

Is the Church the Bride of the Lamb?

by Harry Ironside

The Church can be both the Body and the Bride of Christ because Scripture uses different figures to describe different aspects of the Church's relationship with Christ.

Scripture: Exodus 4:23, Hosea 11:1, Matthew 16:18, 1 Corinthians 3:9-10, 1 Corinthians 11:2, Ephesians 2:19-22, Ephesians 5:24-33, 1 Peter 2:5, Revelation 19:7-9, Revelation 22:16-17

Topics: "The Church as the Bride of Christ", "Understanding Biblical Imagery"

Description

Harry Ironside addresses the debate surrounding the identity of the Church as both the Body of Christ and the Bride of the Lamb, countering the claims of ultra-dispensationalists who argue against this duality. He emphasizes that various figures used in Scripture, such as the Church as a building and a body, do not create confusion but rather illustrate different aspects of the relationship between Christ and His followers. Ironside clarifies that while Israel is depicted as the wife of Jehovah, the Church holds a unique position as the Bride of the Lamb, highlighting the distinct and precious relationship believers have with Christ. He warns against the dangers of misinterpretation that could lead to a loss of understanding of the Church's role and relationship with Christ, urging believers to embrace the beauty of this bridal imagery. Ultimately, he calls for recognition of the Church's current relevance and the importance of the messages found in the letters to the churches in Revelation.

Transcript

ONE of the first positions generally taken by the ultra-dispensationalists is that it is unthinkable that the Church should be the Body of Christ, and yet at the same time be identified with the Bride of the Lamb. They insist that there is a mixing of figures here which is utterly untenable. How, they ask with scorn, could the Church be both the Bride and a part of the Body of the Bridegroom? Some even go farther and suggest that Christians who all down through the centuries have had no difficulty as to the two figures (recognizing the fact that they are figures, and therefore that there need be no confusion in thought when it comes to harmonizing both), are actually guilty of charging Deity with spiritual polygamy! I would not put such an abominable thought in writing, but it is their own expression which I have heard again and again. They point out, what all Bible students readily admit, that in the Old Testament, Israel is called the bride and the wife of Jehovah. "Then," they exclaim, "how can the Lord have two wives without being guilty of the very thing that He Himself condemns in His creatures here on earth?"

In view of such absurd deductions, it will be necessary to examine with some care just how these figures are used. In the first place, we find God using a number of different figurative expressions in speaking of Israel. He declares Himself to be their Father, that is, the Father of the nation, and Israel is called His son. "Out of Egypt have I called My son" (Hosea 11: 1), and, "Let My son go, that he may serve Me" (Exod. 4: 23). In other places similar expressions are used, and yet the prophets again and again speak of Israel as the wife of Jehovah, and the later prophets depict her as a divorced wife because of her unfaithfulness, some day to be received back again, when she has been purged from her sins. But it is important to see that a divorced wife can never again be a bride, even though she may be forgiven and restored to her wifely estate. What incongruity do we have here if we are to interpret Scripture on the principle of the Bullingerites. Here is a son who is also a wife. What utter absurdity!

Then again we have Israel depicted as a vine. "God brought a vine out of Egypt" (Ps. 80: 8), and, "Israel is an empty vine; he bringeth forth fruit for himself" (Hosea 10: 1). In many other places, the same figure is used. Elsewhere we have this favored nation spoken of as the priests of the Lord, occupying a special position throughout all the millennium, as though they were intermediaries between the Gentiles and Jehovah Himself. Other similitudes are used, but these are enough to show that there is no attempt made in Scripture to harmonize every figure. Each one is used as suits God's purpose for the moment. So the nation which at one time is viewed as a son is seen on another occasion as a vine, and elsewhere as a wife, and again as a nation of priests.

This being so in connection with Israel, why need we be surprised if a similar diversity of terms is used in connection with the Church? When our Lord first introduces the subject of the new order, He speaks of the Church as a building: "Upon this rock I will build My Church" (Matt. 16:18). The apostle Paul views the Church in the same way in 1 Corinthians 3: 9, 10), "I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. Ye are God's building." Again in Ephesians 2: 19-22: "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God: and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone; in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: in whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit." In regard to this passage, please take note that if the Bullingerites are correct, we have here a building suspended in the air with a great gap between the foundation and the superstructure; for this building is said to rest upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, but according to the views of those we are discussing, we must separate in a very definite way the New Testament apostles and prophets of the book of Acts from the Ephesian church, which is supposed to be a different company altogether. The absurdity of this becomes the more apparent as we see how we would have to do damage to the picture of the building as used here by the apostle Paul. The fact is the Church of Acts and that of the prison epistles is one and indivisible. In 1 Timothy 3: 15, he speaks of "the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." The apostle Peter looks at the Church in exactly the same way, as a company of living stones built upon the Living Stone, our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 2: 5).

We have already seen that the figure of the Body is used in a number of Paul's writings, not only in the prison Epistles, but in Romans and 1 Corinthians, to set forth the intimate relationship subsisting between Christ in glory and His people on earth, whereas the house expresses stability, and tells us that the Church is a dwelling place for God in this world, as the temple was of old. The Body speaks of union with Christ, by the indwelling Spirit. But Paul sees no incongruity whatever in changing the figure from that of the Body to the Bride. In the fifth chapter of Ephesians he glides readily from one to the other, and no

violence whatever is done to either view. He shows us that a man's wife is to be regarded as his own body. And in the latter part of that chapter, where he goes back to the marriage relationship as originally established by God, he says:

"Therefore as the Church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the Church, and gave Himself for it; that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the Word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the Church: for we are members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the Church. Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself: and the wife see that she reverence her husband" (vers. 24-33).

Surely nothing could be plainer than that we are to understand the relationship of Adam and Eve at the very beginning was intended by God to set forth the great mystery of Christ and the Church. Writing to the Corinthians at an earlier date, he said, "I have espoused you as a chaste virgin unto Christ," and Christian behavior is shown to spring from the responsibility connected with that espousal. The Church is viewed as an affianced bride, not yet married-, but called upon to be faithful to her absent Lord until the day when she will be openly acknowledged by Him as His Bride. It is this glorious occasion that John brings before us in the nineteenth chapter of the book of Revelation. It is of no earthly bride he is speaking, but of the heavenly. After the destruction of the false harlot, Babylon the Great, the marriage supper of the Lamb is celebrated in the Father's house, and all saints are called upon to rejoice because the marriage of the Lamb has come and His wife hath made herself ready. At the judgment-seat of Christ, she receives from His hand the linen garments in which she is to be arrayed at the marriage feast. Notice that on this occasion we have not only the Bride and the Bridegroom, but we read, "Blessed are they that are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb." These invited guests are distinguished from the Bride herself. They of course are another group of redeemed sinners, namely, Old Testament saints, and possibly some Tribulation saints who have been martyred for Christ's sake. These are the friends of the Bridegroom who rejoice in His happiness when He takes His Bride to Himself.

All down through the Christian centuries believers have revelled in the sweetness of the thought of the bridal relationship, setting forth, as no other figure does, the intensity of Christ's love for His own. How truly we may sing:

"The bride eyes not her garment,

But her dear Bridegroom's face;

I will not gaze on glory,

But on my King of grace;

Not at the crown He giveth,

But on His pierced hand;

The Lamb is all the glory

Of Immanuel's land."

How much we would lose if we lost this! And yet one is pained sometimes to realize how insensible Christians who ought to know better, can be as to its preciousness. I remember on one occasion hearing an advocate of the system we are reviewing exclaim, "I am not part of the Bride; I am part of the Bridegroom Himself. I belong to Christ's Body, and His Body is far more precious to Him than His Bride." I replied, "You mean then that you think far more of your own body than you do of your wife! " He was rather taken back, as he might well be.

But after all, if Israel is a divorced wife to be restored some day, and the Church is also a bride, is there not ground for what some have called "spiritual polygamy?" Certainly not. Similar figures may be used in each dispensation to illustrate spiritual realities; and then it is important to see that Israel is distinctively called the wife of Jehovah, whereas the Church is the Bride of the Lamb. Israel's nuptial relationship is with God Himself apart altogether from any question of incarnation. The Church is the Bride of the Incarnate One who became the Lamb of God for our redemption. Who would want to lose the blessedness of this?

In the last chapter of the book of the Revelation, we have added confirmation as to the correctness of the position taken in this paper. In verse 16, our Lord Jesus declares Himself as the Coming One, saying, "I am the Root and Offspring of David, the Bright and Morning Star." In the very next verse we are told, "And the Spirit and the Bride say, Come." Here we have the Church's response to our Lord's declaration that He is the Morning Star. The morning star shines out before the rising of the sun. It is as the Morning Star Christ comes for His Church. Unto Israel, He will arise as the Sun of Righteousness with healing in His wings. And so here the moment the announcement is made which indicates His near return, the Spirit who dwells in the Church, and the Bride actuated by the Spirit, cry with eager longing, "Come," for the word is addressed to Him. How truly absurd it would be to try to bring Israel in here as though the earthly people were those responding to the Saviour's voice during this present age!

But so determined are these ultra-dispensationalists to take from the Church everything that is found in the book of Revelation, that they even insist that the letters addressed to the churches in chapters 2 and 3 are all for Israel too. Ignoring the fact that the apostle John had labored for years in the Roman proconsular Province of Asia, that he was thoroughly familiar with all these seven churches, they nevertheless even go so far as to deny that some of these churches had any existence in the first century of the Christian era, when John wrote the Apocalypse, although Sir William Ramsay's researches have proven the contrary.

On the other hand ' they declare that all of these churches are to rise up in the future after the Body has been removed to Heaven, and that then the seven letters will have their application, but have no present bearing upon the consciences of the saints. I cannot conceive of anything more Satanic than this. Here are churches actually raised up of God through the preaching of the Gospel. Ephesus we know well. Laodicea is mentioned in the letter to the Colossians. The other churches we may be sure existed at the time and in exactly the state that John depicts, and the risen Christ addresses these churches in the most solemn way, and seven times over calls upon all exercised souls to give heed to what he says to each one, crying, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."

In these letters, we have depicted every possible condition in which the churches of God can be found from Apostolic days to the end of the Christian era. More than that: we have in a mystic way the moral and spiritual principles of the entire course of Church History portrayed. All this should have immense weight

with us as believers, and should speak loudly to our consciences; but along comes the Bullingerite and, with a wave of his interpretative wand, dismisses them entirely for the present age, airily declaring that they have no message for us whatever, that they are all Jewish, and will only have their place in the Great Tribulation after the Church is gone!

And thus the people of God who accept this unscriptural system are robbed of not only the precious things in which these letters abound, but their consciences become indifferent to the solemn admonitions found therein. Surely this is a masterpiece of Satanic strategy, whereby under the plea of rightly dividing the Word of Truth, the Scriptures are so wrongly divided that they cease to have any message for God's people today, and the Word of the Lord is made of no effect by this unscriptural tradition.

And yet the Lord in instructing John, says, "Write the things which are." It is the present continuous tense. It might be rendered, "The things which are now going on." "Not at all," exclaims the Bullingerite. "These are the things which are not going on, neither will they have any place so long as the Church of God is on earth." Others may accept this as deep teaching and advanced truth. Personally, I reject it as a Satanic perversion calculated to destroy the power of the Word of God over the souls of His people.

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