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THE TEMPLE, THE BODY, AND THE PEOPLE: ANCIENT METAPHORS FOR THE MODERN CHURCH

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The modern church is diverse in both orthodoxy and orthopraxy. However, church growth models and church health metrics seem to only apply to certain *types* of ecclesial expression. The Sacred Text employs a wide variety of metaphors to depict the Church. These metaphors may offer insight into the biblical standards for ecclesial composition and praxis. This article explores various biblical metaphors for the church and the implications those metaphors have for ecclesial life, health, and growth metrics.

I. INTRODUCTION

For many, Sunday in America is *Church Day*. Across the nation, tens of thousands of congregations gather to sing, pray, fellowship, and read the Sacred Text. One could argue that these activities are the primary functions of the church. However, a closer look at the variety of ecclesial expressions on any given Sunday reveals a complex network of churches, all with different operating systems and definitions of what church should *look* like. If the church is so diverse in practice, how can ecclesial leaders measure church life, health, growth, and effectiveness? This article suggests that the solution may be found within the biblical metaphors for the Church. The use of metaphor in theoretical research implies a particular way of thinking and seeing that allows one to envision the similarities between two seemingly different objects or concepts.¹ For example, Vondey's metaphor of the Church as a "People of Bread" takes

¹ Gareth Morgan. *Images of Organization* (California: Sage, 2006), 4-5.

the image of a food staple beyond the Lord's Supper and applies it to social justice, ecumenism, hospitality, and mission.² Likewise, Beale's metaphor of the Church as "The Temple" challenges the paradigms surrounding the sacredness of space by juxtaposing the Hebrew temple with the cosmos, the earth, and the human body.³ Metaphors such as Vine, Machine, Body, Bread, and People all have deep implications for organizational design, praxis, and growth metrics within the church.

II. ECCLESIAL METAPHORS

An example of the power of metaphor in ecclesial design is the megachurch. A megachurch is a church that has at least 2,000 weekly attendees, a "full-service" ministry approach, and a large full time and volunteer staff.⁴ Megachurches are also known for their technology driven weekend services or "experiences".⁵ All of the aforementioned depend on some of the same structures and systems often found in large corporations. One could argue that the *building-centric* mentality of some megachurches creates a sacredness of space reminiscent of the Israelite temple. However, megachurch does not necessarily equal *machine*. Mechanistic organizations function best in stable environments where change is easily managed.⁶ A brief foray into ecclesial ministry quickly reveals that stable is oftentimes a myth at best. As opposed to the informal routine and structure of the machine, Vondey and Beale's metaphors emphasize the "living", "breathing", and "spreading" elements of the Church. As the temple, the church is to expand the Glory of God as the water covers the sea.⁷ As a people of bread, the church is to bring life, love, and community to those within and outside of the *oikos*.⁸

The Temple

As the temple, the Church represents the dwelling place of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit on earth.⁹ Truly, the Church (temple) transcends brick and mortar and stained glass images. From the beginning, God charged spiritual leaders to "keep" and "expand" his glory.¹⁰ In the Old Testament, this charge referred to the physical Tabernacle and subsequent temples, which stood as earthy manifestations of

² Wolfgang Vondey. *People of Bread: Rediscovering Ecclesiology* (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), 300-304.

³ G.K. Beale. *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A biblical theology of the dwelling place of God* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 398-402.

⁴ Aaron James. "Rehabilitating Willow Creek: Megachurches, De Certeau, and the tactics of navigating consumer culture." *Christian Scholar's Review* 43, 1 (2013): 23-24.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Gareth Morgan. *Images of Organization* (California: Sage, 2006), 27.

⁷ G.K. Beale. *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A biblical theology of the dwelling place of God* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 402.

⁸ Wolfgang Vondey. *People of Bread: Rediscovering Ecclesiology* (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), 43-45.

⁹ G.K. Beale. *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A biblical theology of the dwelling place of God* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 245-247.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 81-82.

God's eternal dwelling place.¹¹ In the New Testament, Christ stands as the cornerstone of a new temple, which includes all Believers (bearers of the Spirit).¹² Where do ecclesial leaders fit in? A simple answer is found in Ephesians 4:11-16:

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Thus, ecclesial leaders aid in *temple* building by equipping, which includes speaking the truth in love. However, what is not simple is the orthopraxis behind the fundamental truth of Ephesians 4. Barentsen argues that although Ephesians 4 does not dig into the detailed behaviors of the apostle, prophet, evangelist, shepherd, and teacher, it does emphasize the role of local ecclesial leadership in stabilizing and unifying the Church.¹³ If ecclesial history is God's temple-building process, what role do ecclesial leaders play in God's process of expanding His Church?

The People and the Bread

As the "bread", the Church represents hope, healing, and life to a dying, broken, and hopeless world.¹⁴ However, the most constant metaphor for the Church is arguably the most fundamental picture of ecclesial life and structure. While it is true that the Church is the dwelling place of the Spirit and a community fueled by service and fellowship, the Church are the people of God.

From the beginning, God's desire was to have a people that He could call His own. From Genesis to Revelation the Bible tells a story of Yahweh's relentless pursuit and ultimate redemption of His bride, His family – His people. For example, in Exodus 6:6-7 God said to Moses:

Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians.

¹¹ Ibid, 124.

¹² Ibid, 216.

¹³ Jack Barentsen. *Emerging leadership in the Pauline mission: A social identity perspective on local leadership development in Corinth and Ephesus* (Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2011) 170.

¹⁴ Wolfgang Vondey. *People of Bread: Rediscovering Ecclesiology* (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), 300-304.

The language of this passage represents a common marriage formula, which would have been very familiar to the original audience.¹⁵ After the incident with the Golden Calf, Moses grinds the idol into powder and has the Israelites drink it. Traditional Jewish interpretations connect this act with the codified process for investigating suspected adultery found in Numbers 5:12-31.¹⁶ The redemptive language of Exodus and Ruth are not limited to the Hebrew Scriptures.¹⁷ Paul uses the same verbiage in His plea for holy living:

Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings.¹⁸

Although Paul is using the temple metaphor, he is doing so through the lens of God's chosen people. Therefore, as the Church faces an ever-evolving ecclesiology, uncertain global realities, and the rapid decay of morality, it must always remember that the primary identity of the Church rests in the metaphor of *people*. This should give the Church hope. Since God paid such a high price for His people, will He not also keep them and protect them? Likewise, this should also spur ecclesial organizations away from idolatry and toward holiness.

The Body

Banks argues that biblical imagery and metaphor presents the Church as a complex system made up of equally important, yet functionally different parts.¹⁹ This argument is built on Pauline ecclesiology:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.²⁰

This argument also flows from systems theory, which emphasizes the impact of cultural and environmental change on an organization's operations and structure.²¹ Thus, ecclesial leaders must remain vigilant to adjust for cultural changes such as migration, immigration, and globalization.²² Although the Church is often steeped in

¹⁵ Nicholas P. Lunn "'Let my people go!' The exodus as Israel's metaphorical divorce from Egypt." *Evangelical Quarterly* 86, 3 (2014): 241.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Brad Embry "Redemption-acquisition": the marriage of Ruth as a theological commentary on Yahweh and Yahweh's people." *Journal Of Theological Interpretation* 7, 2 (2013): 267-268.

¹⁸ 1 Corinthians 6:19-20; 7:23.

¹⁹ Tonya Banks. "The Role of the Ecclesial Leaders in Shaping the Future Church." *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership* 5, 1. 2013, 82.

²⁰ 1 Cor 12:12-14; 27.

²¹ Tonya Banks. "The Role of the Ecclesial Leaders in Shaping the Future Church." *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership* 5, 1. 2013, 92.

²² Ibid, 88-90.

tradition, ecclesial leaders cannot afford to sacrifice missional flexibility for traditional structures or traditional cultural responses.²³

The Household

The household or *oikos* metaphor has several implications for modern ecclesial expressions. In fact, there are at least three important terms that are etymologically connected to the word *oikos*: ecology, economy, and ecumenism.²⁴ Thus, the household of God may refer to the global earth and cosmos (ecology), the Scriptural systems that define ecclesial behavior (economy), and the universal body of faith (ecumenism).²⁵ One could argue that if the Church is the household for God, then local expressions of the Church should reflect more than an assembly of like-minded individuals. *Oikos* pushes the Church beyond the assembly and toward *koinonia*, which implies sharing, participation, community, and communion.²⁶ Park argues that Luke gives the greatest example of how Jesus transformed the concept of *oikos* from shame and patriarchal hierarchy and toward inclusion and honor.²⁷ Therefore, one could argue that ecclesial leaders in the household metaphor should function as familial elders as opposed to corporate lords.

The Community

In the purest sense, ecclesiology should always connect to *koinonia* (communion, fellowship, common unity etc.). For example, the opposite of *koinonia* is the Greek term *idion*, which implies a private, hidden, and non-participatory experience.²⁸ Since the New Testament presents the church as a group of believers who not only gather together worship, fellowship, and service, concepts of *unity* or *togetherness* must serve as foundational elements of ecclesiology.²⁹ According to Karkkainen, there is no true “being” without communion, since nothing exists as an individual and even God exists within the communal framework of personhood.³⁰

Koinonia is exemplified in the Lucan summary of early church life:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their

²³ Ibid, 86.

²⁴ Daniela C. Augustine. "Pentecost Communal Economics and the Household of God." *Journal Of Pentecostal Theology* 19, 2 (2010): 219.

²⁵ Ibid, 220.

²⁶ Veli-Matti Karkkainen. *An introduction to ecclesiology: Ecumenical historical, and global perspectives* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 289.

²⁷ Rohun Park. "Revisiting the Parable of the Prodigal Son for Decolonization: Luke's Reconfiguration of *Oikos* in 15:11-32." *Biblical Interpretation* 17, 5 (2009): 509-512.

²⁸ Philip Kariatlis. "Affirming *koinonia* ecclesiology: An orthodox perspective." *Phronema* 27, 1 (May 2012): 53.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Veli-Matti Karkkainen. *An introduction to ecclesiology: Ecumenical historical, and global perspectives* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 988.

possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.³¹

Although *kerygma* is the content of the Church's mission, *koinonia* is the vehicle by which the message of Christ is lived out and experienced by those in and out of the Church.³² It appears that the Church referenced in Acts 2:42-47 focused on *koinonia* instead of Church growth and God provided the increase. Perhaps the 21st century Church needs to refocus.

The vine metaphor has several implications for modern ecclesiology. It is clear that in John 15, the church is described as "The Branches", which must stay connected to the "Vine" (Jesus).³³ However, John 15:1-11 contains several thematic connections with at least four other synoptic parables, all of which speak to the eschatological mandate of the church.³⁴ Simply put, the vine metaphor implies that the Church must grow spiritually, produce good fruit, and remain connected to Jesus in every way.³⁵ However, the connection of the branches to the vine also implies a connection of *one to another*. After Jesus shares the Parable of the Vine and the Branches, he wraps up the discourse with a powerful command of love:

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. These things I command you, so that you will love one another.³⁶

Thus, lived-out *koinonia* involves connection, abiding, and the production of fruit.³⁷ Stylistically, the modern church functions on a level that does not always seem to promote the deep and abiding connection that is described in John 15. How can ecclesial leaders recapture *connection* and *abiding* in the context of 60-minute services?

³¹ Acts 2:42-47.

³² Peter Althouse. "Towards a Pentecostal Ecclesiology: Participation in the Missional Life of the Triune God." *Journal Of Pentecostal Theology* 18, 2 (September 2009): 240.

³³ John 15:5.

³⁴ Richard Choi. "I am the vine: an investigation of the relations between John 15:1-6 and some parables of the synoptic gospels." *Biblical Research* 45, (2000): 51.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ John 15:9-16.

³⁷ Philip Kariattlis. Affirming *koinonia* ecclesiology: An orthodox perspective." *Phronema* 27, 1 (2012): 58-59.

III. DISCUSSION

The Church is rapidly shifting away from centralized hierarchies and toward participative communities.³⁸ Churches of all shapes and sizes approach this paradigm shift differently. For example, the megachurch often views participation as both an act of hospitality and an act of service.³⁹ Thus, congregants are invited to participate in the life of the church by serving/volunteering in a variety of customer service style ministries (first-impressions, coffee shop, welcome table, greeters, etc.).⁴⁰ Of course, these ministries are not limited to megachurches. Conversely, the house church or strategically small church movement views the participative nature of the church as one that functions best in small, intentional community.⁴¹ One could argue that the former views hospitality as something that is *done*, while the latter views hospitality as something that is primarily ontological. Regardless of one's ecclesiological preferences, they cannot deny that hospitality and community are linked because Jesus linked them via The Lord's Supper. Through the Eucharist, the church moves beyond ritual and toward companionship, common unity, and a literal participation in the death of Christ.⁴² While it is true that ecclesial leaders are called to welcome the lost *home*, one could argue that the call home is also a call to both live and die.

It seems that the destruction of the temple in the Old Testament stands as a foreshadowing of God's ultimate plan to dwell in His people. One could argue that the Herodian Temple did not constitute the true temple since it was missing several of the essential elements found in Solomon's Temple, mainly the Ark of the Covenant.⁴³ In fact, the post-exilic histories found in the Old Testament (Ezra and Nehemiah) make no mention of the Ark or the *shekinah* associated with the presence of God in the Temple. Ezra went through detail to document the rebuilding of the Temple and the wall. Certainly, he would have mentioned the Temple being filled with the presence of God, if indeed it happened at all. Furthermore, it seems that the post-exilic/Herodian Temple had all the trappings of worship (the Sacred Text, priests, workers, the altar, the veil, the furnishings, etc.). However, one thing was missing: the manifest presence of God. Why? It seems that the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile set in motion God's plan to fulfill the Abrahamic covenant and "enlarge the boundaries" of the Temple via Jesus and His Church.⁴⁴ While it is not the purpose of this paper to present a scholarly argument as to where the manifest presence of God dwelled between the

³⁸ Veli-Matti Karkkainen. *An introduction to ecclesiology: Ecumenical historical, and global perspectives* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 611.

³⁹ Aaron James. "Rehabilitating Willow Creek: Megachurches, De Certeau, and the tactics of navigating consumer culture." *Christian Scholar's Review* 43, 1 (2013): 23-24.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ J.B., Watson, and Walter H. Scalen. "Dining with the devil: The unique secularization of evangelical churches." *International Social Science Review* 83, 3/4 (2008): 177.

⁴² Wolfgang Vondey. "Pentecostal Ecclesiology and Eucharistic Hospitality: Toward a Systematic and Ecumenical Account of the Church." *Pneuma: The Journal Of The Society For Pentecostal Studies* 32, 1 (2010): 42.

⁴³ 2 Chronicles 35:3, 2 Chronicles 36:18-19.

⁴⁴ G.K. Beale. *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A biblical theology of the dwelling place of God* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 123.

exile and Pentecost, one thing seems clear: He did not dwell on Mount Zion during that period.

Like the post-exilic/Herodian temple, many 21st Century churches have all the trappings of worship (professional ministers, altars, the Sacred text, ceremony, furnishings, etc.). Could the modern church be so caught up in the signs of worship that they do not realize the actual presence of God is missing? Two of the greatest questions facing today's ecclesial leaders are:

- How do we avoid turning the 21st Century Church into Herod's Temple?
- If God's people are His Temple, how should that frame our collective theologies of space?

A return to the biblical metaphors for the church may not only answer these questions, it may also provide a unified metric by which all churches can measure ecclesial life, health, and growth.

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