

Metaphors for the church

Definition

A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable, but may provide clarity or identify hidden similarities.

E.g. “That person is a snake” - Obviously not literal, but may have snake like properties; difficult to pin down, evasive, prone to biting (again not necessarily literally!)

The thing to remember is you can use multiple metaphors to express multiple truths. Be wary of mixing your metaphors though to avoid some bizarre conclusions.

The Church is a Family

2 CORINTHIANS 6:18 – “I will be a Father to you and you will be my sons and daughters”, says the Lord Almighty.

An immediate family image is one of God being our father and we being His sons and daughters.

1 TIMOTHY 5:1-2 – Do not rebuke an older man harshly but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.

Multiple family relationships described here. Don’t mix the metaphors! God is our Father; older men are like our Father; doesn’t mean treat older men like God!

MATTHEW 12:49-50 – Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

Note the qualification for being a brother, sister, or mother.

Questions for us to reflect on

- What positive things does the family metaphor teach us about church and our relationships with one another?
- What challenges does the family metaphor represent? How might we overcome these challenges?
- Thinking of Jesus’ qualification, what is our relationship with those in the (local) church who do not do the will of the Father in heaven? Can we draw lines that can’t be crossed?

The Church is a Bride

2 CORINTHIANS 11:2 – 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.

We must show fidelity to one husband, Christ. Purity of the church is important. Anything less is an act of unfaithfulness.

JOHN 3:29 – The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. That joy is mine and is now complete.

The church belongs to Christ, as a bride to the bridegroom. Like Paul, a few years later, John the Baptist was preparing people (an assembly) for the bridegroom. Repentance is part of preparation and maintains purity.

More questions for us to reflect on

- What attributes of a bride do you think applies to us as a church?
- Can you think of any parables that build on this metaphor? (Be careful of mixing!) What do they teach us?
- How can we be an unfaithful bride?

The Church is a Body

Note there are two different body metaphors here.

EPHESIANS 4:15-16 – Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

COLOSSIANS 2:19 – He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow

Here the head of the body is Christ. From Him, the whole body hangs together. The body grows and builds itself. It has ligaments and sinews. However, compare that with:

1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-27 – The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body ...

...

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

Functionally a different metaphor. Here the whole body, including the head is describing the church. It describes both the unity of the body as well as its diverse parts. It also denies the view that you can “opt-out” of being part of the body. If you have assembled, you are part of the body.

Final questions for us to reflect on

- How can a body build itself and grow? Why is love mentioned as part of this process?
- What happens if connection with the head is lost? How can this occur?
- What happens when part of the body is out of step with the rest of the body?
- Are there redundant parts of the body?
- What can be done with weaker parts of the body?

- What are the less presentable parts? And what is “special modesty”?
- Do you know how you fit in the body? What would help you find your place?
- What other metaphors are used for the Church in scripture? What do these metaphors teach us?

Summary

There are several metaphors used and each express a truth. No metaphor is better than another, we should use them all.

To guide our relationships, think of the Family metaphor.

To preserve our purity, think of the Bride metaphor.

With regards to function and purpose, think of the Body metaphor.