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Further Reflections on

'Some Pauline Pictures of the Church'

by D. R. Denton

In this brief note Dr. Denton helpfully takes up an article by Dr. R. Y. K. Fung in an earlier issue of THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY and shows the fruitfulness of his work by examining further conclusions that flow from the evidence which he collected on Paul's pictures of the church.

A recent article in THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY was devoted to certain aspects of the church in Paul.¹ The author focused on four descriptions of the church, drawing out the meaning of each one for the apostle. By way of conclusion, he summarized the distinctive contribution of each image,² then drew attention to two foci — Christ and the Spirit — which bind the various images together.³

I should like to suggest that a further conclusion may be derived from the material that was so clearly and helpfully surveyed. These four metaphors contain certain common features. Several truths are to be found in all of them, or at least in three of the four. Therefore, along with the variety that has been demonstrated (each picture has its own particular contribution) and the central role of the two foci, I conclude that we can grasp certain key emphases in Paul's doctrines of the church. There are elements that are so significant in his thinking that they reappear under different images.

First, unity. Fung explicitly mentions the unity of the church in his summaries of the significance of body and building.⁴ The evidence is found in 1 Cor. 10:17; 12:12f.; Eph. 2:21. To this may be added 1 Cor. 3:16, where the oneness of the church is demonstrated by the combination of plural subject and verb (*este*) and predicate noun in the singular (*naos theou*). Unity is part, too, of Paul's understanding of the church as people of God. In connection with the parable of the olive tree (= the people of God)⁵ it is pointed out that the root is Jewish while the grafted branches represent Gentile believers (Rom. 11:17-24). There is one tree, one people. All believers belong to it. Similarly, this element is depicted in the continuity of the church with Israel which Fung portrays as one of the two complementary aspects of the people of God.⁶ Paul highlights the church's continuity with Israel because of his strong conviction of the unity of God's people. Finally, the unity of the church is reflected in the bride imagery in so far as there is one bride, not several. Fung's language 'she is a whole "person" distinct from Christ'⁷ covers this aspect. In the

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¹ R. Y. K. Fung, 'Some Pauline Pictures of the Church', *EQ* 53 (1981), 89-107.

² *Ibid.*, 105.

³ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 96, 105.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 89-91, 105.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

passage in Ephesians 5 Paul consistently speaks of 'the church' (never in the plural), where the one universal church comprehends all its members. The climax is in the mystery of the two who become one (vv.31f.). Like Christ the Bridegroom, the church as bride or wife is one entity.

A second emphasis which is prominent in the metaphors of the church is holiness or purity. In the article this was indicated for the building concept (1 Cor. 3:17),⁸ but nowhere else. The same truth occurs, however, in Eph. 5:26f. under the bride terminology. Reference was made to these verses in terms of the church's eschatological destiny (v.27). But it may fairly be added that the idea of holiness receives considerable stress in the biblical passage. The following language is used to describe the bride: 'sanctify', 'cleansed', 'washing of water', 'without spot or wrinkle', 'holy', 'without blemish' — all in the space of two verses. Again, the church's holiness is portrayed under the people of God imagery. Probably this is implicit in the phrase itself, for as his people one of its responsibilities is to be like him, that is, holy. While the clearest NT evidence of this concept is 1 Pet. 2:9, the Pauline corpus depicts it too.

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Initially, attention is drawn to 2 Cor. 6:16-7:1. To be sure, Fung has used this when investigating Paul's building imagery.⁹ In fact it is a further example of the coalescence of two images, for while Paul begins at the point of the temple ('we are the temple of the living God', v.16), the supporting quotation runs on to declare, 'I will be their God, and they shall be my people'. Here the dominant idea is that of the people of God. This in turn is the basis for the exhortation, 'Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean' (v.17). The apostle carries this further in his own conclusion, 'Let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, and make holiness perfect in the fear of God' (7:1). Therefore, while acknowledging that 'temple' is the starting point, and that two images are coalesced, I propose that the dominant image in 2 Cor. 6:16-7:1 is that of the people of God and that the chief feature of this people is the necessity of holy living. Secondly, Romans 11 depicts this concept in its claim that 'if the dough offered as first fruits is holy, so is the whole lump; and if the root is holy, so are the branches' (v.16). Thirdly, this aspect of the church is reiterated in Tit. 2:14,¹⁰ which declares the purpose of Jesus' death. He 'gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for him-

⁸ *Ibid.*, 101, 105. It is also explicitly stated in Eph. 2:21.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁰ Fung made no mention of this verse. In a previous article ('Charismatic versus Organized Ministry?', *EQ* 52 (1980) 195-214) he appeared to accept the Pauline authorship of the Pastorals (204f. and n. 31). In any case, here is evidence from the Pauline corpus and the concept is like that of 2 Cor. 6:17, 7:1.

self a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds'. This explicit statement confirms the importance of purity or holiness as a characteristic and function of the people of God.

A third, and final, emphasis which is common to these various metaphors is that the church is living and growing. The building is growing (Eph. 2:21f.).¹¹ So is the body (Col. 2:19; Eph. 4:16).¹² Similarly, it is living, 'a living organic unity'.¹³ In the case of bride and people the element of growth is not explicit,¹⁴ but by their very nature these descriptions depict the truth of a living being, a living organism. The choice of language betrays Paul's belief that the church is pulsating with life. It is no static, lifeless object. Rather, it is vital and throbbing with life, as these two analogies, drawn from the sphere of human relationships, portray.

So, the conclusion is reached that unity, holiness, life and growth are among the central convictions held by Paul in his doctrine of the church. His different images of the church each make a distinctive contribution to the total picture. Christ and the Spirit are the two foci that unite these varying contributions. To these two assessments, made by Fung, we add a third. Unity, holiness, life and growth, which are common to the metaphors investigated, form the key elements in the apostle's teaching on the church.

¹¹ Fung, 'Pauline Pictures', 104, 105.

¹² *Ibid.*, 97, 105.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁴ But the latter does encompass the ideas of the incorporation of additional branches into the olive tree (Rom. 11:17,23,24) and the full number of Gentiles (11:25).