

BIBLICAL METAPHORS FOR THE CHURCH AND ADVENTIST ECCLESIOLOGY

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The republication of Paul Minear's classic treatment, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, provides apt occasion to reconsider metaphors for the church and their appropriation today.¹ The purpose of this essay is threefold: to outline appropriate ways to analyze and understand NT metaphors for the church, to provide a fresh survey of the metaphors in the light of that methodology, and to reflect on how the biblical metaphors for the church should impact our thinking. "If the church is to recover the integrity of its life and mission, it must have adequate images to capture and inspire its imagination."² While I trust a wider audience will find the reflections useful, I am especially interested in the function of NT metaphors in Seventh-day Adventist understandings of the church.

A Survey of Metaphors for the Church

Minear catalogued ninety-six images of the church in the NT;³ then he sifted out thirty-two "minor images" (e.g., the salt of the earth, a letter from Christ) and grouped the remaining images under the rubrics "The People of God," "The New Creation," "The Fellowship in Faith," and "The Body of Christ."⁴ Reproducing his list offers a helpful outline of NT metaphors for the church:⁴

¹Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, foreword, Leander E. Keck (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), xiii-xxvii.

²John Driver, *Images of the Church in Mission* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1997), 21.

³Minear.

⁴*Ibid.*, 268-269. I have adapted Minear's appendix, in which he outlines "Analogies Discussed in the Text." I have added the headings and biblical references, attempting to include those passages Minear specifically mentions where he believes the image/metaphor is or may be used. A question mark indicates that Minear expresses doubt as to whether the metaphor is actually present. Occasionally, too, he does not see a specific metaphor actually present, but still believes the language nonetheless provides "an important clue to the church's self-understanding" (a phrase he uses in treating the image "The Cup of the Lord," 39). I have included such references. It should be borne in mind that Minear is, in general, attempting to be representative, rather than exhaustive, in the citations he provides. I have listed references in canonical order rather than the order in which Minear discusses them and have retained his use of the abbreviation "f."

Minor Images of the Church

- [1] the salt of the earth (Matt 5:13)
- [2] a letter from Christ (2 Cor 3:2-3)
- [3] fish and fish net (Matt 4:19; 13:47-50; Mark 1:17; Luke 5:1-11; John 21:1-14)
- [4] the boat (Matt 8:23-27?; 14:22-27?; Mark 4:1?; John 21:8?)
- [5] the ark (1 Pet 3:18-22)
- [6] unleavened bread (1 Cor 5:7)
- [7] one loaf (John 6; 1 Cor 10:16-17)
- [8] the table of the Lord (1 Cor 10:21)
- [9] the altar (1 Cor 9:13; Heb 13:15; Rev 6:9; 16:6-7)
- [10] the cup of the Lord (1 Cor 10:16, 21)
- [11] wine (Mark 2:27?; John 2:1-11?)
- [12] branches of the vine (John 15)
- [13] vineyard (Matt 21:28-41; Mark 12:1-9; Luke 20:9-16; 1 Cor 9:7?)
- [14] the fig tree (Mark 11:12-14; Luke 13:6-9; John 1:47)
- [15] the olive tree (Rom 11:13-23)
- [16] God's planting (1 Cor 3:9)
- [17] God's building (1 Cor 3:9)
- [18] building on the rock (Matt 16:18-19)
- [19] pillar and buttress (Col 1:23; 1 Tim 3:5; Rev 3:12)
- [20] virgins (Matt 25:1-13; Rev 14:1-4)
- [21] the Messiah's mother (Rev 12:1-2)
- [22] the elect lady (2 John 1:1)
- [23] the bride of Christ (John 3:29; 2 Cor 11:1f.; Eph 5:22-31; Rev 21:2-4; 22:17)
- [24] the wedding feast (Matt 22:1-10; Mark 2:19; Luke 12:36; Rev 19:8-9)
- [25] wearers of white robes (Matt 22:1-14; Rev 19:7)

- [26] the choice of clothing (Rom 13:12, 14; 1 Cor 15:51-54; 2 Cor 5:2-3; Gal 3:27; Eph 4:22-24; 6:11f.; Col 3:9-11; 3:12f.; 1 Thess 5:5-8)
- [27] citizens (Gal 6:10; Eph 2:10; Phil 3:20)
- [28] exiles (Heb 11:13; 1 Pet 1:1; 2:11)
- [28] exiles (Heb 11:13; 1 Pet 1:1; 2:11)
- [29] the dispersion (Jas 1:1; 1 Pet 1:1)
- [30] ambassadors (2 Cor 5:18-21)
- [31] the poor (Luke 6:20?; Jas 2:2-6?)
- [32] hosts and guests (Matt 25:31-46)

The People of God

- [33] the people of God (Rom 9:25-26; 1 Pet 2:9-10)
- [34] Israel (Gal 6:16; Eph 2:10; Heb 8:8-10; 11:25; Rev 2:14)⁵
- [35] a chosen race (1 Pet 2:9)
- [36] a holy nation (1 Pet 2:9)
- [37] twelve tribes (Matt 19:28; Jas 1:1; Rev 7:4)
- [38] the patriarchs (Rom 15:8-10; 1 Cor 10:1-10)
- [39] circumcision (Rom 2:25-29; Phil 3:3-11; Col 2:11-12)
- [40] Abraham's sons (Rom 4:16; Gal 3:29)
- [41] the exodus (passages that demonstrate the belief that "Christians were repeating the communal experience of the exiles from Egypt," see, e.g., John 3:14; Heb 11:23-29; 1 Cor 10:1-12)⁶
- [42] house of David (Acts 15:16-18 and implied in many passages focused on the origins of Jesus)
- [43] remnant (Rom 9:27; 11:5-7)

⁵It is worth noting that, in treating this image, Minear, 72, writes: "Paul did not fall back [in Gal 6:16] upon a concept of two Israels, the old and the new, or the false and the true. He defined God's Israel as one people. . . . So strong is this sense of solidarity that one must conclude that the continuity between the two Testaments is grounded in the fact that both tell the story of how the same God fulfills his covenant promises to the same people."

⁶Ibid., 78.

- [44] the elect (e.g., Luke 9:35; 23:35; John 1:34; 1 Cor 1:27; Eph 1:4; 1 Thess 1:4; Jas 2:5; 2 Pet 1:10)
- [45] flock (Matt 26:31; Luke 2:8?; 12:32; John 10, eps. v. 16; 21:15-17; Acts 20:28-29; 1 Cor 9:7; Heb 13:20; 1 Pet 5:2-3).
- [46] lambs who rule (Rev 2:26-27)
- [47] the Holy City (Gal 3; Heb 12; Rev 11)
- [48] the holy temple (1 Cor 3:16-17; Eph 2:18-22; 1 Pet 2:5)
- [49] priesthood (1 Pet 2:9; Rev 1:6; 5:10)
- [50] sacrifice (Hebrews)
- [51] aroma (2 Cor 2:15; Phil 4:18; Rev 5:8; 8:3)
- [52] festivals (esp. Passover, Pentecost, and Sabbath)

The New Creation

- [53] the new creation (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15-16; Jas 1:18)
- [54] first fruits (Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:15; Jas 1:18; cf. Rom 8:23; 11:16; 1 Cor 15:20-23)
- [55] the new humanity (Col 3:10; Eph 4:22, 24)
- [56] the last Adam (Rom 5:12; 1 Cor 15:21-22; Eph 2:14-15)
- [57] the Son of Man (John 1:51; Heb 2:6)
- [58] the Kingdom of God (Gospels)
- [59] fighters against Satan (see images nos. 26 and 55)
- [60] Sabbath Rest (Mark 2:23-3:6; Luke 13:6-21; John 5; Heb 4:1-11)
- [61] the coming age (1 Cor 15:28; Heb 12:28)
- [62] God's glory (1 Thess 2:12; 2 Cor 3:7-18)
- [63] light (Matt 5:14; Luke 16:8; John 8:12; Acts 13:47; Eph 5:8; Phil 2:15; 1 Thess 5:5; 1 Pet 2:9; Rev 1:20; 2:1, 5)
- [64] the name (Matt 7:22; 18:5; Rev 3:12)

- [65] life (John 20:31; Col 3:3; 1 Pet 3:7; Rev 3:1)
- [66] the tree of life (Rev 2:7; 22:1-5)
- [67] communion in the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 13:14; passages mentioning "one spirit")
- [68] the bond of love (linked to many "new creation" passages)

The Fellowship in Faith

- [69] the sanctified (e.g., 1 Cor 1:2)
- [70] the faithful (e.g., Col 1:2)
- [71] the justified (e.g., Rom 3:26)
- [72] followers (Call narratives in the Gospels)
- [73] disciples (Call narratives in the Gospels)
- [74] road (Matt 7:13-14; Luke 13:23-24; John 14:4-6; Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22)
- [75] coming and going (Gospel of John)
- [76] witnessing community (John 15:26-27; 1 John 1:1-4; 4:11-18; 5:19; Rev 6:9-11; 12:11, 17; 19:10)
- [77] confessors (see passages for "witnessing community," just above)
- [78] slaves (1 Cor 9:19; 2 Cor 4:5; Gal 1:10; 5:13; Eph 6:6)
- [79] friends (Luke 12:4; John 11:11; 15:15-20; 20:2; 21:16; 3 John 15)
- [80] servants (Mark 9:35; 10:43; John 12:25-26; 2 Cor 3; Eph 4; 1 Pet 4:10-11; Rev 2:19)
- [81] "with . . ." (e.g., Rom 8:32; Col 3:3-4)
- [82] edification (1 Cor 8:1; Eph 2:21; 4:7-12, 16; 1 Pet 2:5)
- [83] household of God (Heb 3:1-6; 8:1-13; 1 Pet 2:5-10; 4:17)
- [84] sons of God (Matt 23:9-10; John 1:12; 11:52)
- [85] brotherhood (Matt 25:40; Mark 3:35; 10:29-30; 1 Pet 2:17; 5:9; 1 John 3:1-5:5)

The Body of Christ	
[86] the body of life (Rom 5:8)	[91] head of cosmic spirits (Col 2:9-10) ⁷
[87] members of Christ (1 Cor 6:12-20)	[92] head of the church (Col 2:9-10, by implication)
[88] the body and the blood (1 Cor 10:16-17; 11:23-26)	[93] the body of this head (Col 2:11, 18, 23, <i>passim</i>)
[89] the diversities of ministries (1 Cor 12:12-27, in the setting of 1 Cor 12-14; Rom 12)	[94] the unity of Jews and Gentiles (Colossians)
[90] spiritual body (1 Cor 15)	[95] the growth of the body (Col 2:19)
	[96] the fullness of God (Ephesians)

While Minear's taxonomy is helpful, a different organization is adopted here. I have emphasized those metaphors that are present both in the earlier and the later letters of Paul, the apostle's sustained interest suggesting they are worthy of close attention. I propose to treat here five clusters of biblical metaphors for the church:

Corporal: The Church as Body

Architectural: The Church as Building/Temple

Agricultural: The Church as Plant/Field/Vineyard/Vine

Martial: The Church as Army

Familial and Marital: The Church as Family and as Bride

In each case, I shall discuss the (usually OT) background, survey the uses of the cluster in the NT, examine selected passages more closely in view of the method described below, and emphasize the contributions the cluster makes to a well-rounded and vibrant understanding of the church.

How to Analyze Metaphors for the Church

Exegetes and theologians have sometimes operated with a dated set of presuppositions concerning metaphor, presuppositions that denigrate its use.⁸ However, the metaphors of the Bible are surely to be regarded as inspired in the same way as the rest of it. So it is welcome news that some theorists offer an understanding of metaphor that comports well with its ubiquitous use in the Bible.

In the place of dated presuppositions about "mere metaphor," a distilled set of concepts about metaphor provide a truer perspective. The first of these ideas is that *metaphor is not mere adornment of language*. It is not "a sort of happy trick with words" or "a grace or ornament added to the power of language." Instead, metaphor is "the omnipresent principle of language" since language

⁷In dealing with images 91-95, Minear, 203-220, focuses solely on the occurrence of them in Colossians, reserving the discussion of Ephesians until image 96.

⁸See the elaboration of this point in Ian Paul, "Metaphor and Exegesis," in *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew, Colin Greene, and Karl Möller, Scripture and Hermeneutics Series 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 389-390.

itself is metaphoric and metaphor simply illustrates the workings of human language and thought as a whole.⁹

Second, *the meaning of metaphor cannot be adequately or fully paraphrased*. In this sense, metaphor—and especially poetic metaphor—is “irreducible.” “The richer and more suggestive a metaphor is, the more impossible it is to spell out explicitly all the similarities that underlie it.”¹⁰ We should not be surprised that our explanations of biblical metaphors are not as convincing or durable as the metaphors themselves.

Third, *the communicative impact of metaphor should be appreciated* (rather than depreciated). Too often in biblical studies and theology, statements regarded as “literally true” are set over against those thought to be “only metaphorically true.” However, “to say that a statement is metaphorical is a comment on its manner of expression and not necessarily on the truth of that which is expressed.” If we were to warn someone, “Watch out! That’s a live wire!” we would not be inclined to add, “Of course, that is only metaphorically true.” It is both true and expressed with metaphor.¹¹

The fourth idea is closely related: *Complex and “mixed” metaphors are, similarly, to be acknowledged and studied rather than overlooked and devalued*. From a classical perspective, occurrences of metaphor should demonstrate harmony and congruity of metaphorical elements, as well as visual clarity. From such a perspective, some uses of metaphor within the Bible do not measure up and so are devalued or dismissed. A more enlightened view demonstrates willingness to explore biblical metaphor and appreciate its complexity. Against the customary prohibition, such a view suggests that in mixed metaphor “we understand the speaker’s intention directly; hence mixed metaphor is a sin against eloquence rather than a sin against meaning.”¹²

With these four ideas clearly in mind, we may turn to some definitions and terms that will aid in disciplined analysis of biblical metaphors for the church.¹³

⁹I. A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 90, 92. While the idea that “ornament and style have no place in pure argument” is often credited to Aristotle and Quintilian, that origin has been controverted by Janet M. Soskice, who argues instead that the real source of the idea “is to be found in those philosophers of the seventeenth century who chose as their model the arguments of mathematics and the new sciences” (*Metaphor and Religious Language* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1985], 12).

¹⁰William P. Alston, *Philosophy of Language* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1964), 100-101. See also Edmund P. Clowney, “Interpreting the Biblical Models of the Church: A Hermeneutical Deepening of Ecclesiology,” in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: Text and Context*, ed. D. A. Carson (Exeter: Paternoster, 1984), 71.

¹¹Soskice, 70. See also George B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London: Duckworth, 1980), 131-132.

¹²Soskice, 73.

¹³The Wikipedia articles on “Metaphor” and “Conceptual Metaphor” provide a helpful review of wider concepts of metaphor: Wikipedia contributors, “Metaphor” and “Conceptual Metaphor,” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*,

How can we identify an occurrence of metaphor? Janet M. Soskice provides a helpful working definition: “*Metaphor is that figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another.*”¹⁴

Once we have identified such a case where, for instance, “the church” is spoken about in terms of a “temple,” how can we identify the components of metaphor and ponder their interaction? I. A. Richards’s terms “tenor” and “vehicle” have proved enduring ones to identify respectively “the underlying idea or principal subject which the vehicle or figure means” and the basic figure that is used to carry the “tenor.”¹⁵ Richards illustrates these terms by referring to Shakespeare’s phrase from *Othello*, “Steep’d me in poverty to the very lips,” where he identifies the “tenor” as poverty and the “vehicle” as “the sea or vat in which Othello is to be steeped.”¹⁶

In addition to being able to identify the “tenor” and “vehicle” of an instance of metaphor, two additional concepts help us evaluate the mechanics of metaphor: *How full is the metaphor?* Full metaphors explicitly reveal the following (using the temple metaphor of Eph 2:19-22 as an example): the tenor or object of the comparison (e.g., you, the church); the vehicle or image of the comparison (e.g., temple); and the “ground” of the comparison (e.g., God dwells in you, as a deity is thought to inhabit a temple). However, metaphors may be abbreviated, with one or two of these elements being implicit.¹⁷

Also, *to what extent is the metaphor guarded?* Metaphors are “frequently guarded, so as to take advantage of their values without courting their dangers.” Such guarding occurs when “the metaphor is hedged about with protective rules and auxiliary explanations” and so “becomes less rich in meaning, but safer.”¹⁸ Among the ways an author can guard a metaphor is to express it fully, spelling out the tenor, vehicle, and ground of the comparison.

To understand a metaphor, though, we need to do more than ponder its mechanics, the pieces of the metaphor. We also need to consider how those components interact to create meaning. How do the tenor and vehicle interact? And what meaning(s) does this interaction yield? Here, another term is helpful,

<en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Metaphor&oldid=47789471> and
<en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Conceptual_metaphor&oldid=46813884>
(accessed March 19, 2006).

¹⁴Soskice, 15.

¹⁵Richards, 96. It may be helpful to compare J. A. Cuddon’s summary of Richards’s terms: “By ‘tenor’ he meant the purport or general drift of thought regarding the subject of a metaphor; by ‘vehicle’, the image which embodies the tenor” (*A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 3d ed. [Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991], 959).

¹⁶Richards, 104-105.

¹⁷I am adapting the concepts of Jan de Waard, “Biblical Metaphors and Their Translation,” *BT* 25 (1974): 109-111.

¹⁸Monroe C. Beardsley, “Metaphor,” in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. P. Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 286.

that of “associated commonplaces.”¹⁹ Imagine reading the metaphor, “Men are wolves.” We would know that the writer is speaking about “men” in terms of “wolves.” What “associated commonplaces” might the writer and hearers share about wolves? We could construct quite a list, including, for example, that wolves run in packs, are voracious hunters, and are wily and sly. The more we know about the “associated commonplaces” attached to the vehicle “wolves,” the more likely we are to understand the metaphor and be able to analyze the context in order to know which of these “associated commonplaces” may be active there.

A similar need confronts us as we interpret the Bible. We need to carefully consider the meaning of the metaphors within their literary and cultural contexts. “A given metaphor is capable of very diverse uses; the setting becomes as decisive for its meaning as the image taken by itself.”²⁰ Metaphors for the church “need to be understood in their formative settings, in their social and religious contexts of origin.”²¹ Ellen White’s exhortation applies here:

Let us in imagination go back to that scene, and, as we sit with the disciples on the mountainside, enter into the thoughts and feelings that filled their hearts. Understanding what the words of Jesus meant to those who heard them, we may discern in them a new vividness and beauty, and may also gather for ourselves their deeper lessons.²²

With the above concepts and terminology in view, a set of evaluative questions may be composed to structure the analysis of a given occurrence of biblical metaphor for the church:

1. *Identification.* Is a specific biblical statement about the church an example of metaphor?

2. *Mechanics.* Assuming the statement constitutes a metaphor, what are its “tenor” and “vehicle”? How full is it? In what ways is the metaphor guarded?

3. *Interaction of Components.* What “associated commonplaces” might have occurred to the author and the writer’s audience? How many of these ideas does the context indicate are active? How do these “associated commonplaces” contribute to the understanding of the church?

4. *Function.* How does the metaphor function in this context? Why does the author employ it?²³

¹⁹I borrow the term “associated commonplaces” from Max Black, *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962), 40. Peter Cottrell and Max Turner use the term “presupposition pool” (*Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989], 301). Peter W. Macky uses the more complex taxonomy of positive, negative, and neutral analogies (*The Centrality of Metaphors to Biblical Thought: A Method for Interpreting the Bible*, Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity 19 [Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1990], 104-105, 251).

²⁰Miner, 30.

²¹Driver, 17.

²²Ellen G. White, *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1955), 1.

²³This basic outline of metaphor analysis may be compared with benefit to the

Five Clusters of Metaphors for the Church

Corporal: The Church as Body

Of the clusters of metaphors employed to describe the church, the use of the human body is especially important because of the frequency of its use, the variety of ways it is employed and developed, and its theological importance. Of the clusters reviewed here, it is the only one that is not readily traced to the OT. While a variety of origins for the imagery have been proposed, it is difficult to imagine that Paul does not draw on the frequent Greco-Roman use of the body metaphor for the society or the state.²⁴

The Greco-Roman use of the body metaphor seems to hark back to the fable credited to Aesop, "The Belly and the Feet" (and the more elaborate speeches, based on the fable, attributed to Menenius Agrippa):

The belly and the feet were arguing about their importance, and when the feet kept saying that they were so much stronger that they even carried the stomach around, the stomach replied, "But, my good friends, if I didn't take in food, you wouldn't be able to carry anything."²⁵

One ancient author, Seneca, uses the body metaphor with a similar range of meaning, as we find in the writings of Paul. He uses the metaphor in a cosmic sense to indicate the unity of the human and the divine (cf. Col 1:15-20; Eph 1:22-23; 5:23, 30), to indicate the unity of the members of human society (cf. Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 12:12-27; Eph 2:16; 3:6; 4:4, 25), and to elucidate the relationship between the state as "body" and the emperor as "head" (cf. Col 1:18; 2:19; Eph 1:22-23; 4:11-16; 5:23).²⁶

In the earlier epistles, Paul employs "The Church is a Body"²⁷ to describe

more detailed pattern offered by Peter Macky in *Centrality of Metaphors*, with special attention to pp. 278-297. I should note that in this section of my essay, "How to Analyze Metaphors for the Church," I am summarizing the first chapter, "Approaching Ecclesial Metaphor in the Epistle to the Ephesians," pp. 1-73, of my "Ecclesial Metaphor in the Epistle to the Ephesians from the Perspective of a Modern Theory of Metaphor" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Sheffield, 1995).

²⁴Gosnell L. O. Yorke classifies theories of origin of the body metaphor into "Extra-New Testament" proposals (The Old Testament, Rabbinic Judaism, Gnosticism, Greco-Roman Philosophy, and the Corinthian Asclepion) and "Intra-New Testament" proposals (Paul's Christophanic Encounter, Paul's Eucharistic Christology, Nuptial Theology, or Theology of Baptism) (*The Church as the Body of Christ in the Pauline Corpus: A Re-Examination* [Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991], 1-7).

²⁵The translation is from Lloyd W. Daly, *Aesop without Morals: The Famous Fables, and a Life of Aesop* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1961), 148. For the speeches of Menenius Agrippa, see Ruth Ilesley Hicks, "The Body Political and the Body Ecclesiastical," *JBR* 31 (1963): 29-35.

²⁶For more detailed discussion, see John K. McVay, "The Human Body as Social and Political Metaphor in Stoic Literature and Early Christian Writers," *BASP* 37 (2000): 135-147.

²⁷I adopt the standard of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in capitalizing a

the church in 1 Corinthians (10:17; 11:29; 12:12-27) and Romans (12:4-5). The first two uses in 1 Corinthians (10:17; 11:29) are in the context of a discussion of the Lord's Supper. Issuing a warning against partaking of the "cup" and "table" of demons (1 Cor 10:1-22, esp. vv. 14-22), Paul writes, "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body (σῶμα) of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body (σῶμα), for we all partake of the one loaf" (vv. 16-17, NIV).²⁸

The use of σῶμα in 1 Cor 11:29 is debated. Is it eucharistic (failing to distinguish sacramental from common food), Christological ("he fails to distinguish the Lord's body in the bread which he eats"), or ecclesial in the sense of failing "to discern and to give due weight to the church, assembled at the Supper as the body of Christ"?²⁹ In favor of the ecclesial understanding, it may be noted that Paul has defined that sense of "one body" at 10:17 and the use here seems to point back to it. "Most likely the term 'body,' . . . deliberately recalls Paul's interpretation of the bread in 10:17, thus indicating that the concern is with the problem in Corinth itself, of the rich abusing the poor."³⁰ These two uses (or only one if 1 Cor 11:29 is discounted) point to a profound unity among believers, one rooted in God's action in Christ. Sacramental participation in the body of Christ through the "one loaf" and Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper joins believers together as "one body."

1 Corinthians 12:12-27 and Romans 12:4-5

The uses of the body metaphor in 1 Cor 12:12-27 and Rom 12:4-5 are quite similar. In both cases, the body metaphor is offered in the context of affirming the smooth function and appropriate valuation of spiritual gifts. Romans 12:4-5 functions nicely as a summary: "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others."

summary statement of metaphors as a way of identifying them clearly (*Metaphors We Live By*, 4 [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003], 243-276).

²⁸Unless otherwise noted, quotations from the Bible are drawn from the NIV.

²⁹C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 2d ed., BNTC (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1971), 274. Barrett argues that the reference is best viewed as Christological, based on "the parallelism between verses 27 and 29" and the use of σῶμα as a "shorthand form" of the earlier phrase, "the body and blood of the Lord." Ivan Blazen, too, believes the reference to be Christological, but artfully melds the Christological and ecclesial views: "Better examine yourselves then, admonishes Paul, for when you celebrate the Lord's Supper 'without discerning the body,' the presence of Christ whose body was broken for us that He might forge us into His body, the church, you bring the judgment of weakness, illness, and even death upon yourself (11:29, 30)" (*The Gospel on the Street: Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians* [Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1997], 90).

³⁰Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 563.

The accent here is on the need for healthy relationships among church members, where due respect is given to the diversity of gifts in the context of treasuring every member, especially those who are “weaker” or “less honorable” or “respectable” (1 Cor 12:22-23).

At this point, it is helpful to introduce an additional term used in the study of metaphor: submetaphors. Submetaphors are related to the overall metaphor as parts to the whole. So, in 1 Cor 12:12-27, the various “members” (μέλη) or body parts may be identified as submetaphors of the wider body metaphor: foot, hand, ear, eye, head, weaker parts, less honorable parts, unpresentable parts, presentable parts. While these are not supplied with direct referents, so that these submetaphors are not fully expressed, there is an implied and general identity with various gifts listed in vv. 28-31.

Much as in the fable of Aesop, the function of the metaphor is to highlight the interdependence of church members who have been arranged in the ecclesial body just as God intended (1 Cor 12:18). Ideally, when this interdependence is realized and actualized, there will be “no division in the body,” but, instead, the various parts will “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” (1 Cor 12:25-26).

Ephesians 4:1-16

Ephesians 4:1-16 represents the most detailed use of the body metaphor in the later writings of Paul. In a way reminiscent of Rom 12, where a call to unity is followed by a discussion of the role of spiritual gifts in advancing it, the passage focuses on the role of the “gifts” (δώρα, v. 8) as they relate to the theme of unity. It is instructive to compare the use of the body metaphor in Eph 4 with the earlier one in 1 Cor 12. In both passages, the body metaphor is employed in relation to a discussion of spiritual gifts. In 1 Cor 12, while God arranges the gifts in the body (vv. 18, 24, 28), it is the Spirit who gives the gifts (vv. 4-11). In Ephesians, the gifts are given by the triumphant Christ (Eph 4:8, 11).

In 1 Cor 12, there is a greater variety listed of both spiritual gifts and body parts (foot, hand, ear, eye, head), though none of the gifts is identified with a specific body part. In Eph 4, referents are provided for a shorter list of body parts. Christ is the “head,” (κεφαλή, v. 15). By way of contrast, in 1 Cor 12 the head was not distinguished as a particularly significant body part, ministers of the word (v. 11) are “ligaments” (ἀφή [s.], v. 16),³¹ and other church members are “parts” (μέροι, v. 16). “The emphasis here is on the gift of the ministry of the Church.”³² In Ephesians, Paul is anxious to assert that “the function of the

³¹I follow the technical sense of the term defended by BDAG 155; J. Armitage Robinson, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians*, 2d ed. (London: Macmillan, 1904), 186; J. P. Louw and E. A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 2d ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 1.101-102; H. Balz, G. Schneider, eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1.181).

³²R. Newton Flew, *Jesus and His Church: A Study of the Idea of the Ecclesia in the New*

various ministers in the church is critical for its growth and that such people are to be seen as part of the royal largesse which Christ distributes from his position of cosmic lordship after his triumphal ascent." These individuals "are to be highly valued as gifts from the exalted Christ."³³

Paul also innovates in his use of the body metaphor in introducing the concept of the growth of the body, a thought that permeates vv. 11-16, which display a chiasmic structure:

A—Growth *from* Christ (vv. 11-12; "It was he who gave . . . that the body of Christ might be built up")

B—Growth *toward* Christ (v. 13; "Until all of us come . . . to the measure of the full stature of Christ," NRSV)

Warning: The Alternative to Growth (v. 14)

B'—Growth *toward* Christ (v. 15; "We must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ," NRSV)

A'—Growth *from* Christ (v. 16; "From him the whole body . . . grows and builds itself up in love")

The function of the body metaphor in the passage is nicely highlighted by citing the closely related passage, Col 2:18-19:

Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. He has lost connection with the Head (τὴν κεφαλὴν), from whom the whole body (τὸ σῶμα), supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews (διὰ τῶν ἀφῶν καὶ συνδέσμων), grows as God causes it to grow.

In Eph 4, Paul employs the body metaphor to underscore relationships among members, but with a special emphasis on valuing and following those "ministers of the Word" given to the church by Christ from his position of lordship over the cosmos. In addition, in both Eph 4 and Col 2, Paul is keen to accentuate the importance of the relationship between the churchly body and Christ, the head of it. He worries that some may not be "holding fast" to the head (Col 2:19) and that others may, in refusing the resources Christ offers, miss that growth and maturity, which finds its source, direction and goal in Christ, the Head (Eph 4:11-16).

To survey the uses of the body metaphor is to be reminded that biblical metaphors for the church are not static images: "[T]he body of Christ' is not a single expression with an unchanging meaning. Paul's thought remains extremely flexible and elastic."³⁴ Close attention to the use in a specific context is essential to both the interpretation and appropriation of the metaphor.

Testament, 2d ed. (London: Epworth, 1943), 183.

³³Andrew T. Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet: Studies in the Role of the Heavenly Dimension in Paul's Thought with Special Reference to His Eschatology*, SNTSMS 43 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 162.

³⁴Miner, 173-174.

The metaphor "The Church is a Body" or, more specifically, "The Church is the Body of Christ" reminds us that healthy relationships among members and cohesion to Christ are essential for the church. Interestingly, advancing knowledge of anatomy and physiology, far from rendering Paul's use of the metaphor obsolete, has only served to heighten the impact of these points. While the missional significance of the metaphor is more assumed than detailed, "The thrust of these passages is one of activity. Christ directs, controls, and energizes the members . . . so that they may serve his purpose in the world. Thus part of the church's reason for being is that *it may minister to the world as Christ's agent.*"³⁵

Agricultural: The Church as Plant/Field/Vineyard/Vine

In the OT, the grapevine and the vineyard symbolize Israel, pictured by the Psalmist as "a vine from Egypt" that God transplanted and nurtured in the Promised Land before judging Israel as a vineyard by breaking down its walls (Ps 80). Isaiah crafts an extended parable, explicitly using the metaphor "Israel is a Vineyard" ("The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight," Isa 5:7) and emphasizing God's care for the vineyard (vv. 1-2) and the divine judgment following a failed harvest (vv. 3-7).³⁶ Other plants, too, can be used to represent Israel, including an oak tree (Isa 61:3), a palm or cedar (Ps 92:12), and an olive tree (Jer 11:16-17).³⁷

In Ezek 17:1-24, the prophet relates an elaborate "allegory" or "parable" (v. 1) about an eagle who broke off the topmost shoot of a cedar (Jehoiachin) and transplanted it in "a city of traders" (Babylon, v. 4 cf. v. 12). Meanwhile, the eagle planted "some of the seed of your land" in fertile soil, where it became a luxuriant, spreading vine, an image of Israel under the rule of Babylon (vv. 3-6, referring especially to the rule of Mattaniah/Zedekiah). This vine, though, "sent out its roots" to another eagle (Egypt) and, as a result, will "be uprooted and stripped of its fruit" (v. 9). However, God himself will plant a clipping from the top of a cedar and plant it "on a high and lofty mountain" in Israel, where "it will produce branches and bear fruit

³⁵Ralph P. Martin, *The Family and the Fellowship: New Testament Images of the Church*, 1st American ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 123.

³⁶Cf. the brief mention in Jer 2:21, "I had planted you like a choice vine of sound and reliable stock. How then did you turn against me into a corrupt, wild vine?" The imagery is used differently in Jer 6:9, where checking the vines a second time in the harvest is a metaphor for judgment; Hos 10:1-2, 13, where judgment follows an abundant, but evil, harvest; and Ezek 17, discussed below, where judgment seems to precede the time of harvest (v. 9). Dan 4, which employs the agricultural metaphor "The King is a Tree," illustrates the continuity of the themes of "privilege" and "judgment" expressed through such metaphors.

³⁷The agricultural metaphors of Isa 61:3 and Ps 92:12 are formulated in a wholly positive manner, while that of Jer 11:16-17 again expresses the theme of judgment.

and become a splendid cedar” (v. 23; cf. Ezek 34:23-24; 37:24-25).³⁸

There is considerable consistency with this cluster of metaphors as it is carried into the NT, with the imagery of the vine/vineyard conveying both the sense of God’s care and the potential of his judgment. This is the case in two prominent uses in the Gospels: the Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Matt 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19) and Jesus’ discussion of the vine and its branches (John 15:1-8).³⁹ In these parables, which seem to trace salvation-history in an allegorical fashion, the metaphor is implicit and obvious: “The People of God are the Vineyard of God.” The Jewish leaders who are being addressed in the parable (Mark 11:27; 12:1, 12), having refused repeatedly to return to the owner the agreed-upon portion of the harvest even to the point of killing and ejecting the owner’s son (Mark 12:7-8), stand under judgment (Mark 12:9).

John 15:1-8

In John 15:1-8, Jesus becomes “the true vine” and disciples are branches that hold the promise of bearing much fruit, but are under the threat of being “thrown away” and “burned” (v. 6). Jesus’ use of the organic image in the Gospel of John provides a remarkably personal and intimate image of the relationship between disciples and Jesus. As fruit-bearing branches must “remain in the vine” (v. 4), so disciples who flourish and bear much fruit must remain organically connected to Christ and accept the nourishing resources he offers (vv. 5-6, 8). “Much fruit” (v. 5) results from abiding in Jesus and praying in his name (vv. 7-8), and consists of obedience to Jesus’ commands (v. 10), experiencing Jesus’ joy (v. 11), love for fellow believers (v. 12), and persistent, faithful witness to the world on the pattern of Jesus’ own witness and with a similar and negative reception (vv. 18-27).⁴⁰

1 Corinthians 3:6-9

Paul uses the agricultural metaphor “Believer’s are God’s Field” implicitly in 1 Cor 3:6-9a and explicitly in v. 9b. Here, though, the focus is on the workers (Paul and Apollos), their differing roles, and essential equality, rather than the field itself.

Romans 11:17-24

The privilege/judgment theme is obvious when Paul employs the image of the olive tree in an allegorical manner in Rom 11:17-24 to illustrate salvation history

³⁸Two additional passages in Ezekiel also employ the vine metaphor to express judgment on Jerusalem (15:1-8) or the princes of Israel (19:10-14).

³⁹Additional passages in the Gospels also employ the imagery of the vineyard, but the metaphor “The People of God are the Vineyard of God” is less obvious and central: The parables of the Laborers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1-16), the Two Sons (Matt 21:28-32), and the Fig Tree (Luke 13:6-9). In the latter case, though, Minear, 44, argues that “[t]here is probably involved here an identification of God’s people with God’s tree.”

⁴⁰Following D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 517.

to Gentile addressees. He highlights both the privilege of their identity as branches in the tree that share in “the nourishing sap from the olive root” (v. 17) and the threat of judgment (cf. Jer 11:16-17). They, as wild olive shoots grafted into the tree, should not “be arrogant” toward Jews who have been “cut off,” “but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either” (v. 21).⁴¹ Paul’s use of the metaphor is especially interesting here as he employs “The People of God are an Olive Tree” in a way that accents the continuity of the people of God.

Agricultural metaphors, when used to highlight the identity of believers in the NT, function to accent the privileged connection believers have to Christ and the resources they receive from him. In line with earlier uses in the OT, the metaphors also function to describe the attendant responsibility of Christians to offer a “harvest of righteousness and peace” (Heb 12:11) and warn of the judgment that will surely follow the misuse of such exalted privileges.⁴² This cluster of metaphors, then, offers the biological dynamism of nourishment and growth, as well as warning of the negative results of refusing such nourishment.

Architectural: The Church as Building/Temple

The authors of the NT frequently employ building and temple imagery in relation to the Christian community. In doing so, they draw on the rich tradition and history of the wilderness tabernacle and the temple in Jerusalem. The metaphor “The People of God are the Temple of God” is not employed explicitly in the OT. However, important themes build toward it. God the Creator is portrayed as a builder: “My own hand laid the foundations of the earth” (Isa 48:13; cf. Job 26:10; 38:4-7; Pss 102:25; 104:3; Prov 8:27-31; Isa 40:12; Jer 31:27; Amos 9:6). In giving detailed instructions for construction of the tabernacle and temple, God is cast as the paradigmatic Builder. Importantly, God “builds” Jerusalem (Ps 147:2) and the remnant of Judah (Jer 31:4, 28).⁴³

There exists also a strong and poignant theme, especially in the prophetic literature, that acts of justice and attitudes of humble worship are to be preferred to cultic acts of festival and sacrifice (Ps 40:6-8; Isa 1:10-20; 66:2b-4; Jer 6:20; Hos 6:6; Amos 5:21-27; Mic 6:6-8). To spiritualize the cultus of

⁴¹For a concise discussion of whether or not Paul’s metaphor reflects “actual arboricultural practice,” see C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 278. Cranfield concludes: “In this use of metaphor—and it is surely a perfectly proper use of it—the verisimilitude of the metaphorical details is not important; the important thing is that the author’s meaning should be quite clear. And about Paul’s meaning here there is no doubt.”

⁴²See Jesus’ succinct statement of the judgment theme in Matt 15:13: “He replied, ‘Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots.’”

⁴³Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998), 128-129. This brief entry on “Build, Building” is insightful and I am dependent on it in tracing the OT themes.

worship in this way was to take a significant step toward identifying the people of God as the locus of true worship.

In addition to the OT tradition, the Greco-Roman “temple culture” of the first century was a part of the everyday lives of believers.⁴⁴ In one or both of these ways, the authors of the NT documents could count on their addressees being familiar with the building and function of temples.

Matthew credits Jesus with the pronouncement, “On this rock I will build my church” (16:18), identifying the church as a building rising on a solid foundation. Other NT authors use terms from the content domain of architecture to describe individual believers or the Christian community (Matt 7:24-27 [cf. Luke 6:47-49]; 1 Cor 3:9b-17; 6:19;⁴⁵ 2 Cor 6:14-7:1; Gal 2:9; Eph 2:19-22; Col 1:21-23; 2:6-7; 1 Tim 3:5, 15; 2 Tim 2:19; Heb 3:1-6; 10:21; 1 Pet 2:4-8; 4:17; Rev 3:12). Of these passages, four offer developed building/temple metaphors for the church: 1 Cor 3:9b-17; 2 Cor 6:14-7:1; Eph 2:19-22; 1 Pet 2:4-8.

1 Corinthians 3:9b-17

In 1 Cor 3, Paul treats the issue of “jealousy and quarreling” among the Christian congregations in Corinth. Complaining that they identify with himself or Apollos, Paul uses an agricultural metaphor, in which he identifies himself as the one who planted and Apollos as the one who watered, to describe their equality as “only servants” (vv. 5-9a). Paul then modulates to an architectural metaphor: “You are God’s field, God’s building” (οἰκοδομή, v. 9b).

The function of the architectural metaphor of house/temple is different than the agricultural one, for now Paul wishes to distinguish, rather than coalesce, his role with those of Apollos and others. These are now cast as other builders on the foundation he laid as “expert builder” (NIV) or “skilled chief builder” (ἀρχιτέκτων, v. 10).⁴⁶ He issues a warning to them to take care in their building, mentioning a variety of building materials suggestive of temple construction, and describing the eschatological test that awaits (vv. 10b-15). If the builder’s work survives the fiery, eschatological test, he will be rewarded; if not, he will “suffer loss.”⁴⁷ Addressing Christian believers directly, Paul employs

⁴⁴A brief and helpful introduction to Greco-Roman temples is found in J. R. C. Cousland, “Temples, Greco-Roman,” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. A. Evans Craig and E. Porter Stanley (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 1186-1188.

⁴⁵ 1 Cor 6:19 is the only passage that applies ναός (“temple”) to the individual believer. In the passage, Paul queries Christian men who were visiting prostitutes and offering theological justification for doing so: “Do you not know that your body is a temple (ναός) of the Holy Spirit?”

⁴⁶ So McVay, “Ecclesial Metaphor,” 174-175 n. 61.

⁴⁷Jay Shanor argues, in the context of examining an ancient inscription about temple building, that this is part of the building/temple metaphor and should be translated “he shall be fined.” Similarly, he believes that the term μισθός (vv. 8, 14; NIV, “be rewarded”; “reward”) should be understood as “wages” (“Paul as Master Builder,” *NTS* 34 [1988]: 461-471).

the term “temple” (ναός) three times, concluding the passage by explicitly offering the metaphor “Christian Believers are God’s Temple”: “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him; for God’s temple is sacred, and you are that temple.”

As noted, Paul employs submetaphors of “skilled master builder” and other builders. In addition, he identifies Christ as the “foundation” (θεμέλιος) and lists a variety of possible building materials, though he provides no referent for them. Associated commonplaces active in the context include: a temple belongs to its god and is of value to that deity and (its corollary) damage to a temple is an affront to the deity; a temple houses the deity; the building of a temple requires supervision; contractors are rewarded for successful work and fined for poor craftsmanship; and the process of temple building involves the selection of appropriate, and rejection of inappropriate, building materials.

2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1

Paul again uses temple imagery to query his addressees in 2 Cor 6:14–7:1, a passage in which he advocates separation from “idols” and the “unclean thing.”⁴⁸ As a culminating question he asks, “What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?” He follows with a strong, declarative statement: “For we are the temple (ναός) of the living God” (v. 16). The tenor of the temple metaphor in the passage may be described as “the distinct sanctity of Christians” and the associated commonplace, “a temple is inhabited by the deity,” is clearly active (“I will live with them,” v. 16). Here, Paul employs the temple metaphor in an exclusive manner to stress the need for separation between believers and unbelievers.

Ephesians 2:19-22

The exclusive use in 2 Cor 6:14–7:1 contrasts with the inclusive one in Eph 2:19-22, where the temple metaphor is the final in a string of telescoped metaphors and functions as a poignant metaphor for the inclusion of Gentiles as full partners in the Christian community.⁴⁹ The wider passage, Eph 2:11-22, celebrates the work of Christ on the Cross, by which Christ creates “in himself one new man out of the two” (Jew and Gentile, v. 15). Gentiles “are no longer foreigners and aliens,” but, instead, are “fellow citizens” and “members of God’s household” (οἰκέται). This language of citizenship and household gives way to the imagery of building and temple.

Submetaphors of builder (implied; = God who is also the occupant of the

⁴⁸I note that the placement (Did the passage stand originally in this context or is it an interpolation?), authenticity (Does the passage come from Paul or from someone else?), and provenance (To what extent was a pre-formed tradition taken over and from where?) of the passage are oft-discussed issues.

⁴⁹By “telescoped metaphors,” I mean a string of metaphors, in which “the vehicle of one metaphor becomes the tenor of another” (Cuddon, 958).

structure), foundation (θεμέλιος; = apostles and prophets), cornerstone (ἀκρογωνιαίος; = Christ, probably as coping stone rather than foundation stone), and building materials (ὕμεις συνοικοδομείσθε; = both Jewish and Gentile believers) are used. The tenor of the metaphor may be identified as “the cohesion of Jews and Gentiles in the church.” A number of associated commonplaces are active, including structural integrity (a building or temple made of different materials coheres), the process of building (temples are built), and habitation (here, the temple is “a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit”).

1 Peter 2:4-8

A final passage, 1 Pet 2:4-8, employs temple imagery (“spiritual house,” οἶκος πνευματικός, v. 5) to designate Christian believers and offers a developed temple metaphor. Believers as “living stones” are built upon “the living Stone,” Jesus, who is the “chosen and precious cornerstone” (ἀκρογωνιαίος; here, clearly a foundation stone). The role of the believers as a “spiritual house,” though, is complicated by the fact that they are also portrayed as priests who offer “spiritual sacrifices” in this temple (v. 5; in both cases “spiritual” translates πνευματικός, pointing to the essential function of the Holy Spirit). The identity of builders is implied in the rejection of the living stone “by men,” an act corrected by the true divine Builder (v. 4). A number of associated commonplaces are active, including: temples require a process of building; the process of building involves the selection and rejection of building materials; a temple is the site for ministry of consecrated priests superintending sanctioned rituals; the building of temples is supervised by a builder or builders; and a temple houses the deity. In the setting of a Christian community wrestling with problems of alienation and “homelessness,” the house/temple metaphor functions to portray vividly the relationship between the addressees and Christ.

In the context of the temple in Jerusalem, as well as the ubiquitous Greco-Roman structures, NT authors employ the temple metaphor to enable believers to visualize the sanctity of the church, God’s role in founding and growing the church, the defining nature of the work of Christ and the Spirit on behalf of the church, and the solidarity of believers within the church as blood-bought privilege. The architecture domain would seem to imply a static image. However, the metaphor is used in conjunction with biological imagery and the process of building is often accentuated. Rather than a static image, “We are impelled to visualize a story of the process of construction rather than a completed edifice.”⁵⁰ The metaphor, then, is an ancient analogy to the modern “web cams” that have become popular means of keeping a constant eye on the progress of a building project. The present active role of the Spirit in the church-as-temple also contributes an important element of dynamism. The church is granted the wondrous privilege of humbly and joyously acknowledging in its life and story “the temple of the living God” (2 Cor 6:16).

⁵⁰Minear, 97.

Martial: The Church as Army

The identity of believers as combatants in an extended war between good and evil is an extension of OT understandings of God as the divine warrior engaging in combat against his foes.⁵¹ This OT theme, reflected in passages such as Isa 59, is “democratized” in the NT, where it is now Christian addressees who wear the divine armor and do battle.⁵² Seventh-day Adventists, for whom the “Great Controversy” serves as metanarrative, should attend carefully to the corresponding biblical metaphor “The Church is an Army.”

Passages in the NT that identify believers as combatants in the battle against evil are to be understood in the setting of the wider NT story. In his book, *God at War: The Biblical and Spiritual Conflict*, Gregory Boyd argues with considerable success that “almost everything that Jesus and the early church were about is decisively colored by the central conviction that the world is caught in the crossfire of a cosmic battle between the Lord and his angelic army and Satan and his demonic army.”⁵³

As Boyd suggests, believers are drawn into this struggle as soldiers. In the Gospels, one thinks of the Lord’s Prayer (Matt 6:9-13), in which believers “ask God to protect them from hardships that accompany their kingdom work as they approach the end of the age,” hardships they expect to come “from the evil one.”⁵⁴ In a noted promise, Jesus declares that “the gates of Hades” will not overcome the church (Matt 16:18-19). Boyd comments: “[M]inistering in his authority and his accomplished victory, the church is to storm the fortress of Hades and bash down its gates.”⁵⁵

At the end of the NT, the Apocalypse reinforces the identity of believers as combatants in the cosmic war against evil. In the face of satanic opposition (e.g., 2:10), the risen Christ offers repeated promises to believers who endure and “conquer” (“to the one who conquers,” τῷ νικῶντι (and variants); 2:7, 11,

⁵¹Theodore Heibert provides a helpful survey of the theme (“Warrior, Divine,” in *ABD*, ed. David Noel Freedman [New York: Doubleday, 1992], 6:876-880). In addition, see Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 29-168. Boyd’s conclusions are controversial. However, he does successfully highlight the theme of divine warfare in the OT. See also Martin G. Klingbeil, *Yahweh Fighting from Heaven: God as Warrior and as God of Heaven in the Hebrew Psalter and Ancient Near Eastern Iconography*, OBO 169 (Fribourg: Editions Universitaires, 1999).

⁵²So Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, *Put on the Armour of God: The Divine Warrior from Isaiah to Ephesians*, JSNTS 140 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997). I critique Neufeld’s arguments in “Our Struggle: *Ecclesia Militans* in Ephesians 6:10-20,” *AUSS* 43 (2005): 91-100. To Isa 59 may be added Isa 11:4-5 (which describes in military terms the work of the “shoot . . . from the stump of Jesse,” the “Branch”) and Wis 5:17-22.

⁵³Boyd, 172. Boyd invests the last five chapters of his volume (pp. 169-293) in developing this thesis.

⁵⁴Ibid., 219.

⁵⁵Ibid., 217.

17, 26-28; 3:5, 12, 21). The struggle is intense with the church (as the woman) bearing the brunt of the dragon's wrath, a foe who "makes war" on "the rest of her offspring" who "obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (12:17). Casualties are to be expected (6:9-11; 14:13), as is victory (12:11) and celebration before the throne of God for those who have come out of "the great ordeal" (7:14, NRSV; 7:9-17; 14:1-5). Repeatedly, believers as combatants in this struggle are exhorted to exercise endurance and faith (13:10; 14:12) and to stay awake and clothed (16:15). Fighting behind enemy lines, they await the conquest of the Lamb (17:14), the victory of the rider on the white horse who leads "the armies of heaven" (19:11-16).

The cosmic battle and the role of believers in it are clearly reflected in the writings of Paul as well:

[I]n Paul's writings we recognize that one of his ways of presenting the gospel was by using military symbolism, imagery taken from the realm of warfare—armies, soldiers, weapons and physical destruction. The conflict between good and evil, which is the inner driving force of the story of Christ, is pictured here as a long-running cosmic war: battles ebb and flow between two armies which face each other down through the ages until one wins the final confrontation by destroying the other completely.⁵⁶

Romans 13:11-14

When one thinks of military metaphor in Paul's writings, one passage looms large: the armament passage of Eph 6:10-20. However, we should note that other, earlier passages offer similar imagery.⁵⁷ Behind the urgent appeal of Rom 13:11-14 is the implied metaphor that believers constitute the *ecclesia militans*. The appeal mirrors exhortations to soldiers as dawn breaks on the day of battle:

And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.⁵⁸

⁵⁶Peter W. Macky, *St. Paul's Cosmic War Myth: A Military Version of the Gospel*, Westminster College Library of Biblical Symbolism 2 (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), 1.

⁵⁷For a more thorough survey of military language and imagery in Paul's letters, see David J. Williams, *Paul's Metaphors: Their Context and Character* 5 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 211-244; and Anthony Byatt, *New Testament Metaphors: Illustrations in Word and Phrase* (Edinburgh: Pentland, 1995), 192-204.

⁵⁸In the Greco-Roman world, "ethical teachers used military language constantly" and so it is no surprise that considerable portions of Paul's language of exhortation reflect the same feature, one that is especially prominent in Philippians. Edgar M. Krentz, "Military Language and Metaphors in Philippians," in *Origins and Method: Towards a New Understanding of Judaism and Christianity: Essays in Honour of John C. Hurd*,

The metaphor "The Church is an Army" becomes quite explicit in v. 12 with the command to "put on the armor of light" (ἐνδυσώμεθα [δὲ] τὰ ὅπλα τοῦ φωτός), in which believers are cast in the role of soldiers arming for battle. That a spiritual battle is in view is confirmed by the parallel exhortation to "clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ" (ἐνδύσασθε, v. 14).

1 Thessalonians 5:8

First Thessalonians 5:8 offers a similar exhortation in a parallel framework. Paul exhorts his addressees to "not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober" (v. 6). Then, repeating the exhortation to sobriety, he enjoins: "But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet" (v. 8). Again, the metaphor "The Church is an Army" becomes quite explicit as Paul casts the believers as well-disciplined troops suiting up to do battle in the full light of day.

2 Corinthians 10:3-6

Paul employs the military metaphor differently at the outset of the stormy final section of 2 Corinthians (chapters 10-13), where he offers strident defense of his and his colleagues' ministry (2 Cor 10:3-6):

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete.

Paul and his coworkers are now the combatants and emphasis is placed on the nature of their battle (a spiritual clash of worldviews), the quality of the weaponry they wield, and the complete victory to be expected. In the context of the wider argument of the section, Paul issues a warning that the addressees, in agreeing with his opponents, not be found on the wrong side of a lopsided battle—the losing one.⁵⁹

ed. Bradley H. McLean, JSNTSup 86 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 105-127. I note in particular that 1 Cor 16:13, Phil 1:27-30, and Col 1:11 issue the command to "be strong" or "stand" in a way that seems to evoke battle exhortations. The general argument that portions of Paul's exhortation reflects battle rhetoric could be argued, as well, for portions of the General Epistles, especially 1 Pet 5:8-10.

⁵⁹ Similarly, and earlier in 2 Cor, Paul describes his and his colleagues' use of "weapons of righteousness in the right hand and the left" (6:7). In the Pastoral Epistles, Paul also exhorts Timothy to faithfulness in ministry through the use of military language and imagery ("Fight the good fight," 1 Tim 6:12; "Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus," 2 Tim 2:1-4). To the passages that cast believers as warriors against evil may be added additional passages that describe Christ in the role of warrior. 1 Cor 15:24-28 describes the future victory of Christ when "he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power" (v. 24) and cedes the kingdom to

Ephesians 6:10-20

In Eph 6:10-20, Paul works out the identity of the church in relationship to the theme of the extended cosmic war between good and evil. Intriguingly, the presence of the metaphor "The Church is an Army" is often missed in the passage as, especially in popular Christian literature, the subject is assumed to be the individual Christian. That the passage comes at the end of an epistle that focuses on the church suggests the primary reference to be to Christian community, a conclusion confirmed by the earlier mention of the church in relationship to the powers (3:10) and Paul's exhortation to pray "for all the saints" (v. 18).⁶⁰

In the passage, Paul employs vivid military imagery in a bid to summarize and apply the themes of the composition. The addressees are invited to outfit themselves with the armor of the divine warrior (6:10-11) as a way of ensuring victory in their struggle against the cosmic powers (6:12). A reprise of the exhortation to dress for battle offers the command in a more detailed way. Readers are to cloth themselves with a soldier's weaponry, donning it in the order in which a soldier might prepare himself for battle (6:13-17). This elaborate military imagery is completed by a call to prayer both for "all the saints" and for Paul (6:18-20).

In describing the church's life and mission in terms of military conflict and weaponry, Paul clearly assumes some risk. However, Paul, as "an ambassador in chains" (v. 20), shapes the rhetoric from below as a victim of Rome's military might. The wider context, with its emphasis on unity, edifying speech, and tenderheartedness, also guards the meaning of the metaphor (see esp. 4:25-5:2). This "guarding" is carried into the immediate context in the relation of elements of the panoply to "truth," "righteousness," "faith," "salvation," "Spirit," and "word of God." Most significantly and explicitly, the metaphor is guarded in the invitation for the addressees to have their "feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace" (v. 15). Moreover, as vv. 18-20 make clear, the modalities the author expects his addressees to employ to press the battle are prayer and bold proclamation of "the mystery of the gospel." As someone has put it so aptly, the church is to "wage peace."

The thorough manner in which the language is guarded ensures that the "interactivity" between the vehicle and the tenor is controlled. Given this careful guarding, principal concepts that are underscored include (associated commonplaces are listed in parentheses): active, zealous engagement in the

his Father (cf. Rom 16:20). Similarly, Col 2:15 describes Christ's past victory: "And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross." It may be argued that "the idea of sinister world powers and their subjugation by Christ is built into the very fabric of Paul's thought, and some mention of them is found in every epistle except Philemon" (George B. Caird, *Principalities and Powers: A Study in Pauline Theology* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1956], viii).

⁶⁰For an extended defense of a corporate, over against an individualist, reading of the passage, see McVay, "Our Struggle."

church's mission is called for on the part of the addressees (soldiers are to be fully committed to battle); they must be alert to unseen dimensions that impact their lives and witness (soldiers are to look to the patron gods and goddesses for protection and aid); they have the assurance of divine provision for their success (the gods have promised the success they have granted in the past); and they are called to Christian community and collaboration (soldiers are to support one another and encourage one another to fight courageously).

What is the function of Paul's extended military metaphor? He draws on a number of associated commonplaces of ancient battle to motivate the addressees to active combat against evil. The key moment of an ancient battle was when the two phalanxes came crashing together in "a terrible cacophony of smashed bronze, wood, and flesh."⁶¹ Holding one's ground at this strategic moment was the great challenge of ancient battle. In the close combat that would ensue, each side would seek momentum for "the push."⁶² Paul's vigorous call to arms reflects this often sustained, close-order combat, in which soldiers were "bunched together, giving and receiving hundreds of blows at close range."⁶³

In addition to motivating the addressees to active combat, the military metaphor functions to reassure them of the divine provision for their victory. In formulating the passage, Paul draws on the OT tradition of battle exhortations (e.g., Deut 20:1-9), mimicking these in form and theology in his opening command, which offers divine aid in battle: "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power."⁶⁴ While fully acknowledging the reality of the battle against evil and the power of the church's foes, Paul points addressees to the quality of their armor (the armor of *God*), the benefits of Christian camaraderie, and the effectiveness of prayer. It is clear that Paul believes that victory is to be experienced against the devil and his minions.

In short, the military metaphor developed in Eph 6:10-20 depicts the church's battle against evil as combat that requires full, sustained, and energetic engagement of the foe. Believers are not merely sentinels, who stand stoically

⁶¹Victor D. Hanson, *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 152. Krentz, 109, n. 110, notes that Hanson writes of hoplite warfare, but, he argues, "much of what he says applies to any battle of foot soldiers in pre-gunpowder days."

⁶²Hanson, 171-184.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 152. That Paul draws on the clash of phalanxes and the ensuing combat in crafting the conclusion to the Epistle to the Ephesians is confirmed early in the passage. He characterizes the church's battle against its foes as a wrestling match (v. 12, ἡμῖν ἡ πάλη). This is not a mixed metaphor. The skills of the wrestler were essential in the hand-to-hand combat that followed on the clash of the phalanxes. Michael E. Gudorf, "The Use of πάλη in Ephesians 6:12," *JBL* 117 (1998): 331-335. See also Hanson, 164-167.

⁶⁴I expand on this point in some detail in "Ephesians 6:10-20 and Battle Exhortations in Jewish Literature," in *The Cosmic Battle for Planet Earth: Essays in Honor of Norman R. Gulley*, ed. Ron du Preez and Jiri Moskala (Berrien Springs: Old Testament Department, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, 2003), 147-169.

at watch, but combatants (albeit in the interest of peace). The passage represents a call to arms that is especially interested in the *esprit de corps* of believers. It does not envision Christians (or Paul) as lone warriors battling in splendid isolation, but instead portrays the *ecclesia militans*, in which the addressees are to enlist as fellow soldiers against the church's foes. Read in this way, the passage presents a developed metaphor for the church, the importance of which is emphasized by its climactic position in the letter. The metaphor "The Church is an Army" highlights, in a way other metaphors do not, the church's engagement against the forces of evil and the real struggle and suffering that such conflict entails, all the while assuring believers of the adequacy of God's provision and the victory that awaits.⁶⁵

Richard Rice critiques contemporary uses of the metaphor "The Church is an Army." The adoption of such a metaphor can lead to tragic consequences if it inspires physical combat; evangelism becomes equated with conquering the enemy or taking captives; members are depersonalized, and/or the only measure of mission becomes whether or not it succeeds (since an "army church" may become "impatient with tactics that do not lead to victory").⁶⁶ I have no quarrel with these criticisms of a military metaphor for the church. I would point out, though, that these criticisms do not describe the use, or even overuse, but the misuse of the biblical metaphor "The Church as an Army." Prayerful appropriation of the biblical metaphor provides a corrective to such misuse and inspiration in a moving call to the church to wage peace.

Familial and Marital: The Church as Family and Bride

In the context of the OT, family relationships are employed to describe the wider relationships of government, society, and religion. The patriarchal family, with a strong father-figure, meant that elder or distinguished men were given the honorific title "father" (e.g., Judg 17; 1 Sam 24:12; 2 Kgs 2:12), while leading women could be thought of as "mothers in Israel" (Judg 5:6-7). The otherness of God meant that he was not a "biological" father (e.g., Hos 11:9, "I am God, and not man"). However, "to be able to

⁶⁵Ernest Best, who does not include *ecclesia militans* as described in Eph 6:10-20 among metaphors for the church, faults the ecclesiology of the letter for its lack of interest in the non-Christian world, an absence of any sign of harassment of Christians, and a lack of reference to suffering, arguing that all of this "lends a triumphalist aspect to the church" (*Ephesians*, NTG [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993], 72). Acknowledging the ecclesial military metaphor of Eph 6:10-20 provides access to a more accurate and well-rounded view of the ecclesiology of the Epistle to the Ephesians and of the NT as a whole.

⁶⁶Richard Rice, *Believing, Behaving, Belonging: Finding New Love for the Church* (Roseville, CA: Association of Adventist Forums, 2002), 98-100, 22-24, 47, 60, 72-73, 99-200, 205. Rice adopts a well-reasoned view of metaphor and takes seriously the idea that metaphors are influential for shaping our understandings of the church. His lucid, thoughtful book is deserving of close attention.

understand God, human images were used anyway."⁶⁷

God, in the role of Creator, is thought of as the Father of Israel (e.g. Deut 32:6) who loves (Jer 31:1-9), protects (Ps 89:23-26), and disciplines (2 Sam 7:14) the nation and adopts them as his own (Exod 4:23; 6:6-8; Lev 26:12; Deut 32:10; Jer 3:19; Hos 11:1). As a result, "The people of Israel are with systematic regularity described as children, daughters and sons of God."⁶⁸ While it may be asked to what degree the metaphor of God as a father has slipped into the background, the fact that God is also described on occasion as a mother suggests the metaphor remains active.⁶⁹ God gives birth to Israel (Deut 32:18; Isa 42:14, 66:5-13; Num 11:10-15, by implication) and declares, "As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you" (Isa 66:13).⁷⁰

This pattern of thought is carried forward in the NT, where God is the Father (πατήρ, frequently, and, transliterated from Aramaic, ἄββᾶ, Matt 23:9; Mark 14:36; Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6), Jesus is Brother (Rom 8:29; Heb 2:11-12), and believers are thought of as related to one another as siblings.⁷¹ The fact that early Christians met in homes and early congregations often mirrored the extended family of the patron or patroness of the group meant that the relationships of the family were a natural source on which to draw in understanding relationships within the church. It should be no surprise, then, that this cluster of metaphors is a pervasive one for early Christians and significantly reflected and shaped the life and mission of the early Christian church.⁷² The household codes of the NT, which provide guidance for various

⁶⁷ Eva Maria Lassen, "Family as Metaphor: Family Images at the Time of the Old Testament and Early Judaism," *SJOT* 6 (1992): 251.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ When a fresh metaphor is created, it is generally highly poetic and in the "foreground." With use, it can fade into the "background" and be described as "dead" or, better, "retired."

⁷⁰ Lassen, 253-254, disagrees with Tribble's conclusion that "the God-image male and female is *basic*, i.e. God was as much woman as man" (emphasis original). Instead, Lassen argues that "The fundamental parent-image of God is the image of a father, and the fundamental human image of God is the image of a man. But in order to give God wider dimensions, female metaphors are occasionally included." I am indebted to Lassen's article for much of the thought and wording of the prior two paragraphs.

⁷¹For a thorough survey of the "kinship metaphor" in the undisputed letters of Paul, I commend chap. 4, "The Communities of Paul of Tarsus," in Joseph H. Hellerman, *The Ancient Church as Family* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 92-126.

⁷²See Roger W. Gehring, *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004). The family has been argued to be the favorite image for the community of believers of both Jesus and Paul (see Driver, *Images of the Church in Mission*, 139). Others argue for the centrality of the image in various NT documents. For example, J. G. van der Watt makes the argument that family imagery, while not the only metaphorical network in the Gospel of John, is the most prominent (*Family of the King: Dynamics of Metaphor in the Gospel According to John*, Biblical Interpretation Series 47 [Leiden: Brill, 2000]). Abraham J. Malherbe makes a

groups in the Christian household, suggest that early Christians both thought of their life within the church in terms of family and also distinguished their identity as believers from their identity as members of households (Eph 5:21-6:9; Col 3:18-4:1; 1 Pet 2:18-3:7; Titus 2:2-10; 1 Tim 2:9-15; 6:1-2). The claims of the ecclesial family were higher even than those of the social one, mirroring Christ's identification of his disciples with the declaration, "Here are my mother and my brothers" (Matt 12:49; cf. Mark 3:34; Luke 8:21).

The metaphor "The Church is the Family of God" becomes, for Paul, a profound theological declaration. God is the Father (πατήρ) of every family (πατρία) in heaven and on earth (Eph 3:14-15; cf. Acts 17:24-29).⁷³ It is through the atoning work of Christ that those once alienated from God and each other become members of God's family (οἰκεῖοι τοῦ θεοῦ, Eph 2:19; cf. Gal 6:10; 1 Tim 3:15; 1 Pet 4:17). The intimacy of the family board is reflected around the table of the Lord, where the hard-won unity of the ecclesial family is celebrated (1 Cor 10:16-17).

Ralph P. Martin summarizes well the promise set forth in this accessible and moving metaphor for the church: "The church at its best reflects all that is noblest and most worthwhile in human family life: attitudes of caring and mutual regard; understanding of needs, whether physical or of the spirit; and above all the sense of 'belonging' to a social unity in which we find acceptance without pretence or make-believe."⁷⁴ To the extent that we fulfill that promise in today's church, we revive the pattern of early Christians,⁷⁵ live out the high-priestly prayer of Jesus himself (John 17), and emulate early Christian mission, in which the family environment of the house church also proved attractive to non-Christians.⁷⁶

The NT presents us with a developed and specialized use of the family metaphor in "The Church is the Bride/Wife of Christ." The development of this metaphor from its OT origins is neatly summarized by R. C. Ortlund: "What begins as Pentateuchal whispers [Gen 1-2; Exod 34:11-16; Lev 17:7; 20:4-6; Num 15:38-40; Deut 31:16] rises later to prophetic cries [Hosea; Isa 1:21; 50:1; 54:4-6; 57:3; 62:5; Micah 1:7; Jer 2-3; 13:20-27; Ezek 16; 23] and is eventually echoed in apostolic teaching [Matt 9:14-15 (cf. Mark 2:18-20; Luke

similar argument for 1 Thessalonians ("God's New Family in Thessalonica," in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, ed. L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995], 116-125).

⁷³Harold W. Hoehner contends: "The anarthrous adjective πᾶσα could be translated 'all' or 'whole' family (AV, NIV), as in 2:21, but in this phrase it seems more appropriate to accept the normal grammatical usage meaning 'every' family (RV, ASV, RSV, NASB, NEB, TEV, JB, NJB, NRSV)" (*Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002], 475).

⁷⁴Martin, 124.

⁷⁵The early critic of Christians, Lucian, noted that "[t]heir [Christians] first lawgiver persuaded them that they are all brothers of one another" (*Peregr.* 13 as cited in Helleman, *The Ancient Church as Family*, 221).

⁷⁶See Gehring, 89-95.

5:33-35); 22:1-2; 25:1; John 3:28-30; 1 Cor 6:15-17; 2 Cor 11:1-3; Eph 5:21-33; Rev 14:4; 19:6-9a; 21:1-3, 9-10].”⁷⁷ The NT metaphor rests solidly on the OT one, “The People of God are the Bride/Wife of YHWH,” a metaphor that is generally employed to spotlight the apostasy-as-adultery of God’s people, Israel.

2 Corinthians 11:1-4

In 2 Cor 11:1-4, Paul views the Corinthian congregations as the betrothed bride of Christ. He views himself as the agent, friend, or best man of the bridegroom, Christ.⁷⁸ In drawing them to faith, he has arranged the betrothal, the legal equivalent of marriage.⁷⁹ And he looks toward the Second Coming of Christ as the moment when he will be privileged to present the Corinthian believers to Christ as his bride: “I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him” (v. 2). Meanwhile, in the time between the betrothal and the marriage-presentation, he worries that they may succumb to other paramours and “be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ” (v. 3). The metaphor provides a vivid eschatological setting for the Corinthians’ current conduct. This stress on the risk of apostasy-as-adultery resonates with the dominant emphasis of OT uses of the metaphor.

The tenor of the metaphor is “the need for devotion to Christ” and the vehicle, the marriage imagery, is used with an accent on betrothal as a time of risk. In addition to the central metaphor of bride-bridegroom, Paul portrays himself as the bridegroom’s representative, employs the betrothal and wedding ceremonies to structure the addressees’ understanding of their relationship to Christ and to him, and includes the element of possible seduction. Associated commonplaces that are active include, “a betrothed bride should be faithful to her husband,” “a betrothed bride may be unfaithful to her husband,” and “‘jealousy’ is appropriate on the part of the bridegroom’s agent.”

Ephesians 5:21-33

Paul employs the metaphor more idealistically in Eph 5:21-33, where, as part of an extended exhortation to husbands in the household code, he recasts the metaphor “The Church is the Bride/Wife of Christ” with a decidedly Christological focus.⁸⁰ A number of elements and roles of wedding ceremony,

⁷⁷R. C. Ortlund, *Whoredom: God’s Unfaithful Wife in Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 8. I have inserted in the quotation the references that Ortlund designates in his wider discussion.

⁷⁸A detailed discussion of this matter may be found in McVay, “Ecclesial Metaphor,” 267-270.

⁷⁹As such, Richard Batey notes that the submetaphor of betrothal “stresses the seriousness and permanency of the Corinthians’ past encounter with God’s elective love” (*New Testament Nuptial Imagery* [Leiden: Brill, 1971], 13).

⁸⁰Paul’s formulation seems especially dependent upon Ezek 16:3b-14 in adopting the three basic events described there—the rescue, cleansing, and endowment of the

representing submetaphors, are consolidated in Christ.⁸¹ In addition to his central role as groom, Christ himself is the bride price (since he “gave himself up for her”), the one who administers the bridal bath (“to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word,” v. 26), and the one who presents the bride (to himself! v. 27). All of these represent contraventions of ancient wedding practice, but the resulting stress on the metaphor serves only to emphasize the importance of Christ for the church. While the passage underscores the past and present attentions of the bridegroom toward the bride, it retains an important element of eschatological expectation in the future “presentation” (v. 27). At that time, the full result of the bridegroom’s work will be manifested in the splendor of the bride.⁸²

This is a good example of a two-way metaphor in which it is difficult to determine which is the tenor and which is the vehicle. Is the principal subject “Christian marriage,” understood in terms of the relationship between Christ and Christians? Or is the principal subject “the relationship between Christ and Christians,” understood in terms of Christian marriage? The fact that the passage is couched in a household code as part of exhortation to Christian husbands ensures that the function of the metaphor is to bring the covenant-loyalty of the divine bridegroom to bear on the marital fidelity of Christian husbands.⁸³

The identity of the church through the familial and marital metaphors has much to contribute to the doctrine of the church. No other cluster can vie with it in offering such an accessible and intimate portrait of relationships among fellow believers and the relationship between the church and its Lord. With such accessibility and intimacy, it harbors important warnings about the present

foundling bride.

⁸¹I reflect the happy phrase of Daniel von Allmen, who describes a “concentration christologique” in the passage (*La Famille de Dieu: La Symbolique Familiale dans le Paulinisme*, OBO 41 [Fribourg: Editions Universitaires, 1981]).

⁸²Many scholars support an eschatological reading of the “presentation” in Eph 5:27, including Markus Barth, *Ephesians*, AB 34 and 34A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 2:628, 69, 278.; Batey, 29.; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, NCB (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1974), 273-274.; James D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit: A Re-Examination of the New Testament Teaching on the Gift of the Spirit in Relation to Pentecostalism Today*, SBT 15 (London: SCM, 1970), 162. Dunn writes, “In Eph 5:27 it is clearly an eschatological ‘presentation’ of the church to Christ that is in view.” Hoehner, 761; Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 424-426; J. Paul Sampley, *‘And the Two Shall Become One Flesh’: A Study of Traditions in Ephesians 5:21-33*, SNTSMS 16 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 154-155. Others disagree, including Andrew T. Lincoln (*Ephesians*, WBC 42 [Dallas: Word, 1990], 377), who earlier supported the idea of a “future element in verse 27” (*Paradise Now and Not Yet*, 164). Cf. Col 1:21-22.

⁸³I am unable to take up the complex uses of marriage imagery and metaphor in the Apocalypse. It may be noted that the uses there cohere with that in Ephesians in two ways: there is a strong eschatological element to the metaphor, and it is employed in a wholly positive and idealistic fashion.

and offers immense hope for the future in its portrait of Jesus Christ as the bridegroom returning to lay claim to his bride. The cluster also challenges our understanding of the church's mission: "Christianity was, and grew because it was, a great fraternity. The name 'brother' . . . vividly expressed a real fact. . . . [A] Christian found, wherever he went, in the community of his fellow-Christians a welcome and hospitality."⁸⁴

*Metaphors for the Church and Seventh-day
Adventist Ecclesiology*

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in their masterful book *Metaphors We Live By*, make the point that metaphors both "highlight" and "hide."⁸⁵ By speaking of one thing in terms of another, a metaphor brings a set of features to light. However, in accenting a specific set of realities, a metaphor downplays or hides other aspects. An architectural metaphor for the church may highlight church organization and durability. However, that same architectural metaphor may hide other important aspects of the church, especially the dynamism and growth that might be made evident in, say, an agricultural metaphor. Paul, at least, seems to recognize this feature of metaphorical language, pushing the limits of the language by mixing the metaphors. So, for example, he describes the church as building/temple that is "growing," employing a verb that is more naturally used of biological growth (αὐξάνω, Eph 2:21).⁸⁶

In this light, it is interesting to consider what the "master metaphor" for church may be within a specific denomination or global church community. Within the context of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, it seems to me that the temple metaphor has been particularly influential. A lot of the language we use to describe our own church is drawn from the context domain of architecture. "The Church has One Foundation" is our most-often-used ecclesiological hymn. We speak of the "pillars of the faith," "fundamental beliefs," and the like. Our organizational "structure" is very important to us. The "Shaking Time," as it is generally understood, becomes part of the metaphor, an eschatological event when the church as temple experiences seismic stress.⁸⁷

⁸⁴Edwin Hatch, *The Organization of the Early Christian Churches: Eight Lectures Delivered before the University of Oxford, in the Year 1880*, 3d ed. (Oxford and Cambridge: Rivingtons, 1888), 43-44, as cited in David A. deSilva, "Re-Writing 'Household' in the Early Church," *ATJ* (2004): 91. DeSilva, 89-93, also offers challenging suggestions with regard to appropriating the family metaphor.

⁸⁵Chap. 3, "Metaphorical Systematicity: Highlighting and Hiding," pp. 10-13 in Lakoff and Johnson.

⁸⁶Following Joachim Gnllka, *Der Epheserbrief*, HTKNT 10/2 (Freiburg: Herder, 1982), 158. See the helpful discussion of mixed metaphors in Ephesians in Gerald Klingbeil, "Metaphors and Pragmatics: An Introduction to the Hermeneutics of Metaphors in the Epistle to the Ephesians," *BBR* (forthcoming).

⁸⁷See Don F. Neufeld, ed., *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, Commentary Reference

If there is any truth in these observations, it is interesting to consider the impact such a master metaphor may have on our ecclesiology. If the temple metaphor serves as our master metaphor for church, ministers of the Word, for example, become mere caretakers of the Temple, focused less on proclamation and growth than on cleaning and maintenance. More pervasively, the architectural metaphor, functioning apart from its biblical use, offers a static image of the church, one that hides important aspects of dynamism and growth that find greater emphasis in other metaphors. If we now operate with a master metaphor, should we switch to another? One could argue that the ubiquitous family metaphor or the often-employed and highly-developed body metaphor should hold pride of place as a metaphor for the church.

I do not believe that we should adopt a master metaphor for the church to the loss of the others.⁸⁸ God has chosen to divulge, in Scripture, a rich variety of metaphors in a bid to provide a well-rounded and fulsome understanding of the church. Since any given metaphor highlights some aspects of the church and hides others, we need to employ the variety of metaphors given to us to offer an accurate and inspiring view of the church.⁸⁹ The challenge is to continue to seek deeper understanding and truer appropriation of the biblical metaphors for the church, a task the church has often failed to accomplish.

John Driver describes what happened when Christians, more attune to contemporary realities than biblical images of the church, “recast” them “to serve as vehicles of the church’s distorted self-understanding.”⁹⁰ In the “Constantinian shift” of the fourth century, still worse occurred with the church increasingly drawing its models from the Roman empire. Each successive era of church history, it could be argued, has seen the church adopt the models and metaphor of its time rather than remaining true to the biblical metaphors for the church. So, the church has, in turn, reflected feudal models, imperial expansion, colonial imagery, democracy, or corporate-business models. The church has repeatedly either adopted images from secular culture or “given” biblical images “unbiblical twists to carry its deformed self-understanding.”⁹¹ So what is to be done?

If the church is to recover the integrity of its life and mission, it must have adequate images to capture and inspire its imagination . . .

Series 10 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1976), 1339. Rice, 96-105, makes an excellent case for the military metaphor (“the army church”) and economic metaphor (“the business church”) as especially influential ones within Adventism.

⁸⁸ Without fully explaining the approach, Rice, 94, presses the need to identify “a root metaphor”: “Our goal is to find a root metaphor for church that will help us experience the quality of corporate life the New Testament describes.”

⁸⁹ Reflecting on Minear’s lengthy list of images for the church, Martin, 112, writes: “Each term has something special to contribute to our understanding, and we need the wide variety of these many terms . . . to portray the fullness of the church.”

⁹⁰ Driver, 17-18.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 17-21.

Biblical images must be read and interpreted afresh, freed from traditional and current ecclesiastical practices. That new reading comes to us as a gift from the Spirit of God. The images must be grasped in the context of the faith community, committed to obedience. This is the realm in which God's will can be most fully discerned (John 7:17). We need to make a self-conscious attempt to remove those Constantinian grids through which we all, consciously and unconsciously, look at reality in the "Christian" West.⁹²

An important note should be added. The biblical metaphors for the church as a whole need to be augmented by the wider record of the NT. For example, the metaphors do not describe the evangelistic mission of the church as explicitly as we might wish. We shall need to study the words of the Great Commission and the life of the intrepid missionary-apostle Paul to understand fully what the metaphors do not as clearly provide—an emphasis on the church's role in reaching out to the lost.⁹³ The metaphors for the church should not be segregated from the rest of Scripture as though they offer, in themselves, a complete ecclesiology.

As one reflects on the plethora of metaphors/images for the church, it becomes obvious that these metaphors are emphasizing—in different ways and with different accents—three relationships or sets of relationships that are vital to the church: the relationship to God, Christ, and/or the Spirit; the relationships among fellow believers; and the church's relationship to the world and the powers.

A simple grid (see figure below) may help to visualize the point. I have attempted to "grid" a few of the metaphors discussed in this paper. For example, the body metaphor, as contained in Col 2:19, accents the relationship of believers to "the head," while "the whole body" remains in view. So I have placed it close to "God/Christ/Spirit." Similarly, the body metaphor, as developed in 1 Cor 12, accents the relationships among believers as body parts, though the relationship of the church to the Spirit, who gives the gifts (vv. 4-11), and to Christ ("the body of Christ," v. 27) is clearly in view. So I have graphed this metaphor close to "Fellow Believers," but part way toward "God/Christ/Spirit."

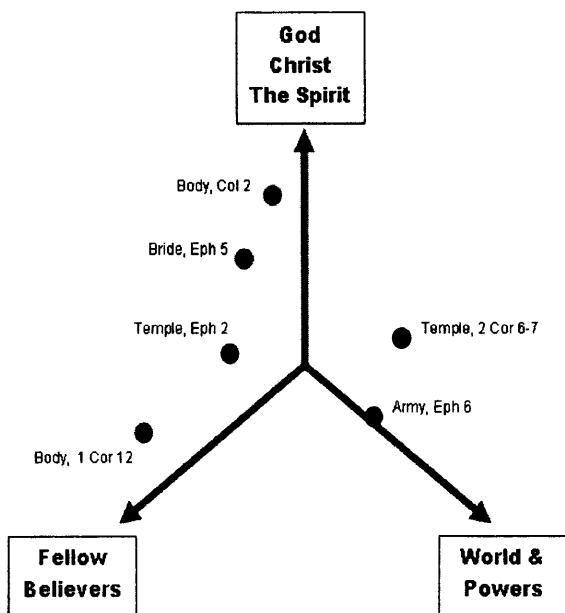
The military metaphor of Eph 6 accents the relationships of the church to "World and Powers," but also has in view rather evenly both the relationship with "God/Christ/Spirit" (since believers are to be strong in God's power, vv. 10-11, 13, and are to "pray in the Spirit," vv. 17-18) and that with "Fellow Believers" for whom they are to fight shoulder-to-shoulder and for whom they are to pray (v. 18). So I have placed this metaphor on the "World and Powers" axis, equidistant from the other two.

The graph is clearly not a precise instrument and one could argue about where a specific instance of metaphor should be placed on it. The point of the

⁹²Ibid., 21.

⁹³However, see *ibid.*; Donald Senior, "Correlating Images of Church and Images of Mission in the New Testament," *Missiology* 23 (1995): 3-16; and Minear, 152-155, where he treats the image of the church as "witnessing community."

illustration, though, is not precision but to underline the crucial nature of the three relationships it portrays. A checkup of practical ecclesiology—how well the church is living out its identity—would query the health of each of these. Each of the metaphors invites us to consider carefully one or, usually, more of these relationships: Are we, as Christian communities of faith, relating to God or Christ (e.g., as Head, Builder, Bridegroom) in the way we should? Are our relationships with fellow believers (e.g., as other body parts, building components) healthy and appropriate, based on an attitude of humility and respect? Are we combating the evil influence of the powers and maintaining an appropriate engagement with, and distance from, the world?



We must pray for the God-given ability to interpret clearly and contextually the biblical metaphors for the church. We must pray for the courage to appropriate them obediently and convincingly, allowing them to transform our communities of faith today. And we must see in these poignant metaphors a call to sterling loyalty toward God, compassion and grace toward one another, and vigorous engagement with the world.