical greatness or moral superiority. Far from it, they were a tiny nation, and no more righteous than other nations. The roots of election lie exclusively in the love and grace of God and for reasons known only to him (Deut. 7:7-10).

Second, they had been chosen, not primarily for their own benefit but for the sake of the rest of the nations.

Blessing Abraham and his descendants was God's intended means of bringing blessing to all nations whom Genesis 11 has shown to be in such a disastrous state. Election, then, is not primarily a privilege but a responsibility. It means being chosen for a task, being a chosen instrument by which God will fulfil his mission of universal blessing.

'You', said Peter in his letter to the scattered groups of early Christians, 'are a chosen people' (1 Pet. 2:9). The church stands in organic continuity with Israel as the elect people of God. But the same two vital points apply to the New Testament church as to Old Testament Israel. Such election is entirely by God's grace, not based on anything in us that made us 'choice-worthy'. And election is fundamentally missional in purpose. We are chosen, not so that we alone might enjoy salvation, but so that we should be the means of God's salvation reaching others—as Peter went on to point out in the following verses. The church exists in the world as the community that God has chosen and called in order to serve God's mission to bring the nations from the situation described in Genesis 4-11 to that portrayed in Revelation 7.

Redemption

Israel knew themselves to be a people whom God had redeemed. They looked back to the great historical deliverance of their ancestors from slavery in Egypt and saw it as the proof of the love, justice, power and incomparable greatness of their God. The language of exodus (redemption, deliverance, mighty acts of justice) filled the worship of Israel, motivated their law and

ethics, and inspired hope at both national and personal levels for God's future deliverance. The memory of exodus was kept alive in the annual Passover celebration. Israel was a people who knew their history. And through their history they knew their God as Redeemer.

The New Testament explicitly sees the cross of Christ through the lens of the exodus (Lk. 9:31). For on the cross God achieved the redemption of the world, the defeat of the forces of evil, and the liberation of his people. The Christian church therefore looks back to Calvary as much as Israel did to the exodus. For Christ, our Passover lamb has been sacrificed for us (1 Cor. 5:7). Christians too are people of memory and hope, both of which are focused in their central feast, the eucharist or Lord's Supper. So the church stands in organic continuity with Old Testament Israel as the people whom God has redeemed.

Covenant

Another dominant concept in Israel's theology was their covenant relationship with God. This too goes back to Abraham. Covenant involves a promise or commitment on the part of God, and a required response on the part of the one with whom the covenant is made. God promised Abraham to bless him, make him a great nation, and to bless all nations through his descendants. Abraham's response was faith and obedience. God extended this covenant to the whole nation of Israel at Mount Sinai after the exodus. In the same context, God makes known his personal name, Yahweh. This name was forever associated in Israel's mind with the

exodus (in which Yahweh proved his redemptive power), and with Sinai (at which Yahweh revealed his character, covenant and law to Israel). So Israel understood themselves to be uniquely the covenant community of Yahweh God. He was committed to them in saving grace, historical protection and blessing, and long-term purpose for the world. They were to be committed to him in sole loyalty and ethical obedience.

Here again there is organic continuity between the testaments. For the church is the people of the new covenant, foretold in the Old Testament and inaugurated by Christ through his death and resurrection. So the church is a community in committed relationship with God. He is committed to those who are united to Christ through faith in his blood, and they are committed to him in exclusive worship and ethical obedience.

Worship

Jesus, it has been said, came to a people who knew how to pray. The people of Israel were committed to worship the one living God, and the rich heritage of that is to be found, of course, in the book of Psalms. The language of adoration, praise, thanksgiving, appeal, lament, and protest was well developed in the worshipping life of Israel. So much so that Deuteronomy could ask what other nation had their gods near them the way the LORD was close to Israel when they prayed to him (Deut. 4:7).

Naturally, therefore, the Christian church that sprang from the womb of Old Testament Israel began as a worshipping community. Indeed this is one

of the commonest postures of the church in the book of Acts—gathered for worship, prayer, and scriptural teaching, just as the Jews did. And it is presupposed in all Paul's letters that the churches to which he wrote were fundamentally communities that knew how to worship God, even if their enthusiasm to do so could itself present problems. And as we shall see, worshipping God is of the very essence of the church, and will be so eternally.

Struggle

Old Testament Israel had high ideals, drawn from their covenant relationship with God, but there was nothing idealistic about their historical existence. It is vital to remember that all the truths mentioned above were lived out in the struggle of being an all-too-human society in the midst of the world of nations just as fallen and sinful as Israel itself. So the Old Testament honestly and painfully records Israel's terrible failures alongside all the remarkable affirmations of their faith and aspirations. They sinned and they suffered. They failed internally and they were attacked externally. Their history is a long catalogue of struggle between those who brought the word of God to them and those who were determined to resist the will and ways of their God.

And in all of this too we see the church as in a mirror. In the paragraphs that follow we must survey many aspects of the Bible's teaching about what the church is and is meant to be. But we must not lose sight of the fact that, although the church is ultimately God's own creation, draws its identity and mission from God, and will accomplish God's purpose, the church

is also a community of sinners—for-given sinners, sure, but fallen sinners still.

In all these ways, then, and many more, the church stands in organic continuity with Old Testament Israel. Of course there are differences. However, the unity of God's people in the Bible is a far more important theological truth than the different periods of their historical existence. Throughout the whole Bible, the people of God are those who are chosen and called by God to serve his purpose of blessing the nations. They are those who have experienced the redeeming grace and power of God in history, ultimately accomplished through Christ on the cross. They are those who stand in committed covenant relationship with God, enjoying the security of his promise and responding in exclusive loyalty and ethical obedience. They are those who are set apart by him and for him to be, and to live as, a distinct and holy community within the surrounding world. They are those who live to worship the living God eternally, and yet also live within all the ambiguities of historical life on this sinful planet and are as yet far from perfect. In all these things, the church stands in continuity with Old Testament Israel, for as Paul puts it, we are sharers in the same promise, the same inheritance and the same good news (Eph. 3:6). In Christ Jesus, we belong to the same olive tree (Rom. 11:17-24; see below).

III The People of God in the New Testament

When we come, then, to the New Testament, in what new ways do we find

the church described? Clearly, the person of Jesus Christ becomes the central and defining presence, to which all descriptions of his followers relate. First of all, Jesus comes as the fulfilment of the promise of God in the Old Testament, so the followers of Jesus are those who live in the light of that fulfilment.

'The time is fulfilled'

In the earliest recorded preaching of Jesus (Mk. 1:15), we hear the note of fulfilment that dominates the Gospels. Throughout the Old Testament period and beyond, the people of Israel grew in expectation that their God would bring about a new state of affairs in human history and they looked forward to that future with hope.

That hope is now fulfilled, said the New Testament writers, through what was inaugurated in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. As Messiah (God's anointed one), Jesus embodied Israel in his own person—taking their destiny and fulfilling their mission. In his life and teaching he inaugurated the kingdom of God, demonstrating the power of God's reign in word and deed. In his death he took upon himself the judgement of God against sin, not just on behalf of his own people Israel, but for the whole world. In his resurrection, God fulfilled his promise to redeem Israel. As Paul put it, 'what God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus' (Acts 13:32). Before his ascension, he commissioned his followers to carry forward the Abrahamic mission of Israel, now focused on the name of Christ himself, to bring the blessings of repentance and forgive-

ness to all nations (Lk. 24:46-47). And to empower them for this, the risen Christ sent the Holy Spirit, whose outpouring had been prophesied as a sign of God's new age of salvation and blessing (Isa. 32:15-20; Joel 2:28-32).

The outpouring of the Spirit of God at Pentecost demonstrated that the new era of fulfilment had begun. The crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth had accomplished what God had promised. Those who were responding in repentance and faith could now belong to the restored Israel in Christ, whether they were Jews like his first followers, or Gentiles from the nations who were also now invited to belong to this new community.

As the community of those who have responded to God's action in Jesus Christ, then, the church is described in the New Testament by several simple terms. These are terms that were used even before the term 'Christian' was invented, and they remain perennially true as descriptions of all members of the church, for they are all related to Jesus.

Disciples

The original nucleus of the Christian church in the New Testament was the group of disciples of Jesus. 'Disciples', means learners—those who are the followers and adherents of a teacher or master. From the Gospels we learn that there were three main aspects to being disciples of Jesus, all of which are still marks of belonging to his church.

First, disciples are those whom Jesus has called to himself, *to be with him*. This is not just following the

teaching of a dead leader. To be a disciple is to be in a constant relationship with Jesus; or rather, it is to experience the truth of the last promise he made to his disciples, 'I am with you always' (Mt. 28:20).

Second, disciples are *those who obey Jesus*. It is a matter of personal loyalty, in which we take all Jesus said with great seriousness, and submit to his authority. That means submission of mind, heart and will to Jesus Christ.

Third, disciples are *commissioned and sent out by Jesus*, in his name (which means, with his authority), to make disciples of the nations. That is, discipleship is a self-replicating mission.

Jesus had a special group of twelve disciples, eleven of whom later became known as *apostles*. But the Gospels also speak of a wider group of disciples, ordinary followers of Jesus. And although the word 'disciple' itself is not greatly used in the New Testament after the Gospels, it is clear that the church is always a community of disciples, the followers of Jesus who live with his presence, submit to his teaching, and carry forward his mission.

Witnesses

'You are my witnesses', said Jesus to his disciples, after his resurrection and before his ascension (Lk. 24:48; Acts 1:8). Almost certainly Jesus was echoing the same words that God had spoken to Israel in Isaiah (43:10-12). Israel was supposed to be the people who bore witness among the surrounding nations to the reality of their God, Yahweh. The nations would come to know who is really God from the testimony of those to whom he has entrusted the task of witnessing to

their own historical experience of him.

Similarly, Jesus is entrusting the truth about himself to those who had witnessed him. Originally, of course, the words were spoken to the original apostles, who had personally witnessed the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus (Acts 3:15). But by extension, all Christians are called to bear witness to what they have experienced of the saving love of God in Christ. The church is the guardian of that apostolic witness. Sometimes the cost of bearing that witness is high, as the earliest Christians found, and countless others down the centuries have also proved. The word ‘martyr’ originally meant simple ‘witness’. But since that witness so often ended in death at the hands of those who rejected the word of witness, it acquired the added meaning of one who gives his or her life rather than compromise their testimony.

Believers

The next common description of the earliest Christians (before they got that name) in the book of Acts is ‘believers’. This too goes back to the Gospels, of course, because Jesus so frequently called for faith, along with repentance. Faith is the key to entering the kingdom of God, and to receiving its blessings, including forgiveness, healing, and eternal life. Faith too, like discipleship and witness, is entirely directed to the person of Jesus himself. It is not just a matter of believing certain propositions, though it does include believing the claims of Christ. Rather it means an act of personal trust in God, focussed on Jesus as the one who has fulfilled God’s promises

and who died and rose again for our salvation. The church, then, is essentially a community of disciples of Christ, witnesses to Christ, and believers in Christ.

IV Pictures of the Church

The church is much more than just a collection of individuals who claim to be disciples of, witnesses to, and believers in Jesus Christ. The church as *a whole* is a significant entity. It is a historical reality in the world, with its spiritual roots going right back to Abraham. The Bible provides many metaphors to convey different aspects of this reality. Most of them are found in the Old Testament as ways of describing Israel, and are then extended in the New Testament to those who are in Christ. One metaphor, however, the concept of the church as a body, or as the body of Christ, is unique to the New Testament.

A household or family

Old Testament Israel was a kinship-structured society, divided into tribes, clans and households. The basic unit in this arrangement was the ‘father’s house’ or *beth-ab*. This was the extended family, of three or even four generations, including married sons and their children, household servants, agricultural workers and even resident foreigners practising their trade. This robust organism also provided the individual Israelite with vital support. The household was the place in which the individual found personal *identity* and *inclusion* (personal names always included the father’s house, as well as clan and tribal names). It was the place

of *security*, since the household had its inherited portion of the land. And it was the place of spiritual *nurture and teaching* in the law of God. Already in Old Testament times, the whole nation of Israel could be metaphorically described as a household: 'House of Israel' or 'House of Yahweh', picturing the whole people as an extended family belonging to God.

It is not surprising that the early Christians adopted similar language to speak of the church community. Paul calls it 'the household of God' (1 Tim. 3:15). 'We are his house', says the writer to the Hebrews (3:6). Applying this metaphor was undoubtedly made even easier by the fact that the first Christians met in homes, and the sense of being an extended family must have been strong. As in the Old Testament, the church as a household was the place of *identity* (in Christ), *inclusion* (in the fellowship of sisters and brothers), *security* (in an eternal inheritance), *nurture and teaching* (in the scriptures and teaching of the apostles). For those who had been severed from their natural family connections because of loyalty to Christ, the church as a new family in all these senses was of great importance, and still is.

A people

Old Testament Israel most often referred to themselves as a people ('*am*'), which is flavoured more by community than by ethnicity. In fact, although the core of Israel was the ethnically related community descended from the twelve tribes of the sons of Jacob/Israel, in reality it was a very mixed society (cf. Ex. 12:37; Josh. 9; Lev. 19:33-34). What held Israel

together was not so much single ethnicity as *covenant loyalty* to the one God—Yahweh. So they were above all 'the people of Yahweh'. But that title could be expanded. The Old Testament envisaged people of other nations coming to be included in the people of Yahweh (Is. 19:24-25; Ps. 87; Zech. 2:11 etc.)—and that is exactly what the New Testament says has happened through the mission of the church.

So the church is a people, or rather it is *the* people of the biblical God, through faith in Christ. But it is also a *multi-national* people, in which membership is open to all, Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free (Gal. 3:28). So the language that had first applied to Israel is now extended to people of all nations. 'You,' says Peter, 'are a people belonging to God...once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God' (1 Pet. 2:9-10). As a worldwide community of peoples, the church fulfils the promise of God to Abraham and anticipates the ultimate gathering of God's people in the new creation (Rev. 7:9, 21:3).

A bride

The relationship between Yahweh and his people, being one of love, could be portrayed in terms of the marriage covenant. Hosea seems to have been the first to make that comparison. The metaphor could also be used negatively to accuse Israel of being an unfaithful bride (Hos. 2; Jer. 2:1-2; Ezek. 16). Nevertheless, it is clear that God wants a people who are united to him in mutual loving devotion as husband and wife ideally should be.

In the New Testament the church is portrayed as the Bride of Christ. On the

one hand, the metaphor highlights Christ's love for the church, and especially his self-giving, sacrificial care for his Bride. On the other hand, it speaks of the beauty and adornment of the Bride, who will one day be perfect and without blemish for her divine husband (Eph. 5:25-27; Rev. 21:2). In both directions, the picture is one of love, commitment, and beauty—and celebration (Rev. 19:9).

A priesthood

'You will be for me a priestly kingdom,' said God to Israel at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:6). Priests stood in the middle between God and the rest of the people. They operated as mediator in both directions. On the one hand they taught the law of God to the people. On the other hand they brought the people's sacrifices to God. Through the priests, God came to the people. Through the priests, the people came to God. And it was also the job of the priests to bless the people in the name of Yahweh (Num. 6:22-27). Then, by analogy, God tells Israel that they will stand in a similar position between him and the rest of the nations of the earth. Through Israel, God will become known to the nations (Is. 42:1-7; 49:1-6). And through Israel God will ultimately draw the nations to himself (Is. 2:1-5; 60:1-3; Jer. 3:17). Israel's priesthood among the nations would fulfil the Abrahamic role of blessing them.

That priestly identity of Old Testament Israel is now inherited by those who are in Christ (1 Pet. 2:9-12). So as God's priesthood, the church consists of those who are to declare the praises of God and what he has done. And as a holy priesthood, Christians are to live

in such a way that the nations are drawn to praise God for themselves. Priesthood is a missional concept, for it puts the church between God and the world with the task of bringing the two together in Christ—making God known to the nations, and calling the nations to repentance and faith in God and to the sacrifice of the cross. This double direction of movement seems to have been in Paul's mind when he spoke of his own missionary work as a 'priestly duty' in Romans 15:16.

A temple

The temple in Jerusalem was one of the central pillars of Israel's faith and identity. It had a double significance.

First of all, the temple (like the tabernacle before it) was regarded as the place of God's dwelling. Israel knew, of course, that the creator of the universe did not actually live in any little house they had built, nor did he need to (1 Kgs. 8:27; 2 Sam. 7:1-7). But nevertheless, this temple was the place that God had chosen to make his name dwell (1 Kgs. 8:29), and where his glory would be tangibly felt.

I will keep my covenant with you...
I will put my dwelling-place among you, and I will not abhor you. I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people (Lev. 26:9-12).

Secondly, the temple was a place where Israelites would come to meet with God (as the tabernacle had been called a 'tent of meeting'). God was everywhere, but the temple provided a 'direction' for their prayer (1 Kgs. 8), and pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem became a significant and

joyful (though never obligatory). Psalms 120-134 are songs for such pilgrimage, and they express the joy (in the midst of struggles too), of knowing, meeting, trusting, and worshipping God in Zion—the place where the temple stood and where God's people celebrated his presence—provided they did so with moral integrity (Pss. 15, 24; Isa. 1:10-17; Jer. 7:1-15).

Since Jesus, as the Lord's anointed messiah and king, had fulfilled God's purpose for Israel, this had major implications for the physical temple. Jesus himself took over its double role. Jesus is the person (no longer the place) in whom God's presence is among us (Immanuel), and Jesus is the person through whom people must now come to meet God in worship (Jn. 4:2-26). So, the writer to the Hebrews points out that by coming to Christ, Christians have already come to Mount Zion (i.e. to the temple), just as in him they have an altar, the perfect sacrifice, and God's great High Priest (Heb. 12:22).

Paul goes further and sees the church itself as the temple of God. Not in the sense of a physical building (Christians did not start building 'churches' in that sense for a long time after the New Testament period). Rather, the church is the community in which God dwells by his Spirit, and to which people gather to meet with God—the double function of the Old Testament temple.

Actually Paul uses the temple imagery at three distinct levels: the individual Christian, the local church, and the whole church, but all with the basic idea of a dwelling place for God.

- In 1 Corinthians 6:19 Paul warns Christians that they cannot use

their bodies in any way they like, especially not for sexual immorality for 'your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit'. This is the only individual application of the concept.

- In 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, Paul extends the picture to include the local Christians in Corinth as, collectively, God's temple. Similarly, in 2 Corinthians 6:16, Paul warns the Corinthians that they must not take part in things that were connected with pagan temples, 'for we are the temple of the living God'.
- In Ephesians 2:21-22 Paul is addressing Gentile believers. He has been explaining how they have now been united with believing Jews into one single community through the death of Christ. He uses temple imagery to describe how all Christians, Jews and Gentiles, are being built together into a temple for God to dwell in by his Spirit.

The temple image as applied to the church implies that there is only one church—the people of the one living God, who has only one dwelling place, through his one Spirit. There was only one temple in Old Testament Israel. But God had promised that it would be 'a house of prayer for all nations' (Is. 56:7). And indeed Solomon had prayed for it to be a place of blessing for foreigners when it was first dedicated (1 Kgs. 8:41-43). Now, through Christ and the gospel, that was a reality. The temple of God is now truly the multinational community of believers from all nations.

A vine and an olive tree

Two pictures of the people of God are

drawn from horticulture. Both in the Old and New Testaments, they are compared to a vine and an olive tree. Jesus uses the first and Paul the second.

In John 15, Jesus says he is the true vine. Doubtless he is referring to the fact that in the Old Testament, Israel is likened to a vine that the Lord God had planted in his own land (Ps. 80). Unfortunately, God's expectations from his vine were rudely disappointed. Isaiah pictures God looking for a harvest of good grapes from his people to reward his loving investment in them, but instead of justice, finds bloodshed, and instead of righteousness, cries of the oppressed (Isa. 5:1-7; cf. Ezek. 15).

Jesus similarly is concerned about the fruitfulness of his followers. Abiding in Christ is the only way to fruitfulness as God's people.

In Romans 11:13-36, Paul compares Israel to an olive tree (cf. Jer. 11:16; Hos. 14:6). Paul, however, builds a whole theology around the horticultural practice of stripping some branches off a tree and grafting in others—in order to rejuvenate the original tree and increase its fruit-bearing. Paul sees an analogy to the way Gentiles are being grafted into the original covenant people of God, Israel, while some of those original people were being cut off because they failed to respond to what God had now done in Jesus Christ.

It is important to note that God's response to the failure of many Jews to believe in Jesus was not to chop down the olive tree and plant a completely new one. Some branches may be lopped off, and other branches wonderfully grafted in, but the roots and the trunk remain. Paul thus confirms the

continuity between Old Testament Israel and the church, and the unity of believing Jews and Gentiles in the one new people of God. There is only one olive tree—only one covenant people of God throughout both testaments and all of history. And there also remains the opportunity for branches that have been cut off to be grafted in again, if they turn in repentance and faith to God through Christ.

A flock

Another picture of the church that is found in both testaments is also drawn from the world of agriculture—a flock of sheep. It is, perhaps, a rather passive and not very flattering image, but it is used in two significant ways, depending on who is pictured as the shepherd or shepherds.

God as Shepherd. 'We are his people, the sheep of his pasture' (Ps. 100:3). The main point of this metaphor was to highlight God's providential and tender care for his people, as a shepherd cares for his flock. Individuals could take comfort from this (Ps. 23), but the whole nation could envisage itself being led by their divine Shepherd (Is. 40:11).

Leaders as shepherds. It was common to speak of kings as shepherds of their people. Care, provision, guidance and protection was what was expected of them—in theory at least. In reality, in Israel, the complaint was that their 'shepherds' more often exploited the sheep than cared for them. So Ezekiel vigorously condemns such shepherds (meaning the kings of Israel), and says that God himself will take on again the job of shepherding his own flock (Ezek. 34).

It is against this background that Jesus claimed to be the good, or model, shepherd in John 10. This was not just a promise of tender care (like Ps. 23). It was a bold claim to be the true king of Israel, indeed to be the divine king himself, as promised by Ezekiel. Not surprisingly, it led to a violent reaction (Jn. 10). But Jesus went on to describe his followers (i.e. the embryonic church) as his own known sheep and then pointed forward to the inclusion of others, within a single flock under a single shepherd (Jn 10:16—echoing Ezek. 37:22-24).

As a natural extension, those who are called to leadership within the church are portrayed as shepherds also. Peter calls them under-shepherds of the Chief Shepherd, who is Jesus. Christian leaders are to work with love, without greed, with servant hearts, and as good examples to the rest of the flock (1 Pet. 5:1-4). Paul adds the additional duty of defending the flock from ravaging wolves—his matching metaphor for false teachers who seek to devour the sheep (Acts. 20:28).

A body

Finally we come to the one major picture of the church that is unique to the New Testament, and indeed, unique to Paul—that is, the church as a body, or specifically as the body of Christ.

We may note four key points that emerge from Paul's rich development of this picture of the church.

- Unity and diversity of members. Paul first uses the human body simply as very effective simile. In 1 Corinthians 12:12-30, he likens the believers within the church to the different members of the human

body. There are many physical parts of a body, but they all cohere within the one body; they all assist one another; they all experience joy or pain together; and they all contribute to the healthy functioning of the body as a single organism. His main point in this context is that God has arranged things in this way for the good of the whole. So no single part should think that it is so important that it has no need of any other part of the body; and no single part should consider itself less important than some other more prominent part. Paul's point in relation to the church is that all the spiritual gifts God has distributed among different members of the church are actually given for the benefit of the whole. So, in Romans 12:4-8, using the same comparison, he urges those with different gifts to use them wholeheartedly and with humility. There is diversity within the church, but it exists within the fundamental unity that we all belong by baptism to the one Christ and share the one Spirit. The church, then, like the human body, is an organic unity with functional diversity.

- Christ as the head. The main emphasis in 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 on the 'horizontal' relationships within the body. But in Colossians and Ephesians, Paul develops the picture in a more 'vertical' direction by speaking of Christ as the head, in such a way that the church relates to Christ just as the rest of the human body is related to the head. There seem to be three elements to this picture.

First, in both letters Paul puts this description of Christ as the head of his body, the church, in the same context as Christ's sovereignty over the whole of creation (Col. 1:15-18; Eph. 1:19-22). The implication is that Christ exercises Lordship and control over the church. This, however, as Paul stresses elsewhere, is a headship that is exercised in tender love and servanthood, with self-sacrificial, self-giving care (Eph. 5:23-30).

Second, in Ephesians 1:23, Paul speaks of Christ 'filling the church' as his body (just as he fills the whole of creation). This may mean something like our human consciousness, in the way our minds are conscious of our bodies—as if the mind 'fills' the body with its presence and direction. Likewise, Christ is everywhere present and active within his church.

Third, just as a body grows as a living organism under the direction of the head, so Paul describes the church as growing up, both 'from' and 'into' Christ (Col. 2:19; Eph. 4:12-14). So the body metaphor is useful for Paul's passion for maturity among his churches. As a body cannot grow if it is severed from its head, neither can the church grow if it does not remain vitally connected to Christ.

- Reconciliation of Jew and Gentile. The most fundamental division in his world was that between Jews and Gentiles. And it was central to Paul's understanding of the gospel and of the church that God had dissolved that barrier through the death of Jesus the Messiah. So, in

Ephesians 2:14-18 he describes how God has brought both together by uniting the two in a single new humanity through the cross and by presenting them both together to God. He uses body language again, saying that Christ's intention was 'in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility' (v. 16). 'This one body' here clearly means the church of believing and reconciled Jews and Gentiles in Christ. This was so important to Paul that he seems to have coined a new Greek word to describe it in Ephesians 3:6, where he says that Gentiles constitute a 'co-body' (*syssoma*) with Israel, as well as being co-heirs and co-sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus. The church in *this* sense is a new and unprecedented reality in history—nothing less than a new humanity. A new body.

- Appropriate behaviour. There is no place among the members of the same body for either a superiority complex (rejecting others as less important than oneself), or an inferiority complex (rejecting oneself as of no importance in comparison with others). This is the message of 1 Corinthians 12: 14-26. Paul takes the metaphor in an even more positive direction to speak about Christian behaviour within the church. In Ephesians 4:15-16, 23, Christians should speak the truth in love with one another, because they are to be growing up in love as a whole body under Christ and 'we are all members of one body'. So, we have completed our survey of

major biblical pictures for the church as the people of God. We should not set one up as dominant, at the expense of the others, or neglect any of them. Also, we should not imagine that these are pictures only of some idealized or mystical church. These are ways in which the Old Testament spoke about historical Israel, and the New Testament speaks about the actual assemblies of Christian believers in the early church. Both Israel and the church

were filled with very ordinary people with many faults and failures. By means of these metaphors and images, however, God reminded them of the real identity that they had, and emphasized different aspects of their relationship with Christ and with each other. We need all of these teachings and models to inform our understanding of what we mean by 'The whole church'.

Canon and Biblical Interpretation (Scripture and Hermeneutics Vol. 7)

Craig Bartholomew, Scott Hahn, Robin Parry, Christopher Seitz,
& Al Wolters (editors)

A key concept in current hermeneutical discussions of the Christian Scriptures is the idea of canon. It plays a pivotal role in the move from critical analysis to theological appropriation. Canon has to do with the authoritative shape in which Scripture has been received by the Church, and which must be taken seriously if it is to be read aright by people of faith. In this extraordinary collection the notion of canon is illuminated from a number of different perspectives: historical, theoretical, and exegetical. A particularly valuable feature of the volume is its interaction with the work of Brevard Childs, the pioneer of the canonical approach, and its focus on the fruitfulness of a canonical reading for a broad range of biblical material. Contributors include Brevard Childs, Scott Hahn, Tremper Longman III, Gordon McConville, Christopher Seitz, Anthony Thiselton, Jean Vanier, Gordon Wenham, Christopher Wright, and Frances Young.

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