

“Body and Bride”

by Terry L. Johnson

This is the sixteenth of 18 articles in a series entitled “Who Needs the Church?”

Still not convinced of the central role that the church is to play in a believer’s life and commitments? Let’s return to Jesus’ relation to the church as expressed by the metaphors employed by the Prophets and Apostles. As we’ve seen, two of their favorites are the church as the “body of Christ” (1 Cor 12:12-31; Rom 12:4-8; Eph 4:11ff) and as “bride of Christ.” (Ps 45; Song of Solomon; 2 Cor 11:2; Rev 21:2, 9; 19:7, 9). Is it possible to harmonize these metaphors of the church with the philosophy of churchless Christianity? Can we claim a healthy relationship with Jesus while rejecting His body and bride?

Body of Christ

Let’s first consider applying the metaphor of the body to churchless Christianity. Can the head be severed from the body and the body still survive? “Christ is the head of the church, his body” (Eph. 5:23). Can one love the head and despise the body? Of course it’s impossible. The head and the body are one, distinguishable but inseparable. No one ever hates his own body, says the Apostle, “but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body” (Eph 5:29, 30). Let’s consult the perspective of an older author. “My love to myself is hot,” admits the Puritan George Swinnock (1627-1673) as he develops the metaphor of the body in his classic, “The Christian Man’s Calling.” Of course it is. We love ourselves.

How *tender* I am of myself under any malady! How *pitiful* towards myself in any misery! How *patient* toward myself when I discover many infirmities! My love to myself is *hearty*.¹

If this is how I view myself, then this also must be how I love the church: tenderly, full of pity, patiently, vigorously.

Bride of Christ

Second, let's consider applying the metaphor of the bride to churchless Christianity. Jesus loves His bride-wife. He shed His blood for her. He nourishes and cherishes her (Eph 5:25-33). Can one love Christ and despise His bride-wife? Can one separate Christ from His beloved? Can one love Him and ignore her? Imagine inviting a friend for dinner and urging him to leave his wife at home because, as you explain, you like him, not her; you are interested in getting to know him better but can't be bothered about her. It is unthinkable.

Remember *we* are His bride-wife. We have been loved by our husband-groom with the purity and intensity of a groom's love for his bride. "Behold, you are beautiful, my love; behold you are beautiful," Christ says to us through the voice of the groom (Song 1:15; 4:1). "You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you." "How much better is your love than wine... my dove, my perfect one" (Song 4:1, 10; 6:7).

Swinnock encourages us to ponder the magnitude of Christ's love for His bride-church, drawing from Ephesians 5:22ff and 1 Peter 2:4-11. "My Saviour's love is chaste... constant... fervent... perpetual... pure," he exclaims. Follow his adverbs:

¹ George Swinnock, "Christian Man's Calling," in *The Works of George Swinnock*, Vol. 1 (1868; Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), I:500 (my emphasis).

Oh how *industriously* did my Redeemer endeavor his church’s renovation and sanctity!
how *affectionately* doth he beseech her to be holy! how *fervently* doth he beg of
his Father to make her holy! how *willingly* did he broach his heart, and pour out
his blood to wash her from her unholiness! how *plentifully* doth he pour down his
Spirit to work her to holiness!²

The whole life and ministry of Christ was prompted by love for His bride-church:

His *birth* was that she might be born again, and born holy. His *life* was to set her a copy
of holiness; his *death* was to purchase for her a new stock of holiness. He ‘gave
himself for her, that he might redeem her from all iniquity, and purify unto
himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.’ His precepts, his prayers, his
tears, his blood, his birth, his life, his death, his resurrection, his intercession, are
*all for her holiness and purity.*³

How can we not respond to His love with our own love for that which He loves, His church? “He
who does not heartily love the church,” says another Puritan, George Hamond (1620-1705),
“does not sincerely love Christ Himself.”⁴

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² Swinnoek, “Christian Man’s Calling,” in *Works*, I:499, 500 (my emphasis).

³ *Ibid.*, 500 (my emphasis).

⁴ George Hamond, *The Case for Family Worship* (1694; Orlando: Soli Deo Gloria, 2005), 106.