INTRODUCTION

WHY THIS BOOK?

In the contemporary information age, when books gush from publishers, the Internet offers an endless flow of facts, and various forms of media compete for our attention, it seems incumbent on anyone who writes a book to answer the question on the minds of prospective readers: Why should I read this book? This chapter attempts to answer that question, and in so doing will give the reader an idea of what lies ahead.

First, I want to show that the church is God's creation, Christ's body, and the special instrument of the Holy Spirit in the world today. Because the church is so important to God, it should be a primary concern to every Christian.

Second, I argue that understanding the doctrine of the church is especially important to contemporary North Americans, because their pragmatic approach to church life, their concern to be relevant to their culture, and their desire to see their churches grow leave them vulnerable to the danger that their churches will be shaped more by those concerns than by the design of the Lord of the church. Indeed, how can churches be what God desires them to be if people do not know what he desires them to be? Thus, this book will seek to ask the foundational theological questions that will help God's people remain faithful to his ideals for the church, as revealed in Scripture.

Third, I want to make a case that, even in our postdenominational age, there is a need for a book on the doctrine of the church from a Baptist

perspective. Such a book will, I hope, be of some interest to those who are not Baptists, either out of simple curiosity to understand more about the largest Protestant denomination in North America, or out of a willingness to examine Baptist claims that their doctrine of the church faithfully represents what the Bible teaches. But I especially want to urge Baptists to read this book, because I think few Baptists have a rationale for why they are Baptist, or even realize what it means to be Baptist; and many Baptist churches are hardly recognizable as Baptist churches in any historic sense. Historically, Baptists have been Baptist not out of blind denominational loyalty but because of their commitment to what they saw as biblical teaching on the doctrine of the church. That doctrine has been central to Baptist distinctives and was the motivating force behind our origin. It has been largely lost over the past century and is worth recovering, because it addresses critical needs of churches today.

WHY READ A BOOK ON THE CHURCH?

For all those who desire to know God, or for all those who are followers of Christ, the church cannot be a matter of indifference. In the middle of the third century the great North African church father Cyprian said, "You cannot have God as father unless you have the Church as mother."[1] The great Reformer John Calvin called the church "the mother of all the godly."[2] More recently, in an article entitled "The Church: Why Bother?" Tim Stafford has affirmed the same sentiment: "A living, breathing congregation is the only place to live in a healthy relationship to God. That is because it is the only place on earth where Jesus has chosen to dwell."[3] These comments reflect the consistent New Testament teaching that Christianity is not an individualistic enterprise but a corporate commitment. Christians and the church belong together because the church is where the Christian life is born and nurtured. For twenty centuries, most of those who have come to know the true and living God have done so through some form of church ministry. Virtually all Christians have lived out their Christian lives in connection with some form of the church. That is why Hebrews 10:25 admonishes Christians to not give up meeting together; they need the church. It is vitally important to them.

1. Cyprian, "On the Unity of the Church," in *Early Latin Theology,* trans. and ed. S. L. Greenslade, The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 5:127–28.
2. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion,* ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 21:1011 (4.1).
3. Tim Stafford, "The Church: Why Bother?" *Christianity Today* 49, no. 1 (January 2005): 42–49.

But as significant as the church is to Christians, the most important reason for Christians to be passionate about the church is that the church is God's passion. It is central to what God has been doing down through history, creating a people for his own possession, a people who will be his people, and for whom he will be their God. Early in the biblical story, we see God calling Abram and promising that through him he would bless all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:1–3). Throughout the Old Testament we see God forming Israel to be his people and, through them, bringing the Messiah into the world. In the Gospels, Jesus gathers a group of disciples, but does not yet call them the church. The story reaches a point of climax and transition with the birth of the church on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. The coming of the Holy Spirit constitutes the church as God's new creation. The New Testament letters picture the life and growth of the church, continuing until the great purpose of God is fulfilled in Revelation 21:3: "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God." Virtually the whole Bible traces God's work of preparing for the church and working in and through it. The church is of central importance to God.

Paul says that God's intent was that "through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms" (Eph. 3:10). He goes on to say that God is eternally glorified in the church: "to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever" (v. 21). Thus any book offering biblical teaching on the church should be of interest to anyone interested in the wisdom or glory of God.

The church is also central to why Christ came. He came to seek and save the lost and then to gather them into a body. He said, "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matt. 16:18). Paul says, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" (Eph. 5:25–27). He calls all those who love Christ to love his church as well, and to cooperate with him in his great project of building the church. But how can we cooperate with Christ in the building of the church if we do not understand what he desires it to be? This book presents what Christ calls the church to be.

Further, the church is central to the presence of the Holy Spirit in the world today. The writer of Luke and Acts does not use the term *church*

(ekklēsia) for the group gathered by Jesus until after the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, because it is the presence of the Spirit that gives life to the church. The church is called "a holy temple . . . a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Eph. 2:21–22). The church is not the only way the Spirit is present in the world, but he is uniquely present in the church.

As such, the church is uniquely empowered by God to minister in the world. A recent survey estimated that Southern Baptist congregations alone provide services such as food pantries and clothing closets to three million people a month.[4] Church members not only fund and voluntarily staff many of the ministries of their churches, but church members also donate two-thirds of the contributions given to nonreligious charities.[5] In so doing they reflect the working of the Holy Spirit in their lives and their churches. Furthermore, according to the projections of Philip Jenkins, the worldwide importance of the church is not decreasing but increasing, and dramatically so in the Southern Hemisphere.[6] The church survived decades of oppression at the hands of communist rulers in Eastern Europe and, though often not recognized as such, was an important factor in the crumbling of the Iron Curtain. Today, the church continues to face persecution in many parts of the world, in part because its power, the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, is not subject to political control.

All these factors should make the church a matter of intense concern for all those interested in God and what he is doing in the world today.

WHY READ A BOOK ON THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH?

American culture is marked by pragmatism, and most books on the church reflect that orientation. There are dozens of books on how to make a church grow, how to organize and administer church programs, how to revitalize a church's worship, how to get church members involved in missions, how to do almost anything churches do. While I share these pragmatic and practical concerns, in this book I focus on a different set

4. This data is from a survey of a representative sample of more than seven hundred Southern Baptist congregations conducted in 2000, called *Southern Baptist Congregations Today: A Survey at the Turn of a New Millennium.* The results of the survey are given in Philip B. Jones, "Research Report: Executive Summary of *Southern Baptist Congregations Today*" (Alpharetta, GA: North American Mission Board, SBC, n.d.), 3–4, available via www.namb.net.
5. Tim Stafford, "Anatomy of a Giver," *Christianity Today* 41, no. 6 (May 19, 1997): 19–24.
6. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Growth of Global Christianity* (Oxford, UK; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

of questions that are more fundamental to a church's long-term health, questions that deal with the doctrine of the church. This is the branch of theology called ecclesiology.

To most people theology is about as appealing as a root canal. Such a view is unfortunate and inaccurate. There are problems with the health of most churches that cannot be corrected by tinkering with the mechanics of their programs. We need to do the important work of theology.

Since the church is God's creation, it must be ordered and operated according to his instructions. Understanding those instructions is the task of theology. It is not a task entrusted to an elite group of scholars, but all Christians are commanded to love God with all their minds. Theology is simply using our minds to know and love God. As one theologian put it, "Theology is too important to be left to the theologians."[7]

This work of theology begins with the study of God's instructions, found in Scripture. This book will seek above all to be biblical in its understanding and presentation of the doctrine of the church. But we have help in understanding the message of the Bible from the twenty centuries of Christians who have gone before us, many of whom sought to understand the same Scriptures that we study. It would be foolish and arrogant to despise the counsel of earlier generations. History has much to teach us in understanding the Bible. At the very least, historical perspective can serve as a safeguard against the perennial danger of allowing our own historical context and culture to distort our understanding of Scripture. For those engaged in the important task of seeking to communicate the gospel to a post-Christian, biblically illiterate culture, the laudable desire to address that culture in a relevant and intelligible way carries with it the danger of allowing the culture to shape and perhaps distort the message. History provides an anchor that can guard against drifting with the currents of culture.

Today we have additional help in understanding the Scriptures from the global community of believers. They read the same Scriptures, but from a non-Western perspective. In many cases, they are closer to the culture of the Bible than Western theologians and interpreters and have insights to offer that Western theologians may miss.[8]

7. W. Ward Gasque, back cover of Robert Banks, *Redeeming the Routines: Bringing Theology to Life* (Wheaton, IL: Bridgepoint Books, 1993).
8. Books like Timothy Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007) and E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with*

Scripture, informed by historical perspective thus forms the basis for theology. Theology takes the data of Scripture, utilizes the help of history and global insights, and develops doctrine to address the questions posed by life as we seek to live for God in God's world in the contemporary context. Such doctrine then serves as the basis for practical application in concrete, real-life situations. The process of theology can thus be pictured as a pyramid, in which theology is built on Scripture, is informed by history and global insights, and serves as a platform for ministry.

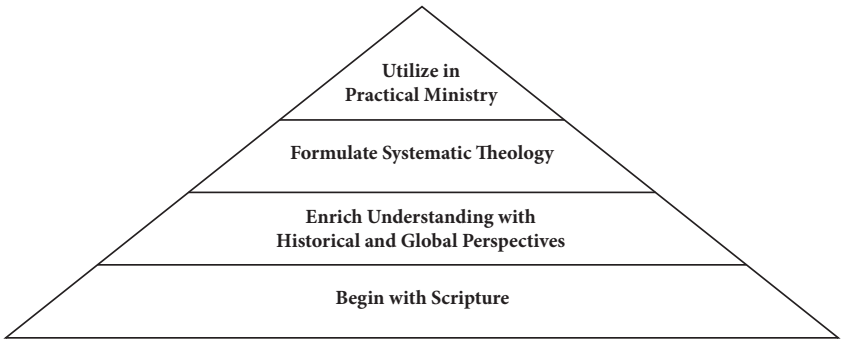


Figure I.1: How to Do Theology

The tendency among most evangelical Christians is to go straight from Scripture to ministry without taking the necessary intervening steps. This book follows the full process, beginning with and emphasizing Scripture as the sole normative source for theology. It, secondarily, draws upon the resources of history, especially Baptist history and global insights, to challenge and, at points, to correct contemporary assumptions. It develops the major aspects of the doctrine of the church and includes examples and suggestions of how such doctrine can and should be fleshed out in practical ministry in local church contexts.

The five parts of the book address the major theological issues involved in the doctrine of the church, with each part organized around a central question. The question for this introduction is, "Why this book?" Specifically, why read a book on the church? Further, why read a book on the

Western Eyes (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2012) are a couple of examples of the types of insights we are receiving from global Christianity.

doctrine of the church? Finally, why read a book on the doctrine of the church from a Baptist perspective?

Part 1 asks the question, "What is the church?" It seeks to answer that question in three chapters. The first chapter examines the New Testament word for church *(ekklēsia),* considers the major images for the church, and describes the nature of the church as biblically conceived. Chapter 2 utilizes the resources of history, reflecting on the two major formulations of the marks of the church. The classical formulation describes the church as "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic," and the Reformation sees the true church as marked by the preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments. I consider what these formulations add to our understanding of the church. From this biblical and historical material, chapter 3 offers five theological conclusions on the essence of the church, with each one leading to suggestions for practical application in church life and ministry.

Part 2 turns to the question, "Who is the church?" Here I consider what may be called the Baptist mark of the church—regenerate church membership. Chapter 4 gives the biblical evidence for viewing the church as a body of regenerate baptized believers, traces how that understanding was lost following the conversion of Constantine in A.D. 312, and shows how it was recovered by Baptists and became the centerpiece of their ecclesiology. Chapter 5 recounts the sad story of how that mark of regenerate church membership was lost by Baptists in America in the twentieth century, and considers how and why it should be regained, involving changes in the practices of baptism, church membership, and church discipline.

The question for part 3 is "How is the church governed?" Chapter 6 presents the case for congregational church government as the form most consistent with New Testament teaching. Chapter 7 builds on the emphasis of chapters 4 and 5 on regenerate church membership by looking at how these regenerate church members live out their membership in meaningful ways, especially considering the privileges and responsibilities of church membership, with the latter being of special importance for congregationalists. Chapters 8 and 9 present Baptist teaching on the two offices of church leaders: those called elders or overseers or pastors, and those called deacons. The important issues of the role, responsibility, qualifications, number, and selection of these leaders are given a careful and thorough consideration.

Part 4 looks at the ministries of the church under the question, "What does the church do?" Drawing on the important and paradigmatic description in Acts 2:42–47, teaching, fellowship, worship, service, and evangelism are affirmed as five essential ministries of the church in chapter 10. Chapter 11 presents a Baptist view of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, with some specific, practical suggestions for improving how Baptists celebrate these important acts.

"Where is the church going?" is the final question, examined in part 5. Chapter 12 answers that question with the phrase "against the grain." That answer reflects the various responses churches are giving to the challenges presented by our changing cultural context. I give special attention to what I see as the six most important responses churches are giving. The final chapter, chapter 13, broadens our vision by looking at the church going into all the world, and considers some of the questions raised as churches are planted in other cultures.

Each part of the book concludes with a list of study questions to help the reader reflect on the issues raised in the preceding chapters, and an annotated list of resources for further study, to assist those who want to go into further depth on specific issues.

The book concludes, not with a question but a challenge—a challenge to give ourselves to the cause for which Christ gave himself, the development of radiant churches, fully pleasing to him. That requires first understanding what God desires his church to be and then working patiently and lovingly to see that design embodied in our churches. Those interested in responding to such a challenge have ample reason to read a book on the doctrine of the church.

WHY READ A BOOK ON THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH FROM A BAPTIST PERSPECTIVE?

While I have drawn doctrine first and foremost from Scripture, this book does present a clear Baptist perspective on ecclesiology. In so doing, I am countering the widespread postdenominationalism in our culture. Increasingly, people are reticent to identify themselves by a denominational affiliation, preferring to be seen simply as Christian. But in practice, it is hard to avoid making some denominational decisions. Even those who join a nondenominational church will find that it either baptizes infants or does not, it operates under a group of elders or it is ruled by the congregation. It would seem reasonable to expect those who attend or join

a church to understand their church's rationale for its practices. If I am a Baptist, naturally I would want to understand my denomination's perspective on the doctrine of the church. But such an answer simply prompts a deeper question: "Why be a Baptist?" At times I have asked my students at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary or members of churches where I speak to tell me why they are Baptists. I get a variety of answers.

Perhaps the most common answer is, "I am a Baptist because I was raised that way; my parents were Baptists and that is all I have ever known." These individuals like the familiar Baptist literature and mission agencies and traditional programs. But family background alone does not provide a very strong reason for denominational affiliation. The proof of that is the ease with which many Baptists switch denominations. When they consider a church, they are likely to assign greater importance to the style of music and worship, the quality of the preaching, and the variety of the programs than to the denominational label.

Others say they are Baptists because it was in a Baptist church where they first heard the gospel and recognized their need for a personal relationship with Christ, or that it was in a Baptist church that they were first taught the Bible, or that it was a Baptist church that reached out to them with love. Experiences like these produce a measure of denominational loyalty, but a small measure only, for there are many churches of other denominations that proclaim the biblical gospel, teach the Bible, and reach out in love and, sadly, there are some Baptist churches that do none of these things.

Some realize they have little denominational identity and see that as a good thing. To the question, "Why are you a Baptist?" they answer, "I don't really think of myself as a Baptist, but simply as a Christian." As we noted above, such an answer is characteristic of our postdenominational era and of evangelical Christianity as a whole, which has been largely identified with transdenominational parachurch groups. One such group, Promise Keepers, even at one time identified denominationalism as a sin akin to that of racism.

I have some sympathy with this answer. Certainly being a Christian is far more important than any denominational commitment, and there have been all too many sinful, arrogant, and divisive expressions of denominationalism. But, as we noted earlier, in the end, some type of denominational identity is unavoidable. In practice, every church has to answer certain questions. Should we baptize infants or believers only? Are

we to be governed by a bishop, by a board, or by the congregation? What type of practices do we believe are appropriate for worship? Is each church connected to others, or does each church have a measure of autonomy? The answers provided to these questions and others like them align an individual and a church, to some degree, with a denomination, or at the least, place them within a denominational tradition. So, while not the most important issue or essential to salvation, the question of denominational affiliation is not irrelevant or unimportant.

To the question, "Why are you a Baptist?" a well-informed Baptist will reply, "because I interpret Scripture as teaching Baptist positions on the traditional ecclesiological questions."[9] Such an answer need not be arrogant, or presume that Baptists have a monopoly on truth, or imply that Baptists are the only true Christians. Rather, it recognizes that since the Reformation, Christians—even Christians of deep piety and genuine love for Christ and commitment to his Word—have not been able to reach agreement on the interpretation of Scripture on certain issues regarding what the church is and how it is to function. These disagreements led to the formation of different denominational traditions. These differences in interpretation endure to this day and present choices every thoughtful Christian must face. Thus any book on the doctrine of the church must present a perspective that is, to some degree, denominational. The perspective presented in this book is Baptist because I agree with how Baptists historically have interpreted the key ecclesiological issues.

To the question with which we began this section, "Why read a book on the doctrine of the church from a Baptist perspective?" there are several answers. For those who are not Baptists, this book will explain

9. There have been a number of books in Baptist history that have given answers to the question, "Why a Baptist?" One of the earliest and most famous is J. M. Pendleton, *Three Reasons Why I Am a Baptist, with a Fourth Reason Added on Communion* (St. Louis, MO: National Baptist Publishing, 1856). His reasons all dealt with Baptist ecclesiology. Others, such as Louis Devotie Newton, *Why I Am a Baptist* (New York: Nelson, 1957); Joe T. Odle, ed., *Why I Am a Baptist* (Nashville: Broadman, 1972); Cecil P. Staton, ed., *Why I Am a Baptist: Reflections on Being Baptist in the 21st Century* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1999); and Tom Nettles and Russell Moore, *Why I Am a Baptist* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), include ecclesiological reasons to some degree, but some also deal with family influence and appreciation for other aspects of Baptist life. Another book that sees some relationship between Baptist ecclesiology and Baptist identity is R. Stanton Norman, *More Than Just a Name: Preserving Our Baptist Identity* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001). Norman followed that book up with another, connecting the same two themes: *The Baptist Way: Distinctives of a Baptist Church* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005).

the basis for Baptist identity, which has centered around their doctrine of the church. Whether one traces the origin of modern Baptists to the early sixteenth-century Anabaptists or the early seventeenth-century English Separatists, the key issue for both groups was the same: their belief in the church as a pure gathered group of believers only. Most other Baptist distinctives grow out of their doctrine of the church. It may well be that some non-Baptists who read this book will be provoked to reconsider their interpretation of scriptural teaching on the church and perhaps revise some of their views.

For those who are Baptists, simple curiosity could be a motivation for reading this book. Most Baptists, and even many Baptist pastors, have never carefully thought through the biblical rationale for historic Baptist views and practices. Indeed, one of the main reasons prompting the writing of this book was the recognition that most Baptists are unaware of their ecclesiological heritage, in part because until very recently, there have not been many books that address the doctrine of the church from a Baptist perspective.[10] This book can help to confirm and strengthen many in their Baptist identity by showing them the strong basis for that identity.

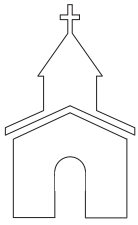
Other Baptists, especially Baptist pastors, may be led to read this book because they sense that many of our churches are wandering, tossed to and fro by passing fads, suffering from problems that go beyond individual, isolated acts to shoddy doctrinal foundations. In the past century, Baptists as a whole seem to have forsaken many of their historic positions, with little awareness of the slippage. The doctrine presented in this book accurately reflects biblical teaching, is deeply rooted in Baptist history, is intensely practical and applicable in Baptist churches today, and is urgently needed if Baptist churches are to be the radiant bride of Christ. This concern for the welfare of the church motivated the writing of this book; I hope it will motivate many to read it.

10. In the years since the first edition of this book (2005), there have been a number of works helping to fill that gap. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman have jointly edited *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2015), and have each individually written books on ecclesiological topics. Among their contributions are Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2012) and Jonathan Leeman, *Don't Fire Your Church Members: The Case for Congregationalism* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2016). Thomas White, Jason G. Duesing, and Malcolm B. Yarnell III edited *Restoring Integrity in Baptist Church* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008); and as part of the series Foundations of Evangelical Theology, Gregg Allison's work *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012) reflects his Baptist ecclesiology.

Study Questions

1. Which of the reasons given for the importance of the church seems most significant to you? How important is the church? Can someone be a Christian and not be involved in any church?
2. What questions do you have about the doctrine of the church that you hope this book will answer? Write them down and review them after reading this book to see if your questions were addressed.
3. What is your own denominational affiliation? Why? How important is it to you? Could you see yourself becoming a member of a church of a different denomination? Why or why not?

PART 1



WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

CHAPTER 1

THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

Biblical Foundations

In this chapter, and the two that follow, we address the question that must be the starting point for any doctrine of the church: "What is the church?" In everyday language, we use the word *church* in a variety of ways. Quite often, we refer to the church as the building where we meet ("We're going to the church"). Some groups apply the term *church* to their denomination (the United Methodist Church). More knowledgeable Christians know that the church is more than a building or denomination—it is people. But simply stating that the church is people, or even God's people, does not go very far. What is the church?

For two thousand years, in hundreds of cultures and languages, divided into a multitude of denominations, thousands if not millions of groups of Christians have assembled under the name of "church." Some have certainly been far healthier than others. Some have been closer to what Baptists see as the New Testament pattern than others. What makes a group a church, as opposed to a club, a Bible study, a fellowship group, or even a parachurch group? What is the nature of a church? What marks identify it in the world? What is the theological essence of a true church?

Our concern in these first three chapters is to discuss these fundamental and foundational issues. Other issues, which are crucial but relate more to the well-being or health or proper order of the church than to its being or nature, will be treated in the following chapters.

Since Baptists are people of the Book, a Baptist approach to the nature of the church begins with Scripture. In this chapter, we—first of all—explore the teaching of Scripture on the nature of the church. Then, respecting the witness of history, we examine in chapter 2 the major historic formulations of the marks of the church. Then, since doctrine is the basis for ministry, we draw upon our findings from Scripture and history to present theological conclusions and practical applications concerning the essence of the church.

THE CHURCH AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

Looking to Scripture for our understanding of the nature of the church requires us to face the difficult question of the relationship of the church to the Old Testament and the people of God in the Old Testament, Israel. Some Christians, especially those who identify with covenant theology, emphasize the continuity of the church with Israel and thus find much in the Old Testament to inform our thinking on the nature of the church. As Reformed theologian Edmund Clowney puts it, "the Old Testament people of God become the church of the Messiah, formed as the fellowship of the Spirit. The Bible does not deliver shipments of doctrine in cargo containers. Rather, the new grows out of the old, as the flower opens from the bud."[1] Baptist author and pastor Mark Dever states: "In order to understand the church in the full richness of God's revealed truth, we must examine both the Old and New Testaments."[2]

The Old Testament allows us to see the historical rootedness of the church, going back to the call of Abraham, who is not only the father of Israel, but the father of all those who share his faith. Paul describes Abraham's offspring as not only "those who are of the law" (Israel) but also "those who have the faith of Abraham" (the church), concluding, "He is the father of us all" (Rom. 4:16). The church is also included in God's great plan to call for himself a people, identified in both the Old and New Testament as "the people of God." This is seen perhaps most clearly in 1 Peter 2:9, in which four phrases used to describe Israel in the Old Testament

1. Edmund Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 29.
2. Dever, *The Church*, 3.

("a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession") are now applied to the church.

Thus, those taking a covenantal view emphasize continuity between the Old Testament people of God and the New Testament people of God. Clowney affirms, "The story of the church begins with Israel, the Old Testament people of God." The question of whether the church fully replaces Israel in the purposes of God or not is, in the words of one covenant theologian, "variously answered," with some seeing the language of extension, continuation, or growth out of as a better description of the relationship of the church and Israel.[3] Millard Erickson, for example, describes the church as "the new Israel," which "occupies the place in the new covenant that Israel occupied in the old." Yet he also affirms "a special future coming for national Israel."[4]

Others, taking a more dispensational view of things, think we should also recognize a significant degree of discontinuity. Classical dispensational theology insisted on a radical or complete discontinuity between the church and Israel, but more recent formulations, as in progressive dispensationalism, allow for a measure of continuity, seen in matters such as the use of the phrase "people of God" to refer to both Israel and the church, but insist that it is important to still maintain a distinction between Israel and the church. For Robert Saucy, the fact that "similar terminology" can be used for Israel and the church does not justify "a continuity of the people of God which views the church as the 'new Israel.'"[5] Gregg Allison argues that since "certain constitutive elements of the church," particularly the baptism of the Holy Spirit, awaited the ascension of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit, we should see the church as beginning at Pentecost. He says, "the church began at Pentecost and did not exist prior to that event, though the people of God did exist and flourish." But the people

3. Marten H. Woudstra, "Israel and the Church: A Case for Continuity," in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments,* ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1988), 237. For a full examination of what is called "replacement theology," or supersessionism, see Michael Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel? A Theological Evaluation* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2010).
4. Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 966.
5. Robert Saucy, "Israel and the Church: A Case for Discontinuity," in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1988), 249. Gregg Allison argues for a similar "moderate discontinuity position," seeing "significant disparate elements" which prevent eliminating distinctions between Israel and the church, and insisting that "the church has not replaced Israel nor fulfilled all of the promises made to Israel" (*Sojourners and Strangers*, 88–89).

of God under the old covenant must be distinguished from the people of God under the new covenant, and the latter could not exist until the former had passed away.[6]

Recognition of discontinuity is not limited to dispensationalists. Historian and theologian Gerald Bray, from an Anglican background, gives several reasons why we "probably should not . . . include Israel under the umbrella term of 'church.'"[7] For Bray, the "final and most theological of the differences between Judaism and Christianity" is the deeper relationship Christians had with God: "They had access to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. They were born again."[8] Seeing the discontinuities as greater than the continuities, Bray writes, "We must therefore conclude that Israel cannot really be regarded as the Old Testament church. The continuities between the Old and New Testaments were refracted through the prism of Christ, who changed everything."[9]

The influence of dispensational thinking on Baptist ecclesiology may be seen in the wording of the article on the church in the Baptist Faith and Message, which begins, "A New Testament church," which seems to assume a significant discontinuity between the church and the Old Testament people of God.[10] But historically, there have been Baptists on both sides of the continuity/discontinuity, or covenantal/dispensational debate, and Baptist ecclesiology is not wedded to one or the other.

The position adopted in this book attempts to recognize a measure of both continuity and discontinuity. The church did not spring completely out of nothing; it is in some way rooted in and connected to the Old Testament people of God. But I share with Gregg Allison the conviction that something unique happened at Pentecost that was in some ways a culmination of what had been taking shape during the ministry of Jesus, whose presence makes for another element of discontinuity. My analogy is that the conception of the church occurred with the call of Abraham. The

6. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 82.
7. Gerald Bray, *The Church: A Theological and Historical Account* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 17.
8. Ibid., 23
9. Ibid., 24. Bray cites as an example of the dramatic nature of the change wrought by Christ the testimony of the apostle Paul in Philippians 3:4–7. Bray adds, "it would be hard to find a clearer statement of why Israel and the church were not just the same thing in a clearer guise," 3.
10. That this wording is deliberate may be seen in the fact that The New Hampshire Confession, after which the Baptist Faith and Message was patterned, begins the article on the church with the phrase, "a visible Church of Christ," rather than "A New Testament church." See William Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, rev. ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969), 365, 396.

entire period of the Old Testament following the call of Abraham is the gestation; the period of Jesus's earthly ministry is the time of labor, with the birth of the church occurring on the day of Pentecost.

THE TERM *EKKLĒSIA*

We turn now to the word used for church in the New Testament, *ekklēsia.* What was it about this word that led early Christians to apply it to themselves, and what did they mean by it?

Most scholars today agree that the best way to decipher the meaning of a word is by looking at how it is used, rather than looking at its etymology, or origin. Still, the origin of *ekklēsia* is interesting. It is formed from two Greek words, *ek,* "out," and *kaleō,* "to call." Thus, the *ekklēsia* are "the called-out ones." In ancient Greece, the *ekklēsia* was the assembly of the called-out citizens, who came together to conduct the business of the city. But over the years, the element of being called out became less prominent, and an *ekklēsia* was regarded as just an assembly of people.[11] Still, it is worth noting that the element of being called out lies in the background of the biblical word for the church. One scholar points out that it seems unlikely that this idea of being called out was not at least part of the reason why the early Christians chose this word for their gatherings.[12] As we will see below, the New Testament teaching on the church does highlight the idea of being called out, and that idea was implied in the origin and ancient usage of the word.

For New Testament concepts like the church, however, the most important background is not etymology or ancient Greek usage, but the Old Testament. Here, we look to the use of *ekklēsia* in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. There are two primary Hebrew terms that are used to refer to God's people in the Old Testament: *ʿēdâh* and *qāhāl.*

The translators of the Septuagint used *ekklēsia* to translate *qāhāl* a total of seventy-three times, but never to translate *ʿēdâh.*[13] For *ʿēdâh* they usually used the Greek term *synagōgē,* which is used only once in the New

11. This usage is reflected in Acts 19:32, where a riotous crowd came together and is called an *ekklēsia,* an assembly. Such an assembly is then contrasted with a legal assembly in verse 39 *(ennomō ekklēsia),* one that would be formally convened to conduct civic affairs.
12. Paige Patterson, "The Church in the 21st Century" (privately published paper, n.d.), 5.
13. I. Howard Marshall, "New Wine in Old Wine-Skins: V. The Biblical Use of the Word '*ekklēsia*,'" *Expository Times* 84 (1972–73): 359.

Testament to refer to the church (James 2:2).[14] What does this association with *qāhāl,* but not *ʿēdâh,* say about the meaning of *ekklēsia?*

While both *ʿēdâh* and *qāhāl* can be used in a variety of senses (secular as well as religious), the most important distinction seems to be that *qāhāl* "embraces only those who have heard the call and are following it. *ʿēdâh,* on the other hand, is the permanent community into which one was born."[15] In designating themselves *ekklēsia,* the early Christians were taking a word already in use by Greek-speaking Jews to refer to the people of God in the Old Testament, and thus making a claim to some degree of historical connection to that earlier people; they were also using a word that reinforced the idea that the church is made up of those summoned or called by God. They avoided the term *synagōgē,* which was occasionally used to translate *qāhāl,* probably because by the New Testament era, that word was strongly associated with the Jewish law and temple, which made it a problematic term to use for the New Testament church.

Perhaps we should not seek to derive too much of the meaning of *ekklēsia* from its Old Testament antecedents. I. H. Marshall argues "in the N.T. the doctrine of the *ekklēsia* owes little to the theological use of the corresponding terms in the O.T. but has undergone a transformation as a result of new associations and ideas."[16] At the same time, when we turn to the actual New Testament usage of *ekklēsia,* we find at least one element of the etymological and Old Testament background confirmed. K. L. Schmidt sees the idea of being called out as central to New Testament teaching on the church: "*Ekklēsia* is in fact the group of men called out of the world by God even though we do not take express note of the *ek,*" referring to the etymology of the term.[17] The very term *called (klētos)* is found several times as a virtual synonym for *ekklēsia.* Paul describes the church in Rome as those "called to belong to Jesus Christ" and "called to be his holy people" (Rom. 1:6–7). The church in Corinth is said to be those who are "called to be his holy people" (1 Cor. 1:2). On the day of Pentecost, the gift of the Holy Spirit was promised to all those whom God called to himself. The church comes into being, not by any human initiative, but in

14. See the discussion by L. Coenen, "Church," in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology,* ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 1:292–96.
15. Ibid., 295.
16. Marshall, "New Wine," 359.
17. K. L. Schmidt, *"ekklēsia,"* in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,* ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 3:531.

response to a divine call. Beyond this central idea, there is some variety in the New Testament usage of *ekklēsia*.

The term is found in the New Testament 114 times. Of these, three refer to a secular assembly and two refer to the Old Testament people of God. The remaining 109 verses refer to the New Testament church. More than half of these, sixty-two, are found in Paul's writings. There are twenty references to the church in Revelation, nineteen in Acts, and a few in Hebrews, James, and 3 John. Noteworthy is the surprising lack of references to *ekklēsia* in the Gospels. The only three references are found in two passages in Matthew (Matt. 16:18; 18:17). These are historically and theologically important passages,[18] but they are only two and both seem to look to a future situation. The implication is that the church was not given birth until after Christ's earthly ministry.

The 109 occurrences of *ekklēsia* are usually seen as referring to the church in two senses, local and universal. The overwhelming majority point to local churches, actual assemblies that gather and act. We find them moving quickly toward order and organization, with leadership established (Acts 14:23) and membership recognized, such that Luke can report the numerical growth of the church, from three thousand (2:41) to five thousand (4:4) and beyond (9:31; 16:5).

There is some variation in nomenclature for church leaders. *Elder (presbyteros)* is the term used most often (Acts 14:23; 15:4, 22), but *bishop* or *overseer (episkopos)* is also found (Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1), along with *deacon* (1 Tim. 3:8). The most commonly used term among Baptists today, *pastor,* is used only once (Eph. 4:11). A discussion of the roles, functions, and significance of these leaders and the related issues of church government would take us well beyond the bounds of this chapter and so will be deferred until part 3. However, it does seem that the church, as portrayed biblically, is not just any group of people, even any group of Christians. It is an organized assembly.

18. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus calls Peter *petros,* and says that he will build his church on a rock *(petra)*. The relationship of Peter to the *petra* on which the church is built has been the subject of controversy. The traditional Roman Catholic interpretation has seen Peter as the rock, thus establishing the importance of the papacy, but such an interpretation requires that Jesus be referring to Peter, that Peter had a line of successors, that those successors would be the bishops of Rome, and that Peter's foundational role was transferred to them. More likely are interpretations that see Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ as the rock on which the church is built, or Peter himself as the rock, not as the bishop of Rome, but as the leader of the apostles, whose teaching collectively was foundational for the church (see Eph. 2:20). Matthew 18:17 has been important in ecclesiology as the most often cited basis for the practice of church discipline.

These churches gather to act in a variety of ways. They gather to worship (Acts 13:2–3; 1 Cor. 14:23ff.), which seems to include prayer (Acts 12:5; 13:3; 14:23), reading of Scripture (Col. 4:16; 1 Tim. 4:13), teaching from the leaders (Acts 20:28–31; Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 3:2), and the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:18ff.). They enjoy fellowship within the local assembly and with other local churches (Rom. 16:16). The church serves widows and the needy (1 Tim. 5:16; 1 Cor. 16:1). Believers are involved in spreading the gospel, both personally (Acts 8:2–4) and through those sent by the church (Acts 13:2–3). These ministries emerge without fanfare, exhortation, or command. It is as if such ministries are part of the very nature of the church. Churches are not passive or static; they are dynamic, purposeful assemblies.

In addition to references to the local church, there are at least thirteen references (nine in Ephesians) that seem clearly to refer to the church in a universal sense, as all the redeemed of all the ages. These passages contain some of the most exalted descriptions of the church, seeing it perhaps as it will be at the consummation (Eph. 5:23–27), or even as it is now in the mind of God (Eph. 3:10, 21). A number of these passages contain the biblical teaching on Christ as the head of the church.

Local and *universal* is the most widely used terminology for the twofold meaning for *ekklēsia* found in the New Testament. Some refer to the dichotomy as *visible* and i*nvisible*. Some even reserve the term *Church* (with a capital *C*) for the universal church, and refer to local assemblies as congregations. However, in view of the predominance of the local church in New Testament usage, it seems more fitting to translate *ekklēsia* as church (with a lowercase *c*), assuming the local church meaning and then noting the exceptions when it has the universal meaning.

Moreover, there may need to be a third sense, in addition to local and universal. For example, when Paul says he persecuted the church of God (1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13; Phil. 3:6), it wasn't just one church he targeted, though he began with the church in Jerusalem (Acts 8:3). Neither does it seem that any individual could persecute the universal church. What Paul persecuted was the church in general, any church.

Finally, the idea of local church must be seen with some flexibility. While a group small enough to meet in a house is called a church (Rom. 16:5; Col. 4:15), Paul also consistently refers to the church in a *city* in the singular (the church in Cenchrea or Philippi or Corinth, the church of the Thessalonians; see Rom. 16:1; 1 Cor. 1:2; Phil. 4:15; 1 Thess. 1:1), but to the churches in a *region* in the plural (the churches of Galatia or Asia or Mace-

donia; see 1 Cor. 16:1, 19; 2 Cor. 8:1). Today we see a multiplicity of churches in virtually every city, large or small. To speak of the church in Raleigh, for example, sounds a bit odd, and could only have a rather nebulous meaning for us. What are we to make of the New Testament pattern on this point?

First, we need to remember the historical situation. Christians in any city were a very small minority. In contrast to their pagan neighbors, they felt a sense of oneness with any fellow Christian. It was only centuries later when Christians held a much stronger position in society that differences of interpretation led to division, with churches existing in separation from and, in many cases, in opposition to, other churches. Today, perhaps in response to the sense of hostility many Christians feel from contemporary North American culture, Christians are recovering something of this sense of oneness across denominational lines, particularly in evangelical parachurch groups. In any case, there is nothing in New Testament usage that implies that the oneness of the churches in a city was organizational or institutional, or put any one local assembly under the authority of a larger body.

A second factor involved in the use of church (singular) for all the Christians in a city is that these Christians may have gathered together (see 1 Cor. 11:18; Col. 4:16). Even the church at Jerusalem, which numbered several thousand from Acts 2 onward, is reported as gathering and acting together (Acts 11:22; 12:5). There are even four interesting references to what is called the *whole* church in a given city (Acts 5:11; 15:22; Rom. 16:23; 1 Cor. 14:23). Perhaps there were both house church meetings in some of these cities, and occasional larger group meetings of all the Christians in the city. In any case, where geographical distance clearly prohibited meeting together, Paul used the plural, referring to churches in this way twenty-one times. This pattern of using the singular "church" for all the Christians in a city, even when they may have met in a network of smaller house congregations, will call for further consideration in a later chapter when we consider the contemporary movement called multisite churches. Some such churches meet in a variety of locations, spread out across a city, and sometimes beyond a city, and yet claim to be "one church in many locations."[19]

A third factor that should be remembered is that there is nothing in this pattern of usage of *ekklēsia* that justifies calling a local group a congre-

19. "One Church in Many Locations" is the phrase used to describe a multisite church in Geoff Surratt, Greg Ligon and Warren Bird, *The Multi-Site Church Revolution: Being One Church in Many Locations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006). This movement will be examined in closer detail in chapter 12.

gation and reserving the term *church* for a larger grouping of congregations. Indeed, since Paul referred to geographically separated congregations as churches and to the smallest house congregations as churches, there is a strong basis for what Baptists have traditionally referred to as local church autonomy, the idea that a local congregation should not be ruled by a larger organization called the church. Rather, each local congregation is fully *ekklēsia* in itself. These various usages of the term *ekklēsia* may be summarized as follows.

- Two times *ekklēsia* is used with reference to the Old Testament congregation.
- Three times it is used for a secular assembly.
- Six times it is used in a general or nonspecific sense.
- Thirteen times it is used for the universal church.
- Ninety times it's used with reference to a local church or churches, assemblies that have a degree of order and purposefulness in their gatherings.
  - Forty times it is found in the singular, for a local church.
  - Fourteen times it is used for all the Christians in a city.
  - 36 times *ekklēsia* is used in the plural for local churches.

Figure 1.1: Usage of the Term *Ekklēsia*

In a few cases, it is not immediately obvious in what way the word is being used; most of these fit in the category of general or nonspecific. There could even be differences in opinion in a few cases about whether a particular verse should be seen in a local or universal sense. But the overall pattern is clear and unmistakable. The focus in New Testament usage is on local churches.

IMAGES OF THE CHURCH

Biblical teaching on the church is not limited to passages containing the term *ekklēsia*. Indeed, it could be argued that the primary way the Bible teaches us about the church is through the numerous images or metaphors of the church found throughout the New Testament.[20] The

20. The fullest exposition of this is Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960). He lists ninety-six possible images of the church in the New Testament, but many are not well supported by Scripture; some do not seem to be an image and others do not refer to the church at all. Of these ninety-six, Minear recognizes four as "master images." They are "people of God, new creation, fellowship in faith, and the

church is pictured as the bride of Christ, as the family of God, as the new creation, and in several other ways. Biblical teaching on the church seems to cluster most fully around four of these images: family, people of God, body of Christ, and temple of the Spirit. We will thus consider them in some detail, as they communicate a variety of insights concerning the nature of the church.

The Family

At first glance, family may not seem to warrant much attention as an image for the church. The noun "family" is almost never used to refer to a church in the New Testament,[21] and the related words for "household" (*oikos, oikeios*) appear only a handful of times as an image for the church.[22] But there are other terms to consider. One so common that we tend to overlook it is God the Father.

God is called Father more than 250 times in the New Testament, and Jesus teaches his followers to address God as "Our Father in heaven" (Matt. 6:9). Indeed, J. I. Packer sees this teaching of God as Father as distinctive and central to New Testament teaching and New Testament religion: "If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's child, and having God as his Father."[23] But becoming God's child is not a status every person receives at birth, but is something given to those who receive Jesus (John 1:12). They become children of God by adoption. As the people of God the Father, the church is his family.

Jesus hinted at this in the Gospels, identifying those who do the will of God as his "brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:35). This seems to look forward to the church being a family. Similar language is increasingly used of the church in the book of Acts. Although the term "brother/s" can be used to refer to those in the same blood family

---

body of Christ" (259). I see the first and last as central images, but combine his second and third in a different way.

21. The 1984 edition of the NIV translated *oikos* in 1 Peter 4:17 as "family," but the 2011 edition has "household," as do all other major contemporary translations (ESV, HCSB, NRSV, NASB, NKJV). The 2011 NIV and 1999 NRSV translate *oikeios* in Galatians 6:10 as "family," but other translations have "household."

22. First Timothy 3:15 is the most explicit, but Galatians 6:10, Ephesians 2:19, 1 Peter 2:5, and 1 Peter 4:17 also seem to refer to the church, either a local church or the church in a general or universal sense.

23. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God,* 20th anniversary ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 201.

(Acts 1:14) or to fellow Israelites (Acts 2:29), the dominant use, especially as groups of believers develop throughout the book of Acts, is for a believer or group of believers.[24] But the use of family terminology becomes especially prominent and pervasive in the epistles. Paul uses *adelphos/oi* (brother, brothers) 134 times, and *adelphe* (sister) five times. On a very few occasions Paul uses such terminology to refer to fellow Jews (Rom. 9:3) or a physical, blood brother (Gal. 1:19), but overwhelmingly these terms are used to refer to fellow Christians. And though *adelphoi* is masculine in form, it is used collectively for a group of male and female believers, and is translated by some versions as "brothers and sisters;" others give "brothers" as the translation and give "brothers and sisters" as the meaning in a footnote.[25] When the fifty-eight uses of *adelphos/oi* and two uses of *adelphe* in the remaining epistles and Revelation are added, the New Testament refers to fellow believers as brothers and sisters more than two hundred times.

When the references to the church as a household, the references to God as the Father of believers, and the references to believers as brothers and sisters are added together, they become so pervasive "that the comparison of the Christian community with a 'family' must be regarded as the most significant metaphorical usage of all."[26] The sibling terminology for fellow believers becomes especially significant when the first-century Mediterranean context is understood. Two aspects of that context are crucial for the New Testament understanding of the church. As Joseph Hellerman puts them, "In the New Testament world the group took priority over the individual," and "In the New Testament world the closest family bond was not the bond of marriage. It was the bond between siblings."[27] Hellerman is not saying that the sibling bond should be closer than that of marriage. In view of New Testament teaching on marriage, I do not think he would do so. His point is that when

24. Of the fifty-seven occurrences of *adelphos/oi* in Acts, thirty-three seem to refer to a believer or group of believers.
25. The 2011 NIV is an example of the former approach; the ESV of the latter.
26. Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 53.
27. Joseph Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2009), 50. The same points are made by S. Scott Bartchy, "Divine Power, Community Formation, and Leadership in the Acts of the Apostles," in *Community Formation in the Early Church and the Church Today*, ed. Richard Longenecker (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 93. Both Hellerman and Bartchy cite the work of Bruce Malina, *Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1986).

Paul and the other writers of the New Testament chose a word to refer to the relationship between fellow Christians, the word they overwhelmingly chose was the word that denoted the strongest bond that existed in their culture. In Hellerman's words, "in light of ancient Mediterranean cultural sensibilities," the use of sibling terminology indicates that "Jesus wanted His followers to interact with one another like members of a strong-group, surrogate family characterized by collectivist solidarity and commitment on every front."[28]

What implications does the image of church as family have for our understanding of the nature of the church? First of all, it speaks to the depth of relationship church members have with God. They have been adopted into his family. J. I. Packer argues that while justification may be the fundamental blessing of the gospel, adoption is the highest blessing. He writes: "Justification is a *forensic* idea, conceived in terms of *law*, and viewing God as *judge*." By contrast, "Adoption is a *family* idea, conceived in terms of *love*, and viewing God as *father*." He concludes: To be right with God the Judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is a greater."[29] Packer goes on to expound adoption as "the normative category" for the entire Christian life, as that which shows us "the greatness of God's love" (1 John 3:1), as that which shows us "the glory of the Christian hope; . . . the ministry of the Holy Spirit; . . . the meaning and motives of what the Puritans called 'gospel holiness;' [and] "the problem of Christian assurance."[30] In fact, to fully explore the riches of the doctrine of adoption would take an entire book; those who are interested in going further can consult such books.[31]

But second and perhaps even more important for individualistic North Americans, seeing fellow church members as brothers and sisters in the New Testament sense would profoundly impact the relationship church members have with one another. From his examination of how Paul uses the family imagery in his letters, Hellerman derives four implications. The first he calls "Affective Solidarity . . . the emotional bond that Paul experienced among brothers and sisters in God's family." In

28. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*, 75.
29. Packer, *Knowing God,* 207.
30. Ibid., 209, 214.
31. See Trevor Burke, *Adopted into God's Family: Exploring a Pauline Metaphor*, NSBT 22 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006); Robert A. Peterson, *Adopted by God: From Wayward Sinners to Cherished Children* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2001); and David B. Garner, *Sons in the Son: The Riches and Reach of Adoption in Christ* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2016).

simpler terms, it means "We share our hearts with one another."[32] The second is "Family Unity . . . the interpersonal harmony and absence of discord that Paul expected among brothers and sisters in God's family."[33] Scott Bartchy adds that among surrogate kinship groups characteristic practices included "truth telling" and "open homes to all in the extended kin group," practices that would help preserve family unity.[34] The third implication is "Material Solidarity . . . the sharing of resources that Paul assumed would characterize relationships among brothers and sisters in God's family."[35] This is especially evident in Acts 2 and 4, especially in the example of Barnabas, whose sale of a piece of land and delivery of the money to the family via the apostles shows this material solidarity, which Hellerman more plainly states as, "We share our stuff with one another."[36] The last implication drawn by Hellerman is "Family Loyalty . . . the undivided commitment to God's group that was to mark the value system of brothers and sisters in God's family."[37] Rather than hopping around from church to church as free agents, seeing ourselves as members of a family means, "We stay, embrace the pain and grow up with one another."[38] Undergirding this family loyalty is a sense of shared destiny, the recognition that we are not just family for the short time of this life, but that we are truly a forever family.[39]

A third implication we may draw from the church as family is the inseparability of salvation and church membership. When we are born again, we are born into a family. As one of my colleagues puts it, we are saved from sin, for God, into a family and unto a mission.[40] Hellerman calls on us to recognize that conversion involves both justification and what he calls "familification," and argues that we should see personal salvation as a "community-creating event."[41] When we see the church as family, we realize that not belonging to it is not an option.

32. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*, 78, 145.
33. Ibid., 78.
34. Bartchy, "Divine Power, Community Formation, and Leadership in Acts," 94.
35. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family,* 79.
36. Ibid., 145.
37. Ibid., 79.
38. Ibid., 145.
39. Bartchy, "Divine Power, Community Formation, and Leadership in Acts," notes, "Throughout the Acts narrative, the Jesus community remains highly energized by a sense of common purpose and shared destiny."
40. I heard this from my colleague, Dr. George Robinson.
41. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family,* 143.

1. The church as family means we have a deeper relationship with God; not merely pardoned criminals, but adopted and beloved children.
2. The church as family calls on us to treat fellow members as brothers and sisters, showing affective solidarity, family unity, material solidarity, and family unity.
3. The church as family means there can be no separation between conversion and church membership; conversion is a community-creating event.

Figure 1.2: Summary of Implications of the Church as Family

The People of God

In 1 Peter 2:9–10, the church is addressed using terminology from the Old Testament. The church is "a chosen people . . . God's special possession . . . the people of God," drawing upon the descriptions of Israel in Exodus 19:5–6; Deuteronomy 4:20; 7:6; Hosea 1:10; 2:23; and dozens if not hundreds of places throughout the Old Testament where God calls Israel "my people."

What does this image add to our understanding of the nature of the church? It connects the church to the Old Testament people of God, and sees the church as involved in God's great purpose of calling to himself a people, while leaving open the question of whether or not there is also a future purpose for ethnic Israel. The people of God image is also consistent with the idea of the church as the called-out people, for God's people become his people as a result of his call. This image can also serve as a corrective to the strong individualism in American society, for it reminds us that the church is a people, not a collection of isolated individuals. Most important of all, the people of God image reminds us that the church is much more than a human institution. Eleven times the church is called "the church of God."[42] God called it and God relates to it; the church is shaped in every way by its relationship to God.

For example, the God of the Bible is a holy God, and thus his people must be a holy people. God's called-out people are also "called to be his holy people" (Rom. 1:7). More than sixty times God's people are called saints or

42. See Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 10:32; 11:16; 11:22; 15:9; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Galatians 1:13; 1 Thessalonians 2:14; 2 Thessalonians 1:4; and 1 Timothy 3:5. By comparison, there is only one reference to "the churches of Christ" (Rom. 16:16).

holy ones *(hagioi).* This in no way implies that they have attained a state of sinless perfection; "holy" means first of all to be specially set apart for God's purposes. God summons his people out of the world to devotion to him. But the call to be holy in devotion includes a call to be holy in behavior.

It seems significant that one of the two places in the Gospels where Jesus discusses the church includes the process by which the church was to take action to exclude an unrepentant sinner (Matt. 18:15–18). Similarly, Paul insists that the church in Corinth must expel the wicked man from the church (1 Cor. 5:13). Because God is holy, the people of God must be holy.

But the holiness of God in Scripture is matched by his love. First John 4:8 says simply "God is love." Indeed, a succinct summary of God's character could be holy love, or loving holiness. Love for God and neighbor is identified by Jesus as the most important commandment (Matt. 22:37–39), but love is especially the mark of the church as the people of God. Early on, Jesus commanded his disciples to love one another, and promised that this would identify them to the world (John 13:34–35). In 1 John, one of the grounds for believing that one is part of the church is love for the brethren (1 John 2:9–10; 3:10, 14; 4:7–8, 19–20). Christians are commanded seventeen times in the New Testament to "love one another" and the record of history indicates early on a widespread obedience to that command. By the late second century Tertullian could claim that even the opponents of Christians noted this, saying, "See, they say, how they love one another."[43] In his classic study, *Evangelism in the Early Church,* Michael Green says that the love of Christians for one another "astonished the pagans" and was a large factor in their evangelistic success.[44] Because the church is the people of the God who is himself love, its members must be characterized by love.

As the people of God, the church is the people of the Triune God. We mentioned above the significance of seeing the church as the people of God the Father, in connection with the image of the church as a family. Now we want to reflect on the church as the people of the other two persons of the Trinity.

Christ the Son is God as well, and the church is his people too. The church is those who respond to God's call by trusting Christ. God's people in Ephesus are called "the faithful in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 1:1); at Colossae

43. Tertullian, "Apology," 39, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers,* eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1868–72; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 3:46–47.
44. Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 120.

they are called "God's holy people . . .the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ" (Col. 1:2). In the book of Acts, the church is referred to as "believers" in Christ, "disciples" of Christ, and, ultimately, as "Christians" (Acts 2:44; 11:26). They are clearly the people of God the Son.

The people of God are also the people of God the Holy Spirit. Indeed, it is the coming of the Spirit that transforms the disciples of Jesus into the church. Perhaps the most distinctive reflection of the church being the Holy Spirit's people is his gift of fellowship. The New Testament term for fellowship, *koinōnia,* is not found in Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, or Acts 1. However, once the Holy Spirit comes in Acts 2, we find fellowship in the first description of the life of the early church (v. 42). In the apostolic benediction of 2 Corinthians 13:14, while grace is associated with Christ, and love with God the Father, fellowship is "of the Holy Spirit."

1. It gives the church a connection to the Old Testament and God's great purpose of calling to himself a people.
2. It underscores the nature of the church as called—called by God to be his people.
3. The church is a people, not a collection of isolated individuals.
4. The church is God's people, not a human institution.
   - As God's people, the church is called to be holy and loving.
   - As God the Father's people, the church is a family.
   - As God the Son's people, the church is those who believe in Christ.
   - As God the Spirit's people, the church is those who experience fellowship.

Figure 1.3: Summary of Implications of the Church as the People of God

The word *koinōnia* involves the idea of participating in or sharing something in common with another. It can be used to describe a believer's relationship with God (1 John 1:3), but it is also used for the relationship the Holy Spirit creates among believers. He makes them aware that they share new life in Christ, which must radically alter how they relate to one another. In the early church, *koinōnia* was initially expressed in a virtual voluntary community of goods, where "[a]ll the believers were together and had everything in common" (Acts 2:44). Fellowship was also expressed in believers living what may be called the "one another" life.

There are more than thirty specific commands regarding how believers are to act toward one another, including forgiving one another, encouraging one another, accepting one another, and, most of all, loving one another, which appears seventeen times. We will have more to say about the importance of fellowship as an integral ministry of the church in chapter 10, but fellowship as an intrinsic part of the nature of the church comes from seeing the church as the people of God the Holy Spirit.

The Body of Christ

Perhaps the biblical image of the church that comes to mind most readily is that of the body of Christ. But, in fact, this image occurs only in the writings of Paul, and in only four of his letters (Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, and Colossians). However, in those four letters, the body image is used to illustrate in a vivid and memorable way a number of aspects of the church. Interestingly, the use made of the body image in Romans and 1 Corinthians differs markedly from the use in Ephesians and Colossians, so much so that they need to be examined separately.

In Romans and 1 Corinthians, the body of Christ is a metaphor for the local church, and the emphasis is on the relationships the members of the body have with one another. This is seen most clearly in 1 Corinthians 12:27: "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." The local church is not regarded here as merely a part of a larger body of Christ, but as *the* body of Christ in that place. This is another support for a proper understanding of the autonomy of the local church. No local church should be isolated, but no local church needs a larger body to complete it or enable it to function. It is the body of Christ, possessing full ecclesial status.

There is no mention here of Christ as the head of the body. The eye and ear are mentioned (1 Cor. 12:16–17), but only as members in the body. The body image in Romans and 1 Corinthians highlights three aspects of the relationship members of the body enjoy with each other.

The first aspect is that of *unity.* Interestingly, Paul links the body's unity to the two acts that we call ordinances or sacraments.[45] In 1 Corin-

45. Most denominations use the word "sacrament" for baptism and the Lord's Supper, and there is nothing objectionable about the word itself. The Latin word *sacramentum* originally was used as a term for the oath of loyalty a soldier took to his commander. But since the term *sacrament* over the years became associated with the view that grace is automatically conferred through these acts and that they are essential to salvation, Baptists have generally preferred the term

thians 10:16–17, Paul sees the Corinthians' participation or fellowship in the Lord's Supper as creating and expressing the oneness they enjoy in the body of Christ: "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf" (v. 17). In this meal, they celebrate and express the common life they have in Christ. Gordon Fee comments on this passage: "there can be little doubt that Paul intends to emphasize the kind of bonding relationship of the worshipers with one another that the meal expresses" and "the solidarity of the fellowship of believers is created by their all sharing 'the one loaf.'"[46] The basis for their unity with one another is their prior union with Christ, but the focus here is on their unity with one another, and Paul naturally turns to the image of the body to express that unity.

Likewise, in 1 Corinthians 12:13, their unity in the body of Christ is related to their common experience of baptism by the one Spirit: "we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body . . . and we were all given the one Spirit to drink." There are several important points in this verse that should be noted. First, contrary to the claims of some, Spirit baptism is an experience common to all believers. The word *all* appears twice in this verse, underscoring that fact. Second, the unity of the body is derived from the unity of the Spirit. Because it is the one Spirit that is acting here, his creation is one body. Third, his action is directed toward the creation of one body. The preposition *into (eis)* can "either be local, indicating that into which all were baptized, or denote the goal of the action, indicating the purpose or goal of the baptismal action (= 'so as to become one body')."[47] The meaning of purpose or goal seems more likely here. Spirit baptism is invisible, and places one in the universal body of Christ, but it is water baptism that is a visible act with a local meaning, placing one in a local body of Christ. Some may object that Ephesians 4:5 says there is one baptism, but the one baptism may have two forms, just as the one church has both a local and a universal form. Spirit baptism identifies us with the universal church and water baptism with a local church. In either case, the result is "one body."

---

ordinance to avoid these connotations. Some Baptists use the term *sacrament* but with a different understanding of its meaning. See Stanley Fowler, *More Than a Symbol: The British Baptist Recovery of Baptismal Sacramentalism*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought, vol. 2 (Milton Keynes, Great Britain: Paternoster, 2002).

46. Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians,* The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 466.

47. Ibid., 603, n. 20.

For Paul, the body image is everywhere associated with unity. It is based on a common life in Christ, celebrated in the Lord's Supper. That unity is created by the act of the Spirit, who baptizes believers into one body.

Paul also uses the body image to illustrate *unity in diversity.* Romans 12:4–5 and 1 Corinthians 12:14–20 echo the same message: many members, but one body; diversity of gifts, but one body. The body makes an obvious, clearly visible, and easily understandable illustration of Paul's point, which perhaps accounts for the popularity of this image. Even so, while easy to understand, the unity of the body is difficult to experience. Paul reminds the Romans that it is only "in Christ" that "we though many, form one body" (Rom. 12:5). It took the supernatural power of a common life in Christ and a common reception of the Spirit to overcome the natural divisions of the ancient world of Greek and Jew, slave and free, and male and female. There can be diversity of race and sex and status, diversity in function and gift, but one body, one Lord, one Spirit, one faith.

It is important, especially for Baptists, to remember both the areas in which diversity is allowed or even esteemed and other areas where unity is required. Baptists have a long history of divisions. I even have a friend who says you're not a real Baptist until you've been through a church split; and, sadly, there are few longtime Baptists who have not experienced such a sad episode. However, most of those splits have come over issues that should not have been allowed to threaten the unity of the body. In many instances, diversity should have been embraced.

More recently, however, we have seen the rise of some in Baptist life who have argued for an acceptance, not just of diversity in race, sex, or status, but also diversity in faith, or doctrine. These Baptists have argued that doctrine divides and ministry unites—that being Baptist means being free from doctrinal constraints. But that is not how Baptists have historically approached the issue of unity, and it is not consistent with the biblical mandate that the "one body" must have "one faith" (Eph. 4:4–5).

Baptists have published dozens of confessions of faith to articulate the "one faith" (Eph. 4:5) as they understood it. While they gladly affirm unity in the universal body of Christ with all those who share life in Christ and the presence of the Spirit, and while many Baptists individually express unity with other believers in numerous community organizations or evangelical parachurch ministries, they see that unity as limited to areas of common doctrinal understanding. To walk together in church fellowship requires a fuller unity and thus a fuller doctrinal agreement. Historically

most Baptist churches have included a statement of faith as part of their founding documents, which articulates the common faith that is a legitimate aspect of the church's unity. There must be diversity in many things, but unity in doctrine, especially unity in the doctrine of the church, is necessary for a local church to operate in genuine unity.

The third theme highlighted by the body of Christ image is *mutuality* of love and care among the members of the body. Romans 12:5 says that in Christ's body, "each member belongs to all the others." First Corinthians 12 contains a long explanation of how each part of the body needs every other part, and states that God desires all the members of the body to "have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it" (vv. 25–26). This mutuality is reflected in the more than thirty "one another" passages in the New Testament (such as "love one another," "forgive one another," and many more). The care that members of the church offer to each other is aptly portrayed in the image of the body, whose parts work harmoniously together.

This biblical theme is also reflected in the language earlier Baptists often used in confessions and church covenants to describe what it meant to join together as a church. The widely influential Second London Confession of 1677 says that church members "do willingly consent to walk together according to the appointment of Christ, giving up themselves to the Lord and one to another, by the will of God, in professed subjection to the ordinances of the Gospel."[48] Such language was found even more often in church covenants. Whereas confessions of faith dealt mainly with doctrine, church covenants emphasized the commitment church members make to one another.[49] The most widely used covenant was that adopted by the 1833 New Hampshire Baptist Convention. It described the care members pledged to give to one another in these words: "We do, therefore, in His strength engage, that we will exercise a mutual care as members one of another to promote the growth of the whole body."[50] The convention saw such a pledge virtually as constitutive for the church. It is

48. William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith,* rev. ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969), 286. This confession was reissued in England for more than a hundred years and came to America almost verbatim as the Philadelphia Confession, the most influential Baptist confession in America well into the nineteenth century.
49. A collection of seventy-nine Baptist church covenants can be found in Charles W. Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants* (Nashville: Broadman, 1990), 115–99.
50. Ibid., 157.

derived from the image of the body, whose members care for one another as part of their nature.

For any who question the propriety of using phrases like "church members" or "church membership," it is worth noting that the body image gives us both the precedence for such language and the proper understanding of it. Being a member of the church is nothing like being a member of Sam's Club or a member of some team. Church members are those vitally connected to the other members of the body as the physical members of a body are vitally connected to that physical body. Any so-called "church members" who can leave their churches without feeling the pain of being severed were never members in the biblical sense at all. Biblical church membership is a serious commitment.

To summarize, in Romans and 1 Corinthians, Paul uses the image of the body of Christ to illustrate the relationships the members of a local church have to one another. The predominant themes are unity of the body, unity and diversity within the body, and the mutuality of care among the members of the body. In Ephesians and Colossians, the image of the body of Christ is used, but in a totally different context, with different emphases.

First of all, in Ephesians and Colossians, the body is related to the universal church. Five times Paul places the two together: "the church . . . his body" (Eph. 1:22–23; 5:23, 29–30; Col. 1:18, 24). In each case, the description of the church points to and virtually requires the universal sense. However, while the universal church does seem to fit the usage of *ekklēsia* in these two letters, the activities Paul describes (of pastors and teachers equipping God's people, of the body growing as each part does its work; see Eph. 4:12, 16; Col. 2:19) take place in local churches and thus local assemblies are not totally out of view.

Second, in Ephesians and Colossians, a new element is added to the usage of the body image, that of the relationship of the head to the body. In these letters, a major emphasis is on the role and importance of Christ, who is identified as the head of the body five times (Eph. 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Col. 1:18; 2:19).

What themes emerge from Paul's usage of the body of Christ in these two letters? The teaching on Christ as the head of the body highlights the ideas of his *authority* over the body and his *provision* for the body. His provision for the body leads to its *growth,* which is the third theme encountered here. Each theme deserves more thorough consideration.

Despite recent attempts to remove the idea of authority from the Greek word for head *(kephalē),*[51] the authority of the head over the body seems to be one of the major emphases of Paul's teaching on Christ as the head of the church. Paul's teaching on Christ as the head of the body is found in some of the most exalted Christological passages in all the New Testament. In Ephesians 1:20–23, Christ is described as exalted above all rival powers, for all time, with all things under his feet. This sovereign figure is then appointed "head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way" (vv. 22–23). It is hard to imagine a more majestic description of sovereign authority, but Colossians 1 comes close. There Christ is the image of God, the firstborn, the Creator of all, the one in whom all things consist (vv. 15–17). This one is also the head of the church, the one who is supreme or preeminent in everything (v. 18). He is even called "the head over every power and authority" (Col. 2:10). But lest this authority seem authoritarian and harsh, it is described as a loving, self-sacrificing authority in the beautiful comparison of Christ and the church to a husband and wife (Eph. 5:23–33). Christ's headship certainly involves authority, for the church is called to submit to Christ. But the head exercises his authority on behalf of the church, loving her, giving himself up for her, feeding her, and caring for her.

This theme of Christ as the authoritative head of the church has one immediate practical implication for local churches, especially in the area of church polity. One criterion for evaluating any form of church government should be how well it preserves Christ's unique authority as head of the church. We will return to this point when we consider the issue of church polity and government.

The idea of authority is perhaps the central idea in Christ's headship over the church, but it is not the only idea. Clinton Arnold notes that in the ancient world, especially among first-century medical writers, the head was seen as both the ruling part of the body and the source that provided nourishment and sustenance.[52] This idea of provision is also reflected in

51. See the article by Catherine Kroeger, "Head," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters,* eds. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL/Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 1993), 375–77. Her work is subjected to a convincing critique by Wayne Grudem, "The Meaning of *kephalē* ("Head"): An Evaluation of New Evidence, Real and Alleged," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44, no. 1 (March 2001): 25–65.

52. Clinton E. Arnold, "Jesus Christ: 'Head' of the Church (Colossians and Ephesians)," in *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ,* eds. Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1994), 346–66. The same point is made by Gregory W. Dawes, *The*

Paul's usage. He uses virtually identical language in Ephesians 4:16 and Colossians 2:19 to describe Christ the head as the one "from whom" the body derives what it needs to grow. Indeed, the problem with the Colossians is that they have "lost connection with the head" (Col. 2:19). This is the same idea as that vividly pictured by Jesus's teaching in John 15 on the vine and the branches. The branches receive all their sustenance from connection with the vine; the body receives all its nourishment via the head. The head makes provision for the body.

Those provisions are designed to aid the church in its growth. In Ephesians, the growth envisioned seems to be not numerical, but spiritual. The goal of growth is referred to as "unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God," or maturity, "attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ," or even growing into him "who is the head, that is, Christ" (Eph. 4:13–16). Knowing Christ their head and becoming like him is the goal of the church's growth. But Paul is careful not to overlook or omit the role of the leaders of the body. Part of Christ's provision for the body is gifted leaders: "Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers" (v. 11). These gifted leaders then equip the members of the body to carry out ministry. The end result is that the body is "joined and held together by every supporting ligament" and grows "as each part does its work" (v. 16). The language in Colossians 2:19 is strikingly similar: The body grows when it is "supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews." Paul is again drawing implications from the diversity of parts in the human body for understanding the church. In Romans and 1 Corinthians, the point was that the diversity of gifts in the members and the multiplicity of members do not eliminate the unity of the body. In Ephesians and Colossians, Paul carries the point further. Unity is not only not eliminated by the multiplicity and diversity of the body, but the diverse gifts of the body are necessary for both unity (holding the body together) and maturity (growing up to full Christlikeness).

One final caution should be added to our discussion of the church as the body of Christ. There has been a temptation, especially in Catholic thought, to think of the body of Christ as more than a mere metaphor for the church. *The Catholic Catechism* sees the body language as justifying the claim that "Christ and his Church thus together make up the 'whole

Body in Question: Meaning and Metaphor in the Interpretation of Ephesians 5:21–33 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 122–49.

Christ' (*Christus totus*)."[53] Catholic theologian Richard McBrien speaks of the "physical realism of the union between Christ and the Church" that lies behind the body of Christ language used for the church.[54] But this seems to unjustifiably absolutize one image of the church and treat it as more real or literal than the others, and leads to theological danger. As Catholic bishop Avery Dulles says, seeing the church as in some real way the actual body of Christ, such that in Christ, the incarnation of Christ on earth is extended or prolonged, would seem to lead to "an unhealthy divinization of the Church," with the union of Christ and the church "a biological and hypostatic one."[55] Would sin and error in the church then be attributed to Christ, or would we have to assume the church could never err? No, it is more justifiable exegetically and theologically to recognize the body of Christ as an image for the church; an undeniably rich and meaningful image, but nonetheless, just an image.

1. The image of the body points to the church's unity, seen especially in the Lord's Supper and baptism.
2. The image of the body aptly illustrates how the church may be one, while its members are diverse.
3. The body image reflects how the members of the church should show a mutuality of love and care to one another.
4. Christ, as the head of the body, is the ultimate authority for the church.
5. As head, Christ also provides for the needs of the church.
6. Christlikeness is the goal of the church's growth; all the members of the church contribute to the growth and unity of the church as all perform their own particular ministries.

Figure 1.4: Summary of Implications of the Church as the Body of Christ

The Temple of the Spirit

The third major image of the church in the New Testament is the temple of the Holy Spirit. The first idea of the church as a building is implied by Jesus's words in Matthew 16:18 (emphasis added): "you are

53. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New Hope, KY: Urbi et Orbi, 1994), 210.
54. Richard McBrien, *Catholicism*, new ed. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 600.
55. Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, expanded ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 55.

Peter, and on this rock I will *build* my church." Historically, most discussion of this verse has focused on the relationship between Peter (*petros*) and the rock *(petra)* on which the church is built, chiefly because this verse has been used by many Catholics to support the importance of the papacy for the church. But that discussion, while important, should not distract us from another important idea in the text, that of the church as a building. It is elaborated on elsewhere in the New Testament.

The main developer of this idea is Paul. In 1 Corinthians 3:9, he begins by comparing the church to both a field and a building, but it is the latter idea that receives his attention. He states that the foundation of the building is Jesus Christ, with each Christian's work building on that foundation, some in a way that will endure, and others in a way that will not (vv. 11–15). But in verse 16, Paul turns from the foundation upon which we are building to envision the church as a building, and a very special building, God's temple. Elsewhere, Paul speaks of the individual Christian's body as the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19); here he addresses the church collectively as the temple of God.

Paul says, "You are God's temple." But why is this temple especially associated with God the Holy Spirit? A response is found in the last part of 1 Corinthians 3:16. The church is not the temple of God by anything inherent in its members, but by virtue of the indwelling Holy Spirit. The word used here for "temple," which is also used for the church in 2 Corinthians 6:16 and Ephesians 2:21, is *naos,* which "refers to the actual sanctuary, the place of the deity's dwelling, in contrast to the word *hieron,* which referred to the temple precincts as well as to the sanctuary."[56] This tells us that the key point being made when Paul refers to the church as God's temple is that God indwells or inhabits the church. But the means by which God indwells his people is the Holy Spirit. That is made explicit in Ephesians 2:21–22, where the church is called a holy temple, "a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit." Thus, the temple of God is the temple of the Spirit.

This leads to the first two implications we may draw about the nature of the church from this image. The first is that just as the physical temple was preeminently the place to worship God, because the temple was

56. Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians,* 146. Fee notes that the distinction is not universal in first-century Greek, but it is supported by the usage of the Septuagint, which seems to be the key influence on Paul's usage.

recognized as his dwelling place, so the church, as the temple of the Spirit, must be preeminently a worshiping people.

The Old Testament teaches that, in a sense, all that God created is designed to bring praise and worship to him. Psalm 19:1 says that the heavens themselves declare God's glory; Psalm 96 calls upon the heavens, earth, sea, fields, and trees to be glad, sing, worship, and tremble before the Lord (vv. 9–12); the whole of Psalm 148 is devoted to enlisting the angels, sun, moon, stars, animals, and even the elements of weather to give praise to God; the last verse of the book of Psalms summarizes: "Let everything that has breath praise the LORD" (150:6). But in a special way God's people are gathered together as his temple for the purpose of worship.

First Peter 2:5 compares believers to "living stones" that are built together "into a spiritual house." The word *house* was used in the Old Testament and by Jesus as a synonym for the temple. When Jesus cleansed the temple, he called it a "house of prayer" (see Isa. 56:7; Jer. 7:11, quoted by Jesus in Matt. 21:13). The church, composed of believers, is not a physical temple like the one in Jerusalem but a spiritual one. However, it serves a similar purpose, for the "living stones" that compose this temple are also a "holy priesthood" who offer "spiritual sacrifices." The adjective *spiritual* indicates that the worship offered by these priests is a Spirit-empowered worship, prompted by the Spirit who indwells them and forms them into his temple. It also indicates that the sacrifices they offer are no longer the animals prescribed by the Old Testament law but sacrifices that reflect New Testament worship. Doing good and sharing with others materially are referred to as sacrifices that please God (Phil. 4:18; Heb. 13:16); so is using our lips to confess God's name (Heb. 13:15). But Paul specifically identifies offering our bodies, or our entire selves, as living sacrifices as our "spiritual" or "rational" worship (Rom. 12:1).

Another point to note in the development of this image is that those offering the sacrifices in the temple of the Spirit are called "a holy priesthood," "a royal priesthood," and "a kingdom and priests" (1 Peter 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6; 5:10). These verses form the basis for the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.[57] The New Testament calls those who lead the church elders, bishops, or pastors, but never priests. But by the end of the second century another term for elder, *presbyter*, was contracted to *priest* and applied to

57. Uche Anizor and Hank Vess, *Representing Christ: A Vision for the Priesthood of All Believers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).

clergy. Throughout the Middle Ages, the priesthood and priestly functions were increasingly limited to clergy. Martin Luther is justly identified with the recovery of the priesthood of all believers,[58] but it has been especially important in Baptist ecclesiology, where it has formed part of the basis for congregational government. Since all believers are priests, and only believers should be members of the church, Baptists have argued that all these believer-priest church members are able and responsible to help the church find God's direction for its life.

In more recent Baptist life, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers has sometimes become the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer (singular), and has been misinterpreted in terms of individual rights and confused with the idea of soul competence. Soul competence, as believed by Baptists, has been the conviction that each individual is able and responsible before God for his or her relationship with God and does not require the mediation of any human priest to come before God. This applies to every human, and is related to our creation in God's image. The priesthood of all believers applies only to believers and has to do with our common responsibility to minister to one another and to the world. To see it as somehow justifying an attitude of individual self-sufficiency is to misunderstand the doctrine and to forget our need for the church and the church's need for each member's ministry.

In terms of worship, the priesthood of all believers reminds us that worship is never the province of preachers and musicians, with church members as spectators. All believers are called upon to be those offering the spiritual sacrifices of worship. Thus churches should actively seek ways to involve all their members in worship, a challenge that grows as churches get larger. As the temple of the Spirit, the church must be a worshiping community. That is one of its essential, constitutive ministries.

Perhaps the most important and foundational implication of the church as the temple of the Spirit is the idea of relationship. The purpose of the tabernacle and later the temple in the Old Testament was to portray God's dwelling among his people, not just to receive their worship but to bless them and to show his desire for relationship with them. The tabernacle was called the tent of meeting dozens of times, because God's glory filled the

58. Timothy George states, "Luther's greatest contribution to Protestant ecclesiology was his doctrine of the priesthood of all believers." Timothy George, *The Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman, 1988), 95.

tabernacle and there he met with his people. The temple of Solomon was also regarded as a dwelling place of God, a place to which his people could turn and find his presence (2 Chron. 7:15–16). That purpose was furthered in the coming of Jesus, who "tabernacled" or dwelt among us (John 1:14) for a time; but he eventually ascended. In one of the two passages in which Jesus taught on the church, he promised his presence where two or three gather in his name (Matt. 18:15–20). Paul said that when the church gathers, "the power of our Lord Jesus is present" (1 Cor. 5:4). Yet every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we recognize Christ's absence, for we celebrate the Supper only "until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). How can we experience the presence and power of Christ when he is ascended and we await his coming? By means of the indwelling Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9), whose special function it is to make Christ's presence real now, and who makes the church the temple where God meets with us in a special way. It is only the Holy Spirit who can bring us into relationship with God, for it is the Spirit who sanctifies us and makes us fit to enter relationship with God (1 Cor. 6:11). He makes us, not just a temple, but a holy temple (Eph. 2:21), a fit dwelling place for a holy God.

G. K. Beale has traced this temple imagery for the church throughout the Scriptures and relates it to the mission of the church. His thesis focuses on connecting the Old Testament temple symbolism to the eschatological reality of God's presence extended through the whole earth;[59] the church's mission is as an expanding temple, to extend the presence of God throughout the world by winning people from all nations to Christ.[60]

The image of the church as the temple of the Spirit, as taught in the New Testament, also implies something of the relationship those in the church have with each other. Ephesians 2:21 speaks of the way the church "is joined together" *(synarmologoumenē).* The root of this Greek word, *harmozō,* is the word from which we get the English word *harmonize*. As used here, the word speaks of the care with which a mason fits together the stones in a building.[61] The same word is used in Ephesians 4:16 to

59. Beale states his thesis explicitly: "My thesis is that the Old Testament tabernacle and temples were symbolically designed to point to the cosmic eschatological reality that God's tabernacling presence, formerly limited to the holy of holies, was to be expanded throughout the whole earth" (G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 17 [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity/Leicester, UK: Apollos, 2004], 25).

60. Ibid., 262–63.

61. J. A. Motyer, "Body," in Brown, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology,* 1:241.

describe how the parts of the body are carefully joined together. In the same way that God arranges the parts of the body just as he wants them to be (1 Cor. 12:18), so God the builder carefully builds his temple, arranging the stones just as he desires them to be. We must remember that the builder of the church is not a pastor or leader but God. Jesus said, "I will build my church" (Matt. 16:18). Both Paul and Peter use the passive voice when speaking of the temple. It "is joined together" and is "being built" (Eph. 2:21; 1 Peter 2:5). The builder, though not specified, is clearly God.

But if this is so, if God is the one who carefully fits the stones together and builds his people into a holy temple, why is there so often friction between the stones, with some not wanting to be fit together with others? Why do churches often seem like temples that are falling apart? One danger, of course, is a faulty foundation. Any church not founded solidly on Christ is at risk of falling apart (1 Cor. 3:10–11); it is only "in him" that the stones are built together (Eph. 2:21–22). It is only by coming to him that we become fit building material (1 Peter 2:4).

There is another reason why many churches have a problem holding their living stones together. We call the church the temple of the Spirit because the Spirit is the mortar that holds the stones together. The church is not to be held together by social bonds such as being of the same race or class or income, but by the spiritual bond of a common possession of the Holy Spirit. Church growth strategists tell us that churches grow fastest when they target people most like those already in the church. They are no doubt right; people are usually attracted to those with similar backgrounds and lifestyles. But the New Testament is clear that the church must not become a club of one type of people but a community that transcends those things that divide people in society. In Paul's day, the call was to transcend the barriers between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, and find unity in Christ (Gal. 3:28). Today's barriers include race (white, black, Hispanic), social class (rich, middle class, poor), and even age (young families, senior adults). Fortunately, an increasing number of churches are seeking to follow the model described by Paul and are seeking to build multicultural churches.[62] But contemporary churches need a greater reliance on the Spirit and a deeper experience of his gift of fellow-

62. From a growing literature on this topic, two recent books are Malcolm Patten, *Leading a Multicultural Church* (London; SPCK, 2016) and Douglas Brouwer, *How to Become a Multicultural Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017).

ship if they are to be stones fitly joined together, especially when the stones come from diverse backgrounds.

God fitly joins together the stones in his holy temple with the mortar of fellowship. To switch metaphors, the Holy Spirit is the lubricant that eases friction. Whether seen as mortar or lubricant, true fellowship is the creation of the Holy Spirit and an essential ministry of the church. This too must be a concern as churches grow larger, for fellowship can only happen on a personal, small-group level. The need is for the multiplication of small groups where believer-priests can minister to each other and allow the Spirit to join them together by the bonds of loving fellowship. Pastors know by experience that those who join a church but do not develop such bonds tend to become easily disattached, because they were never fitly joined together. That work is performed by the Holy Spirit, who links people together on a personal level. He transforms a heap of stones into a holy temple.

1. Because it is God's temple, the church must be a worshiping community.
2. In God's temple, all believers form the priesthood; all are involved in the church's ministry.
3. The temple is also the place of relationship.
   - The Spirit mediates our relationship with God, communicating his presence and power and sanctifying us.
   - The Spirit joins together believers as the stones in God's temple through his creation of fellowship.

Figure 1.5: Summary of Implications of the Church as the Temple of the Spirit

While this chapter in no way exhausts biblical teaching on the nature of the church, the major outlines are in place. The following chapter will show how the church in history has filled in that outline, by formulating in two major ways distinguishing marks of the church.