



Names for the church or what's in a name?

Men have been giving their congregations and denominations a great variety of names. With so many names already taken, it has become increasingly difficult to find a new one. Congregations which once were identified by geographical location and numerical sequence no longer want to be third or tenth of such a town or street. Now many of their titles reflect some pious sentiment or theological concept. And then there's increasing popularity of the nondescript Community or People's church. Sometimes these names reflect a kind of theological indifference and an honest distancing from a denominational commitment. At other times one suspects a rather devious element of deceptive propaganda which has been perfected by some notorious sects.

What's in a name? Some popular denominations still find that frankly flying the denominational banner is remarkably helpful in attracting members. Right now this seems especially true of the Baptists. And there are those denominations who try to use their name as a claim to be the only church of Christ. Time and again groups have been formed with the hope of ending all denominations! Historically, moreover, most denominational names were intended either to describe some position or to identify a creedally committed group. A Baptist believed something about baptism. A Reformed or Lutheran church held certain views. That's what the name implied. But what happens when the Presbyterian is no longer Calvinistic, the Methodist no longer Wesleyan, and the Lutheran no longer Lutheran. See here the paradox of history. The historical sequence, i.e., the changing body comes in conflict with the ideologically permanent. The old Greek philosophers were perplexed by change and wondered when a thing was no longer what it had been. To fly a false flag, to pretend in name to be what one is not in reality shows a regrettable lack of integrity in churches and institutions. But what shall we think of using a name as a deliberate device to deceive?

What God calls His church

Man has given names to the church. Long before any such names were given, God had already described His people by giving them meaningful titles. In a variety of ways God tells the church about herself. By listening carefully to what names and titles He ascribes to her, we may come to know her true identity and privileged position. Too often both in sermon and study the descriptive appellations have been overlooked. No wonder that the modern church has such a poor image of herself!

The common biblical word for church is *ecclesia*. It means an assembly. Never does it refer in the N.T. to a building. Some theologians have suggested that we should rather use a word like "congregation" instead of the word "church." Most often *ecclesia* refers to a local group of believers either actually assembled (Acts 5:11, 1 Corinthians 11:18) or not actually gathered together (Romans 16:4, Galatians 1:2). It may be used of the whole body of believers (Ephesians 1:22, 5:23). How important it is to remember that the church is not the place, but the people!

The Bible has also many descriptive or symbolic names for the church. Scattered like gems throughout the Old and New Testament are many precious titles. In them God most often tells us about His love for the church and reveals most fully the mysteries of Christ's body. Since in the names the claims of the church are conferred, she must continue to lay claim to the names.

God often seems to prefer to speak in symbols and poetry. We prefer prose. I once heard a learned, rather liberal scholar lecture on the nature of biblical revelation. A seminary student, in asking a question, expressed his frustration with what he considered the obscure and difficult manner of biblical communication. Before he could finish his question the speaker abruptly said to

him, "Young man, I want you to know that God knew how to write the Bible better than you think! Long after your prose will be forgotten, His poetry will still be speaking."

We have trouble with symbolic names because we do not take the trouble to listen to their message. And when something of their light breaks through we do not know how to apply it to the church, our own church. This is true of well-known N.T. names like body of Christ, temple of the Holy Spirit and Jerusalem. But in general the O.T. names suffer greater neglect and misunderstanding, if not outright rejection.

The Old Testament names

Modern premillennial dispensationalism has denied the churches' claim to the language of Zion of the O.T. In so doing, this position rejects an old and well established tradition going back to the N.T. The early church from apostolic days clearly claimed to be the true successor of the "*Israel of God*" (Galatians 6:16). It was the church that was "*the people of God*," the "*holy nation*," the "*elect race*" and the "*royal priesthood*" (1 Peter 2:9, 10). The earthly Jerusalem had lost its rights and privileges. Not the Jews, but the church was the temple (2 Corinthians 6:16), and it was the believers who had come to Mt. Zion and the real Jerusalem (Hebrews 12:22). Those who say they are Jews and are not really such, may rail against the Christians but God will show them that the church is "*His beloved people*" (Revelation 3:9, New English Translation).

The early church continued the N.T. practice of claiming to be the true heir of the O.T. promises. An outstanding defender of this position was Justin Martyr. His whole *Dialogue with Trypho, the Jew* (*The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. I, pp. 194-270) seeks to establish the churches' claim to the Old Testament. Summing up his point, he writes, "*For the true spiritual Israel, and descendants of Judah, Jacob, Isaac and Abraham — are we who have been led to God through this crucified Christ, as shall be demonstrated while we proceed*" (ibid, p. 200).

The tradition of seeking light and comfort for the church in the Old Testament Zion reached new heights in Calvin and among his Scottish and Dutch followers. Especially the exclusive singing of Psalms stimulated among the Calvinistic worshippers a mysterious, theocratic sense of blessed identity with the O.T. people of God. Sometimes in those psalm-singing services, the worshippers seemed translated by the magic of the divine poetry into Zion itself. The details were all there: the gates, the streets, the praising multitude, the security, the river of life, and every blessing of the Holy City! And God Himself was there! He was their God and they were His people. As Jacob at Bethel, they were at the gate of heaven and the house of God.

New Testament names

We must claim the Old Testament names. But we also have in the New Testament a treasury of new names for the Church. Nor is it enough to know something about such titles. The great blessing comes only when the church hears her Lord call her by these precious names. Who would dare to claim to be the body of Christ, the Bride of the Lamb, or the temple of God. It is not our claim that gives us the name, but the gift of the name assures us of the claim.

God calls us *saints* (Ephesians 1:1, Philippians 1:1, etc.). The popular Roman Catholic concept of "*saint*" robs the church of this name. Nor should we add to the confusion by misunderstanding Romans 1:7. How many worshippers hear "*called to be saints*" in the minister's greeting and understand it as a kind of admonition or invitation. Does Paul mean to say that the Ephesians and Philippians are saints, but the Romans are only trying to be saints? In Romans 1:1 Paul says he was "*called to be an Apostle*." Does this mean he's trying to be or become one? In the same way called to be saints means effectually and properly called saints. And so we are saints. This means, first of all, "set aside" and "justified" in Christ. Nor should this completely exclude some moral change. Paul in Romans 8 is willing to call only those "*sons of God*" who are led by the Spirit. Or as Calvin put it, God justifies no one whom He does not also sanctify. Thus the church is such a body of justified and sanctified saints.

Even more incredible is the name "*temple*." To be considered the household of God (Ephesians 2:18) is a great honor. The name "*Temple*" is beyond comprehension. He who destroys the church, does injury to the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16). The Apostle who in another place had warned against abusing our bodies because they are temples, here issues a stern warning against those who would abuse the church. He who destroys that temple, God will destroy. "*Do you not know*," he says, meaning not so much to correct our ignorance as to rebuke our perverted contempt for God's holy temple.

The Psalmists were fascinated by the glories of the temple. Peter must have been one of the disciples who called Christ's attention to the temple's magnificent stones. Shortly after the Savior's prediction of the complete destruction of Jerusalem's temple, Peter saw a more splendid temple. It was built on an elect, precious cornerstone and made of "*living stones built into a spiritual house*" (1 Peter 2:5). Of that same living temple, Paul had affirmed an even more marvelous fact (Ephesians 2:21, 22). Not only was the church a place of worship, but more amazingly this holy temple is a habitation of God in the Spirit.

We confess a holy church. We know it is the temple of God. But do we experience it? Do we live it?

One is tempted to say many things about "*the flock*," "*the sheep*," or "*the bride*." What thoughts arise in us when we recognize the church as the "*pillar and ground of the truth*" (1 Timothy 3:15). And what problems this title presents!

The most profound, most comforting and most challenging name, however, is "*the body of Christ*." In some circles it is also the most neglected, most misunderstood and even the most abused name for the church. This title is peculiar to Paul especially in 1 Corinthians 12, Colossians 1 and Ephesians 1 and 4. For him the idea of the church as a body is a most practical teaching.

The apostle uses the concept of the body of Christ as his strongest argument for unity in the church. In 1 Corinthians 12 the harmony and cooperation of the local congregation must be maintained because all the members are members of the body. Certainly, nothing can produce such profound fellowship among the members of the church as this sympathetic feeling of being members of one body. And Paul further develops the significance of the idea of "*Christ's body*" in Ephesians 4. Here he stresses not only the importance of unity, but also the concerted effort to do everything for the "*building up of the body of Christ*." This great goal of serving the "*body of Christ*" makes meaningful and bearable the many sufferings of Paul, not only for Christ's sake, but for "*his body which is the church*" (Colossians 1:24).

No name for the church, moreover, leads us into a deeper revelation of the mystery of the church. At least twice Paul sums up the whole plan and purpose of the Sovereign God in the concept of the church as the body of Christ in Colossians 1:18 and Ephesians 1:23. Christ is the head of the body, the church, and somehow this is integrated with the grand vista of the cosmic headship of Christ. Again, the church which is His body is the fulness of Him that filleth all in all. We cannot here consider what metaphysical, mystical and often pantheistic and universalistic speculation has been developed around the idea of a continuing incarnation of Christ in the church. Roman Catholics have sometimes followed a false logic regarding the nature of the church. (For this see G. Berkhouwer *Our Conflict with Rome*.) Too often, however, we have ignored the glorious revelation in this most profound concept of the church as the body of Christ.

Our exalted Lord calls His church by many meaningful names. If we hear and understand we shall lay hold of the names. For in the names are the claims — to be His elect, His bride, His flock, His people, His temple and His body. Perhaps we have not listened to His comforting word to His "*beloved*." Hear His voice today!

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