

Biblical Symbolism: More 'Church' Symbols

by Staff

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In the previous study, we discovered a few of the Bible's symbols for the church of God. We learned the church is symbolized as a family, a city or cities, and mountains or hills. As a symbolic or coded book, the Bible's array of imagery describing the church is not complete with just these few symbols. As God's sons and daughters, and as Jesus Christ's bride-to-be, the New Testament church receives special attention in God's Word.

Such "apple of the eye" attention deserves our continued investigation. In this study, we will explore other—and likely, familiar—symbols of the church, as well as some of the general symbols that, depending on the context, can denote both true and false churches.

1. Is the church symbolized as a vine or vineyard? Psalm 80:8; John 15:1-5.

Comment: Asaph conceives ancient Israel as a vine brought out of Egypt. Jesus echoes this with a vineyard analogy while instructing the disciples before His death. In some passages the church is the vine's branches, and at other times a vine or vineyard in its own right, planted by Christ.

2. Can the vine and vineyard analogy be meaningfully projected forward from Old Testament Israel to the New Testament church? Hosea 10:1; Joel 1:7-14; Isaiah 5:1-7; 60:21; Jeremiah 12:10; Matthew 21:33-40.

Comment: Hosea, Joel and Isaiah frequently make reference to the latter days as the time of the fulfillment of their prophecies. Notice that Joel includes the ministers, priests and farmers in his references to the vine or vineyard of God, making a connection to the church. Isaiah 5 describes, as an end-time prophecy, the problems God sees in His vineyard, the church.

3. Can *house*, *temple*, *building* and *sanctuary* also be symbols of the church? Isaiah 5:7; 56:7; I Corinthians 3:9; I Timothy 3:15; Ephesians 2:21-22; Hebrews 3:6; Zechariah 8:9; Lamentations 2:7; Daniel 8:13-14.

Comment: Isaiah 5:7 states that "the vineyard . . . is the *house* of Israel." God then combines the analogy of the vineyard being torn down with one of houses being torn down. Likewise, Paul combines vineyard and house in describing the church at Corinth. The Bible includes many references to the church as a temple, house or building, whether in type as the physical houses of Israel and Judah or the congregation in the wilderness, or as a present or future reference to a spiritual house, the New Testament church.

4. The Bible often mentions sheep, shepherds and flocks. Do these also represent the church? Isaiah 5:17; John 10:1-16; 21:16-17; Matthew 10:6, 16; Mark 6:34; Romans 8:36; Acts 20:28; I Peter 5:2-3; Ezekiel 34:1-12.

Comment: God adds yet another analogy to His church in Isaiah 5, combining not only vineyards and houses, but also flocks! This is one of the most obvious biblical symbols illustrating God's chosen people.

5. What part do goats play? Leviticus 16:20-22; Jeremiah 50:8; Zechariah 10:3; Matthew 25:32-33.

Comment: While goats are often combined with sheep and other cattle in offerings to God, Scripture often casts them in a bad light. In Leviticus 16, a goat symbolizes Satan, upon whom blame is cast for causing Israel to sin. Christ is predominantly depicted as a lamb slain for those sins. Shepherds often use goats to lead sheep, but as leaders, they tend to be too independent and lead the sheep into trouble. This is why James advises that not many become teachers, for they receive harsher judgment (James 3:1). Jesus also uses goats to symbolize disobedient people on His left hand in contrast to sheep as righteous people on His right.

6. It is impossible to describe the Kingdom of God—or the church as a candidate for it—fully in one analogy, so God uses many familiar symbols to help us understand His plan. While the church is "family" in one analogy, can she also be described as a bride or wife? II Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:22-32; Matthew 22:1-14; Proverbs 31:10-31; Revelation 19:7-9; 21:1-9; 22:17; Song of Songs; Ezekiel 16.

Comment: Paul reveals that the husband-wife relationship is analogous to Christ and the church, and our marriages should mirror His example. He will marry the church upon His return, and she will reign with Him over the nations. In the Song of Songs it is hard to miss the analogy of Christ wooing His bride-to-be at His return, especially when contrasted with His unfaithful wife, ancient Israel (Ezekiel 16).

7. Apart from the bride of Christ, are other females—women, mothers, daughters and sisters—also frequently descriptive of both the true church and false churches? Jeremiah 6:2; Galatians 4:26; Revelation 12:1-6, 13-17; 17:1-6; Micah 4:8-10; 7:1-18; Isaiah 62:11; 32:9-15; Zephaniah 3:14; Zechariah 9:9.

Comment: Since Christ will marry the church when He returns, and since we, as God's children and heirs to His Kingdom, need a mother to nurture us in His way, Christ uses females to describe His church. Revelation 17 shows a harlot ruling over men to be a false church, depicting the wrong kind of mother and wife. Almost anytime a prophetic passage refers to a female, the symbolism is of a church or religious system, false or true.

No single symbol—even stretched to its limits—can completely describe the various attitudes, conditions and traits of the church, therefore God sprinkled His Word with several colorful, meaningful analogies to cover the subject. In this way, combining the types and imagery, God's people can get a good look at themselves through His eyes and make the changes to be accounted worthy of His Kingdom.