**Metaphors for the Church – by James D. Smith III**

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus declared, “I will build my Church” (Matt 16:18). Standing in the Jewish tradition, steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures, come to fulfill the Law and promises given to the people Israel, Jesus called all to follow Him and be part of this fellowship or assembly. Peter’s response—“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:16)—became the foundational confession of Jesus’ disciples. Centered on Him and united in echoing His “good news” (Mark 1:15; 1 Tim 3:15)—whether in twos or threes (Matt 18:20), local assemblies, or as a missional movement reaching out to the world—the Church has experienced Jesus as true to His word: loving, present, and powerful in building His people (Matt 28:16–20; Acts 1:8).

The New Testament contains several images to explain the relationship of believers to God. Here are some of the most common expressions in the New Testament.

**The Body of Christ**

The “body of Christ” metaphor for the Church draws an analogy between the people of God and the human body (Eph 1:22–23; Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 12:12; 1 Pet 4:10). It celebrates the position and ministry of Jesus as “Head” of His body, the Church. He provides its identity, its coordination, and direction. United under Him, each person discovers his or her vital place and part as members. People also discover spiritual gifts for serving God and neighbor, whether as freshly imparted capabilities or the blessed anointing of strengths already in place. In response to Christ, the exercise of these gifts and godly virtues “builds up” the body in condition and extension.

**The Flock**

The “flock” metaphor for the people of God draws on pastoral imagery (Psa 23; Luke 15:3–7; John 10:1–18; 1 Pet 5:1–2). Utilizing the shepherd—sheep relationship of the ancient Near East, this analogy celebrates the position and ministry of Jesus as Great Shepherd of His flock. He provides to a rescued and gathered community its focus, leadership, and care. Under Him, each sheep is known intimately and by name, learns obedience is vital to respectful discipleship, and receives guidance along a purposeful journey. While life’s journey is perilous (predators and pretenders abound), the shepherd staff which rescues the wayward, and the rod which repels the assaults of evil, strengthens and defends the flock. Hearing the beckoning word, and heeding divine direction, the flock is fulfilled—and the shepherd-pastor draws other sheep in.

**Branches of the Vine**

The “branches of the vine” metaphor for believers in Jesus draws on agricultural imagery (Matt 13:1–43; John 15:1–17; Rom 11:16–24). The people of God are likened to parts of vineyards. This metaphor celebrates the position and ministry of Jesus as true vine. He provides true life to a deeply rooted, well-watered, and blossoming community. The marks of this community are intimacy, fruitfulness, and joy. Extending this metaphor, the Church finds itself spiritually “grafted into” God’s historic, chosen people Israel. The Messiah’s reign is the focal reality which creates a new humanity, eager for fulfillment of God’s plan. The

**Household of God**

The household of God metaphor for the people of God draws on familial and residential imagery (Luke 1:29–33; Gal 3:28; 2 Cor 6:16–18; Eph 2:11–22; Heb 2:10–18; 3:1–6). This analogy specifically emphasizes the relationship between the people of God and those who are now their “relatives” through Christ’s work. It celebrates the position and ministry of Jesus as master of the house. He provides the invitation to belong to a scattered community of strangers and aliens—everyone becomes valued parts of a relational whole. Whether seen as family through birth or adoption, all are united under Christ.

**Bride of Christ**

The bride of Christ metaphor for the Church profoundly depicts the relationship of Christ to the Church as a relationship between a husband and wife in marriage (Hos 3:1–3; Matt 9:14–15; 25:1–13; 2 Cor 11:2–4; Eph 5:21–33; Rev 19:7–9; 22:12–21). This metaphor celebrates the position and ministry of Jesus as the bridegroom in the wedding celebration. He offers to His chosen one unconditional love, responsive leadership, glad provision of needs, and deepened identity. In the life of each believer and the community, there is both an abiding security in this relationship and a call to prepare for the fulfillment of this divine marriage at Jesus’ second coming.