

Descriptions of the Church

The richness and variety of the terms God uses to describe his elect people have led some to separate these terms from God's purposes. This misinterpretation leads some to propose that God, therefore, has two peoples and two separate purposes. Perhaps the most common form of this is the separation of the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Heaven, leading Dispensationalists to claim that God has a special purpose for Israel over and above the church, which is a mere stop-gap. That this is a mistake is easily proved by comparing parallel Gospel passages, which show that the terms are synonymous.¹

The richness of the diverse terms for the church are intended to show the great variety of the blessings that God has conferred upon his chosen people. Each term reveals a special aspect of the relationship between the Lord and his people. It is worth considering some of these terms. I will restrict my exposition to simple notes and concise explanations.

Formal titles

The Church

On this rock I will build my church (*ekklesia*), and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.
Matt 16:18

The *ekklesia* is a body of people called out according to God's purpose. This word emphasises that the elect are drawn by God and not by any free-will choice of their own; they are a 'called-out people', called to represent God's authority on Earth. In just the same way Greek citizens were called out as the city's representatives in local government (which is the derivation of the word *ekklesia*).

The elect

Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? *It is* God who justifies. Rm 8:33

'Elect' means 'chosen; it refers to the fact that God selected those who would be his people from eternity, with no cognisance of anything they would do in the future. It was not a choice based upon future human ability but entirely upon God's good pleasure (Eph 1:5). A true believer can rest assured that the Lord of Glory chose him in his divine wisdom and sovereignty, and nothing can threaten his divine protection.

The body of Christ

So we, *being* many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Rm 12:5

Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. 1 Cor 12:27

The church is the body of Christ. He is the Head, but the elect are his body, his representatives on Earth. This emphasises the union of Christ with his people. They are not simply a formal company of those favoured by God, they have been brought into intimate, family relationship with Christ himself; unified with Him by baptism in the Spirit and a new creation. Believers are not human, but supra-human; they have been changed through regeneration, glorified by a divine work which enables them to sit with Christ in heavenly

¹ Dispensationalism teaches that The kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God are different; the former is earthly, political and Davidic, (Jewish); the latter is spiritual, God's world-wide kingdom. Matt 21:43 explains that the kingdom was taken from the Jews and superseded by the New Covenant church (Lk 12:32; 1 Pt 2:9). Parallel passages showing that there is one kingdom include: Matt 11:12-13 with Lk 16:16; Matt 10:7 with Lk 9:2; Matt 4:12,17 with Mk 1:14-15. In Matt 19:23 Jesus uses both terms interchangeably.

places. The reality of this, in practical terms, is seen in that persecution of the church is an attack upon Christ himself (Acts 9:1-5).

The kingdom of God

These *are my* only fellow workers for the kingdom of God. Col 4:11

That you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer. 2 Thess 1:5

The church is God's kingdom, or reign, on Earth. The kingdom is the place where the king is served, worshipped and obeyed. Thus the 'kingdom' is the church viewed from the aspect of service and obedience. It also refers to the delegated authority of the church as God's ambassador. The church has authority to bind and to loose, referring to the admission and expulsion of people from the local church. The word of the Lord is to be obeyed and those who refuse to obey the words of the King must be disciplined. The church is authorised to do this as the kingdom.

[Note: Matthew, writing to convince Jews, prefers the term 'kingdom of heaven', using it over 30 times; although he occasionally uses 'kingdom of God' also. It is not used by other Bible writers.]

Children of God

For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. Gal 3:26 (AV)

Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. Eph 5:1

The elect are not only children, but also 'dear children'; the beloved of God. Saints are begotten by God and brought into God's family in Christ and as such they have the nature of their Father (Jn 3:6; 2 Pt 1:4). As in human families, God's children are all different, having various gifts, functions and states of maturity.

As dear children, they are not only beloved by their Father, but they also love God from the heart. They also love their mother, which is the church (Gal 4:26). True children seek to obey their father, as Christians obey God, seeking always to please him. Thus they are jealous for their Father's name, being stirred up against reproaches made by men against God.

The true child loves to be in his father's house, seeking his glory (Ps 27:4) and will strive to emulate him, walking in his ways and listening to his wisdom.

Heirs of God

And if children, then heirs -- heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. Rm 8:17

Christ is the Firstborn of God and as such inherits the divine blessings. By our inclusion in Christ we share in this inheritance, having blessings and authority in the Son. In God's original instructions to man, the firstborn was the priest until the Levites were chosen to represent men; thus saints are priests to God. The firstborn was also the chosen heir and authority in the family after the father; in kingly dynasties the firstborn was the next king - saints are kings and priests for God. Thus the church is a royal priesthood (1 Pt 2:9; Rev 5:10).

The firstborn had special clothing to distinguish his authority, thus saints are clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

Buildings & Places

The temple of God

Do you not know that you are the temple of God and *that* the Spirit of God dwells in you? 1 Cor 3:16

For you are the temple of the living God. 2 Cor 6:16

The temple is the place where God dwells. He no longer dwells in temples made of stone, but lives within the hearts of his people. The whole Trinity is stated to dwell in a believer's heart (Eph 3:17; 1 Pt 3:15; Gal 4:16), and this is why the church is God's temple.

The city of God

You are ... a city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Matt 5:14

And they shall call them The Holy People, the Redeemed of the LORD; and you shall be called Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken. Isa 62:12

This represents the place where God not only dwells but governs. There are many subsidiary types within the framework of 'the city' which speak of God's decrees, such as:

- It is built for a purpose. Matt 16:18; Eph 2:22.
- A city is often built on a hill for defence. Matt 5:14.
- It has foundations (established firmly – the doctrines of grace, the word of God, the work of Christ). Isa 28:16; Eph 2:20; 2 Tim 2:19.
- Walls (protection, deliverance, eternal security). Isa 26:1.
- Gates (controlled entrance - calling). Rev 22:14; Jn 10:7, 9, 14:6.
- Ramparts (specific protection – spiritual warfare and God's defence of his people; places to attack intruders). Ps 48:12-14; Isa 33:20.
- Despite its protections, a city is besieged and attacked. Isa 1:8.
- The city is the habitation of God as king (Ps 9:11, 76:1-3 132:13-14; Isa 8:18;), comprised of many sorts of buildings and materials joined together. Eph 2:19-22; 1 Pt 2:5; Ps 72:3.
- It is a place where the law of the king governs all and where there are subordinate leaders with delegated authority (regarding the local church = elders).
- All major historic cities were situated by a river by which means goods were brought in and exported (the enabling of the Holy Spirit). Ps 46:4.
- Those within are citizens with certain privileges. Isa 33:24.

Clearly a great deal could be discussed regarding this aspect of the church and significant parts of scripture are devoted to this theme (e.g. Revelation).

Zion & Jerusalem

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels. Heb 12:22

Jerusalem is a type of the dwelling place of God as a city and Zion is the part of that city upon which the temple is built, the specific inhabitation of God. Jerusalem is the city of the Lord and Zion the hill of the Lord. The church is both the city and the temple mount in just the same way as the Lord dwells in our person, but specifically in our heart.

Jerusalem was also the dwelling of the king and his government, God's delegated ruler in Israel's theocracy. Thus Jerusalem stands for God's political government on earth; his sovereignty. The temple was only free for priests in the inner areas and stands for God's

religious authority; the place of atonement and redemption, and also the place of his word. The church is represented in both these areas as kings and priests [see 'Relationships'.]

'Zion' is sometimes used as a paraphrase for the city of God (Ps 48:2).

People & Relationships

A virgin

For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present *you as a chaste virgin* to Christ. 2 Cor 11:2

A virgin is pure and not defiled. When betrothed to a husband she is greatly beloved and protected. Then the virgin longs for the day of her marriage, as the church longs for the return of Christ and the marriage feast of the Lamb. In this period she prizes every token of love from her betrothed.

A wife

For your Maker *is* your husband, The LORD of hosts *is* His name. Isa 54:5

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues came to me and talked with me, saying, 'Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb's wife.' Rev 21:9

The prime symbolism here is the intimate and complete union between the church and Christ (Hosea 2:19-20). Whole books are given to this theme (Song of Songs) and important didactic chapters (Eph 5). The church is the fulness of the promise given to the remnant of Israel, in Isa 62:4-5, that it would become *beulah* (married). As such it is 'one flesh' with Christ.

The foundation of this is the marriage covenant. God covenanted with Christ to secure a people to be his bride, and the outcome of this divine purpose is a covenant in grace, in time, with Christ's people. The beginning of God's work in producing the church is a covenant, made most clear in the Abrahamic Covenant and fulfilled in the New Covenant.

There are many fruitful lines of examination of the typology of marriage. For instance: the wife gives herself completely and obediently to her husband, while the husband sacrifices his life for his wife. The faithful wife keeps clear of other men. A wife seeks to please her husband. The wife has legal rights in her husband's estate. The loss of intimacy with her husband causes her great concern. The debts of the wife fall upon the husband. A wife of a king is raised to aristocratic honour. The wife of a rich man is freed from worry and care (2 Cor 8:9; 1 Pt 5:7). The wife bears fruit of children and nurtures them. The wife knows what is in her husband's mind (Ps 25:14; 1 Cor 2:9-10).

This type is a very important illustration of the church in relationship with God.

A dynastic house

... but Christ as a Son over His own house, whose house we are if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end. Heb 3:6

Christians are the house, or lineage, of Christ. As kings form dynasties, so Christ has a people who are his lineage. The church is descended from Christ, born from him by his Spirit.

The household of God

I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. 1 Tim 3:15

You only have I known of all the families of the earth. Amos 3:2

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith. Gal 6:10

Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. Eph 2:19

This is an affirmation that the church is part of God's family; something often overlooked by some teachers who affirm more formal aspects of the church. The elect are those within the confines of God's house; those related to him by blood since they are in Christ. 'Household' is not talking about lineage or ancestry, but is an intimate word. It refers to domestic issues, blood relatives, family matters, kindred. The church is the company of elect people chosen by God to be his family; as such local church gatherings ought to be expressions of family life and not formally organised, regimented, driven and dominated by men.

An army or soldier

Who is she who looks forth as the morning ... awesome as *an army* with banners? Song 6:10

Yet I considered it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker, and fellow soldier. Phil 2:25

The church has to constantly fight a battle against the world, the flesh and the devil. A great many spiritual parallels can be drawn from the illustration of a soldier. A few include: the saint must leave all worldly affairs and preoccupations to serve his commander (2 Tim 2:4). A saint is prepared and trained for warfare and given the right armour (Eph 6). Saints put off their old clothes and are fitted in this armour. Soldiers don't fight for money, like mercenaries, but for a kingly purpose; they do not please themselves but others. A saint must endure hardness and privation in serving his Captain. A soldier-saint does not spare the enemy (1 Sam 15:3) but overcomes heresy, sin and temptation (Rm 8:13).

Kings

And have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth. Rev 5:10

Kings are descended from kings of royal line as saints are born from above. They have a crown (2 Tim 4:18; Rev 2:10). They exercise authority over the world in the service of the kingdom. They are also engaged in warfare to preserve the kingdom from enemies.

Priests

But you *are* a chosen generation, a royal priesthood. 1 Pt 2:9

And have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth. Rev 5:10

Priests are set apart to serve God. Only a priest is able to minister unto the Lord, and so the elect are formally made priests (Ps 4:3). Their ordination involves washing, anointing and re-clothing. Part of serving God is ministering to God's people, thus priests teach God's word. Priests were called to approach God when other men could not; only priests entered the sanctuary. As priests, so the saints offer up spiritual sacrifices to praise and honour God.

Lights

The moon

Who is she who looks forth as the morning, fair as the moon ...? Song 6:10

This speaks of the church as the reflection of the sun's light, a place of brightness and shining – i.e. the testimony of Jesus. The moon only shines in the night, as the church

serves God in this dark world, giving light to reveal Christ to sinners in darkness. The moon also waxes and wanes, has times of great brightness and comparative dullness; just as the church has periods when the glory of God shines brightly (e.g. the Reformation) and, at others, struggles in persecution, being hidden away from view. [See 'stars' below.]

Light

You are the light of the world. Matt 5:14

Christians are light in the Lord (not in or of themselves). This speaks of the testimony of the elect through the work of the Spirit in them bringing them the life of Christ. The whole point of the church is to witness to God's glory; to shed abroad the light of God. Light speaks of truth and life – the characteristics of Christ. Believers bring these things into the world as a testimony to the work of God.

Light uncovers darkness and exposes the true nature of things. It directs men in the way to go; without light they stumble. Light helps to dispel fear while darkness causes fear. The truth can never hurt us but lies can.

Stars

That you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world. Phil 2:15

'Lights' is the Greek word *phoster*, which is also used of the stars and the moon. The righteousness and spirituality of believers shines in a dark world like stars in a black sky.

A golden lampstand

Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands ... The seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches. Rev 1:12, 20

Again the principle symbol is the giving forth of light in surrounding darkness. But there is also the symbol of gold, meaning the glorious, pure life of God.

Plants

A garden

A garden enclosed /s my sister, my spouse, a spring shut up, a fountain sealed. ... Awake, O north wind, and come, O south! Blow upon my garden, that its spices may flow out. Let my beloved come to his garden and eat its pleasant fruits. ... I have come to my garden, my sister, my spouse.
Song 4:12, 16, 5:1

A garden is a natural place that has been separated out for special care, attention and cultivation, to suit the purposes of a landowner. It is both a place of beauty for his joy, and fruitfulness for his needs. There are flowers to gaze upon, herbs for culinary use and fragrance while walking, plus fruit, vegetables and other useful items (such as timber, canes, compost, water etc.).

A garden is barren before it is cultivated and wasteland. The plants in a garden are sowed from seed and do not arise naturally, which requires great preparation and care by the cultivator. In the same way our hearts are prepared by God for the planting of his word, being dug up by the work of the Spirit. Important gardens are fenced or walled in for protection, as the church is made secure and hedged round (Job 1:10).

A garden is a place where weeds are quickly removed, just as the church is obligated to remove all heresy and heretics from her midst. Equally, God the Gardener ensures that the weeds of the flesh are removed from our hearts. The Gardener loves his garden, the work

of his own hands, and is not preoccupied with barren, wild land – even though he owns it (Isa 43:3-4).

A garden must be continually watered and protected from the elements; as the Spirit feeds and nurtures the church. Pests must also be controlled; as sin must be eliminated from the elect. As a plant may seem green and fruitful, but if it is infested with larvae within it will wither and die, producing no fruit. So some superficial churchgoers appear to have life, but the cancer of sin was never removed and they show their true fruitless colours in time. As the garden blossoms, the Gardener will cut off certain choice, ripe flowers for his own use. When believers are mature, God takes them to himself in heaven. The death of a believer is a harvesting of fruitfulness. Though others may think that a certain plucked flower was too green or not ready, the Gardener knows what he wants and does his will for his purposes.

Gardens need lots of sun and warmth, but also morning dew, cold rain and wind for seed-dispersal, pollination and growth. Winter snow and frosts are also necessary to kill pests. The result is a fragrant scent that is pleasing to the Gardener. The church is always being nurtured, even when life seems cold, hard and difficult winds blow. All are vital to maturity, the blessings of the sun and the disciplines of the wind and rain.

The garden is a place full of resurrection. After bitter winters of death, life springs up again and plants regenerate from hibernation.

An olive tree

His branches shall spread; His beauty shall be like an olive tree, and his fragrance like Lebanon.

Hosea 14:6

You were cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree. Rm 11:24

As an olive tree is always green, full of life and sap in the branches, so the church is always flourishing and bearing fruit as a result of the life of Christ flowing within it. The fruit is plentiful and useful for healing as well as making fuel for lamps to burn. When Paul teaches on election in Romans 11, he uses the illustration of the olive tree. An olive tree branch is also used to represent peace, as the church is a place of peace and reconciliation. Noah's dove brought an olive branch only after the waters of divine wrath were abated.

A vine

You have brought a vine out of Egypt; you have cast out the nations, and planted it. ... Return, we beseech you, O God of hosts; look down from heaven and see, and visit this vine. Ps 80:8, 14

Again the vine, like the olive tree, is full of sap in the branches. It grows quickly and spreads rapidly producing much fruit, which results in wine that brings joy. It also requires consistent pruning by the vine-dresser and needs propping up as it is weak on its own. All these things speak of the church.

A vineyard

And the vineyard which your right hand has planted, and the branch *that* you made strong for yourself. Ps 80:15

Now let me sing to my well-beloved a song of my Beloved regarding His vineyard: My well-beloved has a vineyard on a very fruitful hill. ... For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts *is* the house of Israel.

Isa 5:1, 7

A vineyard is formed when a farmer stakes out a place in the wilderness and nurtures it. It is then fenced for protection from animals and continually guarded from thieves. It is then planted with precious seeds and cared for with great pains, including much watering and

the removal of stones. Vineyards not only grew vines, but also fig trees, fruit trees and pomegranates. The church is the planting of the Lord producing a wide variety of fruitful plants.

Animals

A dove

Oh, do not deliver the life of your turtledove to the wild beast! Do not forget the life of your poor forever. Ps 74:19

O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the secret *places* of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice *is* sweet, and your face *is* lovely. Song 2:14

The dove is meek and innocent, making a nest in the rocks. Her safety is in the place of her dwelling – hidden in the Rock. It doesn't feed on carrion but only on pure grain. Though much attacked, it has no means of self-defence; it is also true to her mate. Doves have beautiful eyes, fixed on their mates as Christians have a single eye fixed on Christ. Doves also gather together in flocks and are very fruitful birds, having young in most months. They also love to be led to water. Doves were the only birds appointed by God to be used as offerings under the law.

The flock of God; 'my sheep'

My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. Jn 10:27

Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Lk 12:32

The church is owned by God and represents something of value to him; it is his flock. He is the great shepherd of the sheep and he ensures that the true flock is led, guarded, nurtured, fed and protected from wolves.

Sheep cannot defend themselves but need a protector, the shepherd; they are very dependant creatures that have many enemies. They are patient and eke out a living from poor conditions. Like the dove, they are harmless animals and keep together in flocks rather than pursue an individual course. They are not crafty like foxes or ravenous like wolves. Sheep are very fruitful in many ways, both in life and death; they multiply quickly, and provide both food and clothing. A man with many sheep was considered rich, so valuable are sheep.

Sheep are generally obedient to the shepherd and follow him in trust. Eastern flocks followed their shepherd, and are thus a good illustration of the elect. The eastern shepherd also became the door of the sheepfold in the wild, when he made a temporary thorn fence at night, sleeping in the gap.

The weakness of sheep, in succumbing to various diseases, ensures that the good shepherd takes great care of them. In the same way Jesus, our Good Shepherd, enables us to overcome temptation and sin. He will also take care that we are not driven too hard or too long, thus our temptations have limits (1 Cor 10:13). Sheep tend to wander without control as saints can be distracted, go astray or be deceived to follow wrong ideas. However, a good shepherd never loses any of his sheep, as Christ will not lose any elect person (Jn 10:28).

Sheep need leading into good pasture and can suffer if they eat in meadows. So Jesus leads his people in the paths of righteousness, giving the church wholesome food (Ps 23). Sheep also attract dirt and require washing for their own good.

Similes

There are a great many similes used of the church to illustrate other characteristics, and these can be studied to great profit. However, the church isn't specifically called by these names, but are likened to them. For instance,

The church is like a lily

Like a lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters. Song 2:2

A lily is both sweet and fragrant, with evocative power. Its whiteness is very striking, it is a tall plant and it is very fruitful. Its beauty is so noticeable that it is frequently the basis of bouquets.

The church is like a merchant ship

She is like the merchant ships, she brings her food from afar. Prov 31:14

These ships trade from far away places, bringing great treasures from many nations with them as cargo. They require a skilled pilot to lead them safely; they are also tossed about by winds and storms and threatened by pirates, yet survive (Isa 54:11).

The church is like a runner

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. 1 Cor 9:24

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us. Heb 12:1

The athlete competes for a specific reason and strains to keep fit; his life is very disciplined and controlled, he does not give way to worldly appetites and entertainment. He runs for a hope – to win the prize of his calling. The athlete is also under constant gaze of outsiders. These and many other features illustrate aspects of the Christian life.

The church is like a merchant

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it. Matt 13:45-46

The elect are like a merchant who deals with precious stones but finds the greatest pearl. Realising its value, he gets rid of everything he has in order to obtain the land rights in order to own the pearl. Finding Jesus as the pearl of great price, the treasure above all treasures, believers lose all in order to gain Christ. [It should, however, be noted that some expositors turn this round and see the merchant as Christ who was prepared to lose everything in order to gain the church.] The point is sacrificing the minor thing to obtain the most important.

The church is like an infant

As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby. 1 Pt 2:2

An infant is born and has the same nature as his Father. He is a partaker of the family he is born into. His greatest need is his mother's milk that he may grow strong. He is also carried and cared for until he is old enough to fend for himself. Infants are weak in knowledge and understanding until they have learned from their parent's. The education of an infant is very important to establish character. Infants also need the discipline of their father for correction.

The church is like salt

You are the salt of the earth. Matt 5:13

Salt brings life and freshness. It is also a preservative keeping meat safe for a long time from decay. It adds favour to any food and enhances eating. It is used for cleansing. It stirs up a thirst for water.

The church is what keeps the world from destruction now. God's purposes with the world are only to bring forth the elect throughout history; when the last elect person is converted, the world is destroyed. As salt keeps meat edible, so the church is keeping the world alive at this time.

The righteous flourish like a palm tree, cedars or wheat.

The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree, he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon. Those who are planted in the house of the LORD shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bear fruit in old age; they shall be fresh and flourishing. Ps 92:12-14

The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way ... He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked *one*. Matt 13:24-25, 37-38

In general the symbolism is of being planted with a purpose and growing to maturity for fruitfulness. The branches of palm trees shoot upwards and do not grow out at the sides, thus offering protection from the sun like an umbrella. They grow by water and like good quality soil, just like believers (Ps 1:3). The young palm plant is feeble on its own, thus several were planted to support each other. They are evergreen and do not shed their leaves (symbolising eternal life). They are full of sweet fruit (dates). They also grow well under pressure.

Palm branches were a sign of victory and rejoicing; the church is the sign of God's victory and successful plan. Palm branches are not only mentioned in Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem (the historical scene of Christ's victory), but also the heavenly redeemed company of 144,000 (the fulness of the covenant) have palm branches in their hands (Rev 7:9) in the consummation of victory.

Saints are likened to many trees for their fruitfulness, strength and value: myrtle tree, willow trees, or growing tall like a cedar. Cedars have deep roots and grow high, but are also free from decay; blocks of cedar in a wardrobe drive away insects. It is a choice wood to build houses with. Myrtle trees were prized for their beauty and fragrance by the Romans, being used for ornamental purposes as well as for fruit (oil and wine). Willows grow near water and will not survive unless close to a river; thus they thrive in drought when other trees fade.

Wheat is an important grain and the staff of life. Saints are God's choice people. It is a profitable grain and survives the worst winters. Its appearance in the spring is like a resurrection from a small, dead seed, just as the church. Wheat needs care and weeding or its growth is hindered; it also needs a long time to ripen. Then it requires threshing to separate corn from chaff, just as saints need separating from sin and the world.

Much more could be added, but the value of the illustration has been ascertained.

The righteous are bold as lions

The righteous are bold as a lion. Prov 28:1

And the remnant of Jacob shall be among the Gentiles, in the midst of many peoples, like a lion among the beasts of the forest, like a young lion among flocks of sheep, who, if he passes through, both treads down and tears in pieces, and none can deliver. Mic 5:8

The lion is the king of beasts, mammal royalty, and is thus an appropriate symbol for God's princes. Lions are fierce and fearless, as Christians are meant to be courageous in battle, zealous for the truth and prepared to contend for it. Lions are conquerors, the church is more than a conqueror in Christ. Others are afraid of lions as Herod was afraid of John the Baptist, even when in prison. Lions are strong; the champion of the elect is Jesus as the Lion of Judah.

The church is like an eagle

But those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles. Isa 40:31

The eagle is the king of birds fearing no predator. It is a noble bird. Saints are also privileged to be esteemed by God above all. They are called 'the excellent' (Ps 16:2-3; Prov 12:26). Eagles have penetrating vision and see from afar, as saints see the glory of God and know his secrets (Ps 25:14). They are swift in flight as saints that fly at the master's bidding; thus the early church spread very rapidly. Eagles inhabit the heights of the mountains and dominate the aerial regions. The church inhabits heaven, being seated with Christ, and fellowships with God in spiritual places. The eagle's nest is on high as saints dwell in God. Eagles renew their strength to fly by changing and cleaning their feathers; thus saints also renew their strength as they put on the new nature. In the new man, saints feed on God's faithfulness and receive power.

The church is pure as gold and silver.

When He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold. Job 23:10

For you, O God, have tested us; you have refined us as silver is refined. Ps 66:10

Gold is the most precious metal, silver is the second most precious metal (in the ancient world). Both are carefully and painstakingly refined by being heated up and separated from dross. They are then beaten into fine sheets or moulded into blocks for use. Both gold and silver are pliant and do not tarnish easily. Vessels and useful objects can be made from both, as well as their use for ornaments, coins and jewellery settings. The owner keeps great care of his gold and silver.

Saints are like stewards

As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. 1 Pt 4:10

Saints have authority over God's house. As God has given them gifts and a function, they are to serve God, and their church generally, in that capacity with faithfulness. All a steward has is given him by his master, nothing is his property; so saints only live with what God has given them. Even their children are gifts on loan for a short period of time. Stewards must disperse the master's gifts under his specific instructions and must not appropriate wrong authority to themselves. Stewards are also expected to improve the master's estate; not only by their practical work but by careful investment. So, the talents given by God to the church must be carefully invested (Matt 25).

The chief symbol here is that the steward is careful for the affairs of his master and not for himself. He will give an account for this, as believers do on the Last Day. Woe betides an unfaithful steward.

Saints are like jewels of God.

'They shall be mine,' says the LORD of hosts, 'On the day that I make them my jewels.' Mal 3:17

Jewels are precious stones that have been cut and trimmed to reflect the light perfectly by a master craftsman. Thus they have great value and are rare items, greatly beloved by the owner. The best jewels take a long time to cut.

Saints are like building blocks

Coming to Him *as to* a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God *and* precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house. 1 Pt 2:4-5

God is building with his people; but first he must shape them to fit according to his plan for his temple. This requires cutting, sawing, hacking, filing and splitting in the quarry, which is what is going on now on this earth. The sound of hammers and tools is not heard in the temple precincts, but the stones are perfectly chiselled to slot into place when taken to the temple (1 Kg 5:17, 6:7). Today is the time of our being changed from rough-hewn blocks into the perfect shape for our place as God's dwelling in heaven. Teaching ministry is used by God in this (Hos 6:5).

Today is the time of our perfecting. God is training us to be exactly what he desires in the new world to fellowship with him and serve his eternal purposes. Now is the time for our preparation. Nothing that happens to us is a mistake, but a means of securing essential character changes that prepare us for heavenly ministry.

We do not expound these in any further detail but leave them for your personal consideration.

Conclusion

While there may be many more illusions to the church (and some folk draw out numerous types on very flimsy evidence), the above is sufficient to make our point. God cares about his chosen people and provides for their every eventuality. The blessings and favours God gives to the church are innumerable; thus the need for a manifold testimony of this in the many diverse representations of the church in symbol, type, poetry and teaching.

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