
Introduction

The study of ecclesiology often deals with the institutional, external aspects of the church. Less attention has been given to the nature or essence of the church. One approach many have found helpful in studying the essential nature of the church is by way of the images employed in reference to it.¹ Paul Minear demonstrated the value of this approach in regard to the New Testament in his impressive and influential compilation, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*.² Less attention,

1. This Introduction is adapted from a lecture I gave titled “Images of the Church in Early Christian Literature,” which was published in Everett Ferguson, *The Early Church at Work and Worship*, vol. 1, *Ministry, Ordination, Covenant, and Canon* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 1–14. This introduction forms part of my article, “Community and Worship,” in D. Jeffrey Bingham, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Early Christian Thought* (London: Routledge, 2010), 313–30.
2. Paul Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960). I covered the images used for the church in the New Testament in my book *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), chap. 2. H. Rikhof, *The Concept of the Church: A Methodological Inquiry into the Use of Metaphor in Ecclesiology* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1981), and Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1987), examined imagery in contemporary theological discussion of the church.

however, has been given to the use of images for the church in Christian writers of the early centuries after the New Testament. For example, Thomas Halton's collection of sources, *The Church*,³ for the series Message of the Fathers of the Church (volume 4) gives only 10 out of 234 pages to the images of the church, noting the church as sheepfold, as edifice, as mother, as bride of Christ, and as the sheet let down from heaven in Peter's vision (Acts 10:9–16). Or again, E. Glenn Hinson in his nearly contemporary collection of sources, *Understandings of the Church*,⁴ for the series Sources of Early Christian Thought, the predecessor of the present volume, gives no explicit treatment of images for the church.

While there have been studies devoted to the doctrine of the church in the early centuries,⁵ some of which discuss images of the church,⁶ the major contribution to the study of imagery for the church in early Christian literature is F. Ledegang, *Mysterium Ecclesiae: Images of the Church and its Members in Origen*,⁷ a massive work of nearly seven hundred pages. Ledegang's comprehensive study groups the scores of images and related terminology in the writings of Origen (185–251) with its parallels in early Christian literature into six categories: body of Christ, bride of Christ, family, house and

3. Thomas Halton, *The Church, Message of the Fathers of the Church* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1985).
4. E. Glenn Hinson, *Understandings of the Church, Sources of Early Christian Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).
5. Gustav Bardy wrote *La théologie de l'Église de Clément de Rom au saint Irénée* (Paris: Cerf, 1945) and *La théologie de l'Église de saint Irénée au concile de Nicée* (Paris: Cerf, 1947). Ladislas Spikowski had earlier written his doctoral dissertation titled *La doctrine de l'Église dans Saint Irénée* (Strasbourg: Université de Strasbourg, 1926).
6. Hugo Rahner, *Symbole der Kirche: Die Ekklesiologie der Väter* (Salzburg: Otto Müller, 1964). David Rankin (*Tertullian and the Church* [Cambridge University Press, 1995]) devoted twenty-six pages to "Tertullian's ecclesiastical images," and G. G. Christo wrote a dissertation titled *The Church's Identity Established through Images according to Saint John Chrysostom* (Rolli, NH: Orthodox Research Institute, 2006).
7. F. Ledegang, *Mysterium Ecclesiae: Images of the Church and its Members in Origen* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2001).

sanctuary, people of God, and “the earth and all that is in it.” I will take Ledegang’s six categories as the framework for my further introductory remarks. For the most part, I will take those images with a basis in the New Testament but then note an additional one.

What is immediately evident in these images for the church is that they all emphasize the *communal* aspect of Christian faith and life. This communal emphasis stands in contrast to the individualistic approach of so many of the expressions of Christianity in the modern Western world. Most of these images are rooted in biblical usage. They furthermore testify not only to the importance of the church in Christian thought but also to the relation of the church to key theological concepts.

Body of Christ

Paul’s image of the church as the body of Christ has remained popular throughout Christian history. He used the analogy to emphasize unity along with diversity in Christian congregations in Rom 12:4–8 and especially 1 Cor 12:12–27, where Christ is the whole body and Christians are members of him. The imagery shifts in the later epistles, where in Col 1:18 Christ is the head of the body in the sense of origin or source of the whole church, and in Eph 1:21–23 Christ is the head of the body in the sense of authority over the universal church.

The use of the imagery of the church as the body of Christ occurs early in Christian literature outside the New Testament. One of the earliest noncanonical Christian writings (perhaps 96 CE), the letter of the “church of God in Rome to the church of God in Corinth,” rightly it seems ascribed to Clement of Rome and now known as *1 Clement*, clearly alludes to 1 Cor 12:14–26

in its appeal for unity in the church at Corinth, once again troubled with division.⁸

The homily we know as *2 Clement* (early to mid-second century), wrongly ascribed to Clement of Rome, employed the language of the church as the body of Christ in order to affirm the preexistence of the church. As Christ is preexistent, so is his body. In stressing the close identification of the church with Christ, the author takes the body as the equivalent of the flesh of Christ. The result is an implicit argument against a docetic/gnostic disparagement of the flesh.⁹ Hermas, a prophet in the first half of the second century in Rome, similarly says that the church was created first of all things.¹⁰

Clement of Alexandria (d. c. 215) also made use of the body imagery for the church. In commenting on Ps 19:4–6, he quotes some who say that the “Lord’s tabernacle is his body,” but others say, “it is the church of the faithful.”¹¹ Instead of moving from Christ to the church, as did *2 Clement*, Clement of Alexandria uses this imagery of the church as the body of Christ to reason back to the nature of Christ. He alludes to 1 Cor 12:12 with the words, “As a human being consisting of many members . . . is a combination of two—a body of faith and a soul of hope—so the Lord is of flesh and blood.”¹² In an extended commentary on 1 Corinthians 6, Clement applies the language of body to the church; with special reference to verse 13 he says,

The church of the Lord is figuratively speaking a body, the spiritual and holy chorus. Those who have been only called these things, but do not live according to the word, are fleshly. “But

8. *1 Clem.* 37.5.

9. *2 Clem.* 14.2–4.

10. *Herm. Vis.* 2.4 [8].

11. Clement of Alexandria, *Prophetic Eclogues* 56.

12. Clement of Alexandria, *Instructor* 1.6.42.

this spiritual body,” that is the holy church, “is not for fornication.”¹³ It is not fitting in any manner, however little, to abandon the gospel for the pagan life.¹⁴

Here like *2 Clement* as well as other authors, for Clement of Alexandria the church as the body of Christ has important implications for the manner of life of its members.

Origen made extensive use of the body imagery for the church. He picked up on the universal use of the image of the church as the body of Christ in the later Pauline letters but blended it with the language of Paul’s earlier use for individual members. Like Clement of Alexandria before him, Origen uses this imagery of the body of Christ to reason back to the nature of Christ. In the context of our quotation in the section on Origen from *Against Celsus* 6.48, Origen uses the analogy of the church to a body, animated by a soul, to support the union of the soul of Jesus, perfect man, with the eternal Word, Son of God; but he is drawing on 1 Cor 12:12 and 27 and Rom 12:4–5.

Paul’s image of the church as body of Christ must have worked itself into the Christian consciousness for it to be used so early, not only for a similar purpose as Paul’s in *1 Clement*’s call to unity, but also for such different purposes from Paul’s as to argue for the nature of Christ (Clement of Alexandria and Origen) and for the preexistence of the church (*2 Clement*) as well as against sexual immorality (*2 Clement* and Clement of Alexandria).

Bride of Christ

Another picture of the close, intimate relationship of the church to Christ given by Paul is that of the bride of Christ.

13. An allusion to 1 Cor 6:13.

14. Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 7.14.87.3. Cf. *Instructor* 1.5.22, “Believers are members of Christ.”

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This image has Old Testament precedent of God as a husband to Israel.¹⁵ Paul employed the bridal imagery to stress the church's purity.¹⁶ The seer John used bridal imagery to express the expectation of the eschatological consummation of the church's union with Christ.¹⁷ The bride is a corporate image, but as we'll see, some made it a personal image for an individual soul.

Clement of Alexandria applied the purity of the bride to the church avoiding heresies. He interpreted Rom 7:2, 4, to mean Christians belong to Christ as "bride and church, which must be pure both from inner thoughts contrary to the truth and from outward temptations," which he identifies as heresies.¹⁸

Tertullian (c. 160–220) stressed that the church as a bride comes to Christ as a virgin. Against the proclamation by a bishop (whether in Rome or in Carthage is not clear) of forgiveness for the sins of adultery and fornication, the rigorist Tertullian, who considered these sins unforgiveable by the church, protested, "The church is a virgin! Far from Christ's betrothed be such a proclamation."¹⁹ On the church as a virgin, note also *On Modesty* 18.11 and *On Monogamy* 11.2, "virgin church betrothed to the one Christ," and *Against Marcion* 5.12.6. The church as bride of Christ occurs in other passages as well.²⁰

Origen applied the imagery of the bride to the church in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. He connected the language of body with that of a bride. Commenting on Paul's words, "Our bodies are members of Christ," he explained, "for when he says 'our bodies,' he shows that these bodies are the body of the bride; but when he mentions the 'members of Christ,'

15. Jer 2:2; Ezek 16:8–14; Hos 2:1–3:1.

16. 2 Cor 11:2.

17. Rev 19:7–8; 21:2, 9.

18. Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 3.12.80.

19. Tertullian, *On Modesty* 1.8.

20. Tertullian, *On Monogamy* 5.7 and *Against Marcion* 4.11.8; 5.18.9.

he indicates that these same bodies are the body of the Bridegroom.”²¹ The words addressed by the Bridegroom to the bride in Song of Songs, Origen says, are “words spoken by Christ to the church.”²² They “can be understood as spoken of this present age, for even now the church is fair when she is near to Christ and imitates Christ.”²³ Origen anticipated later individualistic spirituality in also applying the bridal imagery to the individual soul, but it should be noted that for Origen the individual soul does not establish a bridal relationship in her own right apart from the church. The soul becomes bride only as it enters into the church’s bridal relationship to Christ. The same could be said for others who make the same move to the individual soul. Origen writes: “The blessed soul burns and is aflame and sings that marriage song through the Spirit by which the church is joined to her heavenly spouse, Christ.”²⁴

The bridal imagery was especially used to emphasize the purity of the church. Methodius (d. c. 311) was a critic of Origen on some points of doctrine, but he shared with him the image of church as bride. In his *Symposium*, or the *Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, Methodius says that those who embrace the truth and are delivered from the evils of the flesh become “a church and help-meet of Christ, betrothed and given in marriage to him as a virgin, according to the apostle.”²⁵

Mother

The most important aspect of family imagery for the church in early Christianity was that of the mother. The image of the church as mother was one of the most popular in early

21. Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 3.2 on 1:16.

22. *Ibid.*, 3.15 on 2:13–14.

23. *Ibid.*, 3.1 on 1:15.

24. *Ibid.*, prologue 2.

25. Methodius, *Banquet of the Ten Virgins* 3.8.74; cf. 2 Cor 11:2.

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Christianity, for which there is a comprehensive study by Joseph C. Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesia: An Inquiry into the Concept of the Church as Mother in Early Christianity*.²⁶

This image of the church is not so prominent in the New Testament, but there are anticipations of it. Paul in his allegory of Hagar and Sarah says Sarah “corresponds to the Jerusalem above; . . . she is our mother.”²⁷ The book of Revelation’s vision in chapter 12 of the woman who gave birth to the Messiah and also to other children and who was persecuted by the dragon represents by her the people of God including the church.

Irenaeus (fl. c. late second century) in his catechetical work *Demonstration [or Proof] of the Apostolic Preaching* 94 uses the language of motherhood to contrast the church and the synagogue: “The Lord grants more children to the church than to the synagogue of the past.” In chapter 98, he says that the church throughout the world hands down the preaching of the truth to her children. Elsewhere Irenaeus says against heretics that those “who do not partake of the Spirit [of God] are not nourished into life from the mother’s breasts.”²⁸

The *Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne* (c. 177) provides one of the early uses of maternal imagery for the church. When Christians denied the faith under persecution, others in the church mourned as for children whom she had miscarried; but, when some of those who denied returned to the faith, the church, described as a “virgin mother,” “rejoiced at their being made alive again.”²⁹

Clement of Alexandria too used the paradox of virgin mother for the church.³⁰ As a mother the church draws

26. Joseph C. Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesia: An Inquiry into the Concept of the Church as Mother in Early Christianity* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1943).

27. Gal 4:26.

28. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.24.1.

29. Eusebius, *Church History* 5.1.45; cf. 5.1.49.

30. Clement of Alexandria, *Instructor* 1.6.42.1.

children to herself,³¹ and the members as children seeking the church “run to our good mother.”³² Family imagery is a favorite with Clement, and he frequently refers to Christians as children.

Tertullian made frequent use of the imagery of the church as mother, as I note in the quotations from him. The statement in Galatians 4:26 that the “Jerusalem above” “is our mother” prompted the comment that this is “the holy church in whom we have expressed our faith.”³³ One scholar takes this not as Tertullian’s comment but as part of his quotation from Marcion,³⁴ who thus becomes the first to call the church mother, but the language sounds to me more like Tertullian’s.

When Origen employed the image of mother for the church, he was precise that the origin of Christians is with God the Father and not with the church. It is through the mother that God begets sons and daughters. Others were not always so careful and sometimes spoke as if the children (Christians) derived from the church; probably if pressed they too would have acknowledged the theological priority of God.

Latin Christianity’s fondness for the imagery of church as mother is seen in Cyprian (d. 258), who refers to the church as mother more than thirty times.³⁵ For instance, in his reasoning against accepting baptism performed by heretics he makes the following argument: “The Spirit cannot be received, unless he who receives it first exists. [His point is that one cannot receive the Spirit until first being reborn in the church.] This being so, where and of what mother to whom is he born who is not a son of the church? If one is to have God as his Father, he must first

31. *Ibid.*, 1.5.19.

32. *Ibid.*, 3.12.99.

33. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 5.4.8.

34. Ledegang, *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, 206.

35. Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesiae*, 81.

have the church for a mother.”³⁶ This is similar to his famous declaration against schism: “He can no longer have God for his Father who has not the church for his mother.”³⁷

Methodius in the same section on the church as bride³⁸ used the imagery of motherhood for the church. Like Origen, he was careful not to ascribe the generating power to the mother, but unlike Origen he ascribed the implanting of the spiritual seed to Christ and not to God.³⁹

Rhetorically perceptive thinkers were alert to the parallel paradoxes of the church as virgin bride and mother and of Mary as virgin and mother of Jesus. Augustine (354–430) later succinctly expressed the idea: “The church, imitating the Mother of God [Mary] . . . is both mother and virgin.”⁴⁰ This led to the view of Mary as a personification of the church, but that is a development largely outside the time frame of this collection of sources.

Building/Temple

The architectural image of the church as a building most often is that of a temple. The New Testament basis of this imagery is abundant. Paul addressing the church in Corinth said, “You are God’s building.”⁴¹ He followed with the statement, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you.”⁴² Ephesians 2:19–22 elaborated on Christians as a “holy temple in the Lord,” “a dwelling place for God,” “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus

36. *Letters* 74.7.2.

37. Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Church* 6.

38. *Symposium* 3.8.70–71.

39. *Ibid.*, 3.8.70, 74; 8.8.190–91.

40. *Sermon* 191.3.

41. 1 Cor 3:9.

42. 1 Cor 3:16.

himself as the cornerstone.” First Peter 2:4–5 speaks of the “spiritual house,” of which Christians are “living stones” and in which they are a “holy priesthood,” serving Jesus the “living Stone.”

In the *Shepherd* of Hermas (first half of the second century), one of the Apostolic Fathers, the church as a whole is the building, but this time it is a tower and not a temple. In the elaborate parable of the tower in the *Similitudes*, “the rock and the door [or gate] are the Son of God.”⁴³ “The tower is the church,” and the stones placed in the building are those who take the name of the Son of God and are clothed with the appropriate virtues.⁴⁴ In Hermas’s *Visions* that open the *Shepherd* it is also stated that “the tower that you see being built is the church,” with the further comment that “the tower is built upon the waters” of baptism and “is founded on the word of the almighty and glorious name.”⁴⁵

Early in Christian literature the *Epistle of Barnabas* (late first–early second century CE) expressed the theme of the spiritual temple replacing the physical temple in Jerusalem, but the author applied the idea only to the individual. The temple of the Lord is gloriously built when “having received the forgiveness of sins and having placed hope in his name, we became new.” “Therefore God truly resides in our dwelling place.”⁴⁶

Clement of Alexandria repeated the argument of early Christian apologists against material temples, while applying the terminology of temple to the church and the assembly of God’s people. “Is it not the case that we do not rightly and truly circumscribe in any place the one who cannot be contained,

43. *Herm. Sim.* 9.12.1 [89].

44. *Ibid.*, 9.13.1 [89]; 9.13.4–15.6 [90–92].

45. *Herm. Vis.* 3.3.3 and 5 [11].

46. *Barn.* 16.8; the whole chapter is relevant.

nor do we confine in temples made with hands that which contains all things? What work of builders, stone cutters, and of handicraft can be holy?"⁴⁷ He continued with the affirmation that the church is holy but is not a place, as was true of pagan temples and the Jewish temple, but is the assembly of God's chosen people. So, for Clement, in accord with the New Testament, God's temple now is not a building but the people assembled, as in the meaning of the Greek word for church, *ekklēsia*. In addition to the church, Clement used temple imagery for the cosmos, the soul of the true gnostic, the human body, and the body of Jesus.⁴⁸

Tertullian has frequent use of motifs associated with a temple. For him Christ, in contrast to the Jewish temple that was destroyed, "is the true temple of God."⁴⁹ In *Against Marcion* 3.24 Christ is "the temple of God, and also the gate by whom heaven is entered." By extension Christians are "priests of the spiritual temple, that is of the church."⁵⁰ Alternatively, Christ was the rejected stone that became "the chief cornerstone," "accepted and elevated to the top place of the temple, even his church."⁵¹ Tertullian thus reflects the varied applications in Scripture according to which Christ can be pictured as the temple and as the foundation of the temple. According to one use of the imagery, it is the Holy Spirit who builds "the church, which is indeed the temple, household, and city of God."⁵² The church as the spiritual temple can also be said, following one interpretation of a New Testament text, to be built on Peter.⁵³

47. Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 7.5.28.

48. Ledegang, *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, 320.

49. Tertullian, *Against the Jews* 13.15.

50. *Ibid.*, 14.9.

51. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 3.7.

52. *Ibid.*, 3.23.

53. Tertullian, *On Monogamy* 8.

Individual Christians are themselves “temples of God, and altars, and lights, and sacred vessels.”⁵⁴

Origen could speak of the church as a house, but since the word “house” was often applied to a temple as the house of a deity, there could be overtones of a sacred house even in this usage. Origen stated that “the church is the house of the Son of God.” And again, “The church or the churches, then, are the houses of the Bridegroom and the bride, the houses of the soul and the Word.”⁵⁵

Origen applied the specific language of a temple to the church mostly in biblical passages about the temple. His commentary on John 2:13–17 includes these words: “Jesus always finds some such [money changers] in the temple. For in what we call the church, which is the house ‘of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth,’⁵⁶ when are there not some money-changers sitting?”⁵⁷ The continuation of the passage in John 2:19–21 prompted Origen to combine the images of body and of temple, as does the Gospel of John, for the church:

If the body of Jesus is said to be his temple, it is worth asking whether we must take this in a singular manner, or must endeavor to refer each of the things recorded about the temple anagogically to the saying about the body of Jesus, whether it be the body which he received from the virgin, or the church, which is said to be his body. . . .

Someone . . . will say that the body, understood in either way, has been called the temple because as the temple had the glory of God dwelling in it, so the Firstborn of all creation, being the image and glory of God, is properly said to be the temple bearing the image of God in respect to his body or the church. . . .

54. Tertullian, *On the Crown* 9.

55. Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 3.3 on Song 1:17.

56. 1 Tim 3:15.

57. Origen, *Commentary on John* 10.23 (16).134.

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We shall attempt, however, to refer each of the statements that have reference to the temple anagogically to the church. . . .

Then each of the living stones will be a stone of the temple according to the worth of its life here.⁵⁸

Here, as is usual with him, Origen quickly moves from the corporate use of the image to the individual believer. The biblical material offered a rich lode from which Origen could mine moral and spiritual teachings.

People of God/Nation

The theme of the people of God represents one of the many continuities between the Old Testament and New Testament, where the language of the Old Testament is taken over for the church. I include here the terminology of nation or race in addition to people, for the words are often used almost interchangeably.⁵⁹ When God established his covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai, he said, “You shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. . . . You shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.”⁶⁰ The twin expressions “I am your God” and “You are my people” or their equivalent became a covenant formula.⁶¹ First Peter 2:9–10 appropriates the Exodus passage for the church, and 2 Cor 6:16 takes over the language of the covenant formula.

Early apologists presented Christians as a third (or fourth) race. The *Epistle to Diognetus* says that Christians in their religion “neither acknowledge those considered to be gods by the Greeks nor observe the superstition of the Jews,” but are a

58. Origen, *Commentary on John* 10.39 (23).263–64, 267–68.

59. D. K. Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

60. Exod 19:5–6.

61. Deut 26:17–18; 29:12–13; Jer 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 31:33; Hos 2:23.

“new race or way of life.”⁶² The *Preaching of Peter* similarly says, “Do not worship as the Greeks,” “neither worship as the Jews,” but “worship in a new way by Christ.”⁶³ Aristides argues as follows: “It is evident to us, O King, that there are three classes of people in this world: the worshipers of those called gods by you, the Jews, and the Christians.” The Syriac version gives four by dividing the worshipers of other gods into barbarians and Greeks to go with the Jews and Christians.⁶⁴

Justin Martyr (mid-second century) used the language of people and race in reference to the church in succession to Israel: “After that Righteous One was put to death, we flourished as another people.” He continues, “We are not only a people but also a holy people” and a people chosen by God.⁶⁵ He continues by quoting Old Testament passages to show that the church of the Gentiles is a new Israel, “counted worthy to be called a people.”⁶⁶ He further affirms that Christians are a high priestly race.⁶⁷

Clement of Alexandria, in an extended discussion of different images for the children of God, says that the Lord “calls us sometimes children, sometimes chickens, sometimes infants, and at other times sons and often little children, and a new people and a recent people.”⁶⁸ Without expressly using the word “church,” Clement implied it in the language of a people. He made the contrast, “the old race [Israel] was perverse and hard hearted,” but “we the new people are tender as a child.”⁶⁹ “Formerly the older people had an older covenant, and the

62. *Epistle to Diognetus* 1.

63. Quoted by Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 6.5.

64. Aristides, *Apology* 2.

65. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 119.3–4.

66. *Ibid.*, 123.1.

67. *Ibid.*, 116.3.

68. Clement of Alexandria, *Instructor* 1.5.14.

69. *Ibid.*, 1.5.19.4.

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law disciplined the people with fear, . . . but to the new and recent people a new covenant has been given, the Word has become flesh, and fear is turned into love.”⁷⁰ The children of God “become a new, holy people, by regeneration.”⁷¹

Alongside the word “people,” Clement also used the word “race” for Christians. Out of the Greek and Jewish peoples “there are gathered into one race of the saved people those who come to faith.”⁷²

Tertullian too developed the theme of the two peoples. He interpreted Gen 25:23 about the two nations and two peoples in the womb of Rebekah as referring to the older people of Israel (the Jews) and the later or lesser people, the Christians.⁷³ In all the nations now “dwells the people of the name of Christ.”⁷⁴ Unlike some of his predecessors, Tertullian rejected the designation “third race” for Christians and assigned its use to pagan critics.⁷⁵

Origen worked with the theme of peoplehood quite extensively and in various ways. I select only one passage as illustrative of his approach. After contrasting the Egyptian people and the Israelite people and their respective priests, Origen addresses the congregation:

Examine yourself and consider to which people you belong and the priesthood of which order you hold. If you still serve the carnal senses . . . know that you are of the Egyptian people. But if you have before your eyes the Decalogue of the law and the decade of the New Testament . . . and from that you offer tithes . . . “you are a true Israelite in whom there is no guile.”⁷⁶

70. Clement of Alexandria, *Instructor* 1.7.59.1.

71. *Ibid.*, 1.6.32.4.

72. Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 6.5.42.

73. Tertullian, *Against the Jews* 1.

74. *Ibid.*, 7.

75. Tertullian, *To the Nations* 8.

76. Quoting John 1:47. Origen, *Homilies on Genesis* 16.6.

Here as elsewhere Origen identifies the true Christian people with the true Israel of Old Testament Scripture.

Boat/Ark

Among the images drawn from nature and objects in the world, a boat, or especially the ark, is prominent. Here we come to imagery without explicit New Testament basis for the church, although there is a reference to the ark of Noah in 1 Pet 3:20.

The earliest reference to a ship other than the ark as the church appears to be Tertullian, *On Baptism* 12. He was responding to those who suggested that “the apostles underwent a substitute for baptism when in the little ship they were engulfed by the waves.” Tertullian replied that this event was different from being “baptized by the rule of religion,” and he then affirmed “that little ship presented a type of the church, because on the sea, which means this present world, it is being tossed about by the waves, which mean persecutions and temptations.”

Some writers made imaginative comparisons between a ship and the church. The two most elaborate developments of the image—Hippolytus (first third of the third century), *On Christ and Antichrist* 59, and Pseudo-Clement (third century), *Letter of Clement to James* 14—are included in our selections. Although there are a few elements in common, for the most part the imagery is developed quite differently. One difference is that if one continues reading the passage from Pseudo-Clement, the following chapter applies the comparison to a ship by giving specific exhortations to the different members of the church.

It is notable that one common feature, where there are such different developments of the image of a ship in Hippolytus, Pseudo-Clement, and Tertullian as well, is that the sea is

likened by all three to the world and the dangers it presents. Such imagery could go back to a lost apocalyptic book. Such is the suggestion of Erik Peterson, who has argued that the ship as a symbol of the church is a recasting of an older conception of Israel in an eschatological storm at sea.⁷⁷

Although the Bible did not use the analogy of a ship to the church, the story of the ark of Noah gave a scriptural basis for an ecclesiological application, not itself developed in the Bible.

Latin Christianity made much use of the analogy of the ark and the church. Callistus, bishop of Rome, argued that “the ark of Noah was a symbol of the church, in which were both dogs, wolves, and ravens,” and so he alleged that those guilty of sin, when forgiven, could remain in the church.⁷⁸ Tertullian alluded to this argument, referring to the different kinds of animals (raven, kite, dog, and serpent) in the ark as representing different types of persons in the church, but he insisted that no idolater was in the ark, so “let there not be in the church what was not in the ark.”⁷⁹ He had already anticipated the theme of the ark as a type of the church in his treatment of the flood in Noah’s day as a type of baptism. “The dove is the Holy Spirit, sent forth from heaven, where is the church, a figure of the ark.”⁸⁰

Origen was the first to work out the ark motif extensively in an ecclesiological sense. In his *Homilies on Genesis* he draws lessons for the church from the instructions about the building of the ark. “This people, therefore, which is saved in the church, is compared to all those whether men or animals that are saved in the ark.”⁸¹ He continues by interpreting the

77. Erik Peterson, “Das Schiff als Symbol der Kirche: Die Tat des Messias im eschatologischen Meerssturm in der jüdischen und altchristlichen Ueberlieferung,” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 6 (1950): 77–79.

78. According to Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 9.12 (7).23.

79. Tertullian, *On Idolatry* 24.4.

80. Tertullian, *On Baptism* 8.4.

different levels in the ark as degrees of progress in faith, and he takes Noah as an image of Christ. “Therefore, Christ, the spiritual Noah, in his ark in which he frees the human race from destruction, that is, in his church, has established in its breadth the number fifty, the number of forgiveness.”⁸² Fifty had the significance of forgiveness from the Year of Jubilee and its release from debts. This association of the ark with salvation goes back to 1 Pet 3:20–22 and was extensively employed in the early church, for which note Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 138; but Origen explicitly connects the ark with the church.

Cyprian, like his Latin-speaking predecessors, argued from the ark as a type of the church: 1 Pet 3:20–21 proves that “the one ark of Noah was a type of the one church,” and so only the baptism administered in the church (and not by schismatics) is valid; on this analogy those outside the church will perish.⁸³ Thereafter the analogy of the ark and the church was common.

Implications

This sampling of the rich variety of early Christian imagery for the church demonstrates the importance of the church in the experience and practice of early Christians. The Christian life was a corporate life, lived in community with other believers. Thinking about the church, furthermore, was rooted in scriptural usage. The images emphasized the close association of the church with Christ and the Holy Spirit, the continuity with and progress from the Old Testament, the unity and spirituality of the church. The church was related to important doctrines—such as the nature of Christ and human salvation—and membership in the church was significant for

81. Origen, *Homilies on Genesis* 2.3.

82. *Ibid.*, 2.5.

83. Cyprian, *Letters* 69.2.2; 75.15.

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Christian character (holiness and purity). The lessons drawn by the early Christian authors may not always be applicable to today, but these “sources of early Christian thought” serve to enrich the “understandings of the church” that continue to challenge Christian thought.

Translation

Where credits are not given, the translations are my own.