



Thank you for your interest in To What Shall I Compare It—a five-week study of New Testament metaphors for the church.

The pages which follow include:

- An overview of this series (4 pages)
- A sample sermon/class outline (5 pages)
- A sample handout (2 pages)
- A sample small group handout (2 pages)

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## Preaching through *To What Shall I Compare It?*

This series of five lessons calls us to take our eyes off the nuts and bolts of the first century church (with its particular situations, personalities, and problems) and focus on some of the images and metaphors used in scripture to define God's church: salt, family, bride, body, and boat.

Comparative language is used so that what is unknown may be understood in terms of what is known.

Cotterell and Turner, *Linguistics*, pg. 299.

The premise of *To What Shall I Compare It* is that we cannot speak about spiritual realities except through metaphor. We must use the familiar (earthly things) to talk of the spiritual (heavenly things). Comparisons, similes, word-pictures, parables, allegories—these are the necessary tools for explaining to physical beings a divine world.

Biblical writers do this all the time. What is God like? He is a father, a king, a husband. Who is Jesus? He is son, brother, even thief (see Mk 3:23-27). How do you define discipleship? Compare it to a cross. It is not surprising, then—when they speak of the church—that biblical writers paint heavenly pictures with earthly examples.

In these more literal times, we are not comfortable with the language of symbol, simile, and metaphor. We would far rather focus on the book of Acts and the particular churches found in Greece or Asia Minor. But there are distinct advantages to giving some attention to those figures used by Christ and his Apostles in their attempts to explain what the church is like.

1. It allows us to rise above specific historical situations and to see an *ideal* community. Rather than peering through the Corinthians to find out about the church, we can look at these literary devices and understand what Jesus and the twelve *intended* the church to be before the Corinthians got hold of it! Undoubtedly, the struggling, flawed, culture-bound examples of the church found in the NT have much to teach us about being God's people—in the negative, if nothing else! But the resulting emphasis on historical research and on Acts and the epistles as our primary means of finding out about "church" has skewed us away from those images *specifically intended to inform us on the subject*. When Jesus calls us "salt" and "light" . . . when Paul calls us "body" and "bride" . . . we ought to sit up and pay attention. I believe these metaphors are as definitional for the church as insights drawn from particular instances of the church in the first century.

2. Often, the study of these metaphors will push us back into the gospels and the mind of Jesus himself. In studying the images of *salt* and *boat*, for instance, we have a chance to see not just what the early church thought of itself but what *Jesus* understood about the church. At the least, a study of these images will put us into the apostles' thinking and allow us to hear them *defining* the church rather than simply reacting to or correcting the churches of their day.
3. It is particularly important that a study of these metaphors permits us to focus on *function* rather than *form*. The consistent purpose of these metaphors is to give insight about the mission of the church, what it is called to be and do, what its identity and work is to be. As you read some of the articles listed in the bibliography below, you will notice that the heart of metaphor is the "point of comparison" . . . that feature shared by two, otherwise dissimilar things. In the NT images of the church, the point of comparison is almost always found at the level of function. So the church is like *salt*, not because it is white or comes out of a shaker, but because both things make a *noticeable and beneficial difference* when present. Too often, our discussions of church degenerate into questions of structure and organization and format. The issues of identity and mission, when not thoroughly confused with form, are regularly overshadowed by such concerns. Thankfully, the images of church painted by Jesus and his apostles will not allow us to digress from what is truly critical: who are we and what are we to do. The church today is starving for precisely such insights.

If your congregation is like mine, they will not find this material easy. They will roll their eyes by the end of this series whenever you mention the word "metaphor." But they will appreciate the fresh understandings and renewed sense of purpose that will come by studying these beautiful and powerful word pictures of the church.

## Bibliography

Most of the following suggestions direct you less to books than to segments and chapters. It will repay the effort to read some of this material, become familiar with the use of metaphor in the Bible, and to better understand how metaphor is used specifically to communicate ideas about the church.

Caird, C.B. *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press. 1980. 280 pgs. A technical and in-depth look at the way language is used (how it "means") in the Bible. The entire middle section of the book is on metaphor and deals with the relationship of literal and non-literal language. Chapter 8 (pgs. 144-159) will be useful. I think Cotterell and Turner make for a better read, but Caird has important insights as well.

Cotterell, Peter, and Max Turner. *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press. 1989. 348 pgs. This is a wonderful book if you enjoy language and are interested in taking it apart. It is high level reading, but thoroughly fascinating once you get into the spirit of things. The final chapter on non-literal language will be useful for this series, especially pgs. 299-307 which discuss metaphor specifically.

Fee, Gordon, and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House. 1982. These authors provide a helpful discussion of metaphor in the context of their look at parables (pgs. 123-134).

Minear, Paul. *Images of the Church in the New Testament*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press. 1960. 294 pgs. An invaluable guide to the use of imagery in describing the church. He argues that until we understand these images, we cannot understand ourselves. For, ultimately, the mystery of the church is unveiled only by the metaphors; and missing the metaphors keeps us ignorant of who God wants us to be and what God wants us to be about. Though the language is a bit turgid (rather like that last sentence, actually), the scholarship is excellent and Minear's insights are of value. Highly recommended.

Woodroof, Tim. *The Church as Boat: Building a Sea-worthy Church*. [In press]. Restoration Quarterly will be publishing this article near the end of 1997. In the meantime, copies can be obtained for \$10 (including postage) from Look Press. Call 1-800-863-LOOK.

## Sermon Summaries

There are five lessons in this series, although there could have been fifty-five. As you will see in the first lesson, one author has identified 96 different figures used by Jesus and the NT writers to describe the church. For our purposes, I chose five of the most prominent to look at closely.

### 1. The Church is Like . . .

In this lesson, I attempt to lay a foundation for the series. Getting a handle on the church is no easy task. Jesus found it difficult to talk about heavenly things in human language except through word pictures known as “metaphors.” I review some of these word pictures, but focus primarily on the church as “salt” from Mt 5:13. In doing so, I stress that metaphors are intended to: 1) make a point, and 2) underscore a function.

### 2. The Church as Family

There are a number of *relational metaphors* used in the NT to describe the church: flock, partners, team, friends, etc. The most dominant relational metaphor, however, is that of *family*. Passages which refer to the church as God’s family, and some of the implications (functions) of those passages, are reviewed.

### 3. The Church as Bride

The metaphor of marriage—God (or Christ) as the divine husband and the church as the blushing bride—is explored in this lesson. Old and New Testament passages which touch on this idea are reviewed. In particular, Paul’s teaching in Ephesians 5 is studied. Some of the incredible implications of this image are also explored. Though the church’s relationship with her heavenly husband is sometimes rocky, she remains our best hope for finding true intimacy with Christ.

### 4. The Church as Body

One of the most blatantly incarnational metaphors used to explain the church is that of the *body*. Jesus is the head, we are his hands and feet and eyes. Paul is the only NT writer to use this metaphor, and his teaching in 1 Corinthians forms the backbone of this study (forgive the metaphor!). Some suggestions are offered for what this metaphor teaches us about the church and its work.

### 5. The Church as Boat

I have been a student of Mark’s gospel for years and am fascinated by his use of the *boat* in his story. This lesson looks at what Mark does with the boat in 4:1-8:21 and asks whether he might intend for us to see in the boat a metaphor for the church. Four implications for how we understand the church and how the church is intended to function are discussed. Some of your audience will really love this lesson; some will think you’ve lost your mind. It’s a good pot-stirrer if nothing else.

## The Church is Like . . .

### Introduction:

#### A. Object lesson in the trials of communication.

1. Have someone who speaks a foreign language come to the podium and talk with you in that foreign tongue about coffee . . . *hot* coffee . . . *strong* coffee. [Encourage the use of body language, facial expressions and gestures. The *words*, however, should befuddle the congregation.]
2. When congregation is thoroughly at a loss to understand what is being said, ask how many comprehend what is being talked about.
  - a. Talk about the difficulty of understanding someone who speaks a different language—how hard it is to bridge the gap between languages and cultures.
  - b. Wonder aloud how we might grasp what is being said even though we do not speak that particular tongue.
3. Offer the speaker a marker [have a pen and pad prepared beforehand], and ask him/her to draw out his/her subject while talking about it. [Pictionary!]
  - a. Draw a picture of a cup of black coffee in a mug.
  - b. Draw a hot pad (symbolizing heat).
  - c. Draw a flexed biceps to indicate strength.
  - d. Allow the congregation to play along and guess what is being discussed.
4. Thank the speaker and have him/her sit down.

#### B. The challenge Jesus faced in speaking of heavenly things in earthly language.

1. In many ways, Jesus was a foreigner trying to bridge a chasm of culture and language.
  - a. He came from heavenly realms to speak to people who knew only this world.
  - b. He was a spiritual being attempting to communicate with physical creatures.
  - c. He himself, of course, was the most profound act of cross-cultural communication the world has ever known.
    - i. God poured into the flesh of a man.
    - ii. The divine Word spoken in a language that humans could comprehend.
    - iii. The invisible, infinite, celestial creator of all the universe taking a form which we could see and hear and touch.
2. But Jesus' challenge was greater even than informing us about who God is. He had the daunting task:
  - of telling us what God wanted *us* to be;
  - of explaining spiritual realities in worldly terms;
  - of taking heavenly things and translating them for us so that we could understand them and apply them and build something here on earth that would represent those heavenly realities.
3. To do that, Jesus (and his apostles) often did what was just done for us.
  - a. He would draw pictures . . . not with markers but with words.
  - b. He would take words and paint symbols and parables and metaphors.
  - c. He would take earthly things with which we were familiar and say, "That is what

### **Transition:**

1. That is how he explained *faith*: “It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seed you plant in the ground. But when it is planted, it becomes the largest of all garden plants” (Mk 4:30ff).
2. That is how he explained *prayer*: “It is like a widow who keeps pestering the judge until finally she gets what she is asking for” (Lk 18:2ff).
3. That is how he explained *discipleship*: “It is like a king who must travel to a far country. So he called ten of his servants and gave them money and told them, ‘Put this money to work until I come back.’”
4. In particular, this is how he explained to us the meaning of *the church*.

## **I. Translating “the church” into our Language.**

### **A. We think we understand what the church is.**

1. We listen as the Bible talks about this heavenly concept, this divine notion, this idea born in the mind of God, and tell ourselves it is an easy thing to understand the church.
  - a. After all, many of us were “raised” in it.
  - b. We “go to it” on a weekly basis.
  - c. We sit “in church” and pay attention “during church” and visit “after church.”
  - d. Many in our culture—and even many of us—speak of the building as a church.
2. And then we pat ourselves on the back and congratulate each other on having understood so well and so completely what “church” means in the mind of God.
  - a. Perhaps this is especially true of those of us involved in the churches of Christ.
  - b. We are a people who have majored in the church.
    - i. We have bisected and dissected and vivisected the church.
    - ii. We’ve hunted down every reference and studied its most minute detail.
  - c. We have prided ourselves on getting the church right, when in fact, we have barely scratched the surface!

### **B. If “church” is easy for us, it wasn’t so easy for Jesus or his inspired apostles.**

1. They had all kinds of difficulty translating “church” into words we could understand doing it in a way we would not misapprehend and cheapen what God intended.
2. They had a hard time talking about the church *directly*.
  - a. Though Jesus had much to say about the church, he used the word only twice in all the recorded statements left to us.
  - b. In their writings, the apostles used the word more frequently, but not really in the way we would like them to.
  - c. There is no precise definition of the church given by Jesus or his apostles, no careful and comprehensive ecclesiology [science of the church] that clearly sets out what the church is and what it is to be about.
  - d. You cannot find in all the NT a *constitution* for the church with:
    - fourteen headings under which the nature and work of the church is laid out
    - thirty seven sub-headings defining membership-in-good-standing, etc.
  - e. Somehow human language, propositional phrases, carefully worded definitions are insufficient for communicating to us what God means by the church.

**C. Instead, Jesus and his earliest disciples painted pictures of the church**—in hopes that we might see what the church is *like* and —as a result—grasp what the church is supposed to be.

1. Paul Minear, in his book *Images of the Church in the NT*, identifies 96 figures used by Jesus and the NT writers to describe the church.
  - a. 96 *figures*: symbols, analogies, parallels, parables, similes, metaphors.
  - b. 96 word pictures used to tell us what the church is *like*, what the church can be *compared to*, how some things with which we are familiar are *similar to* this thing we know so little about but which is so important to the plan of God.

2. The church is like:

salt	a wedding feast	a light
a letter	a country	life
a fish net	a pilgrim	a tree
a boat	a new Israel	a road
bread	a nation	a family
wine	a flock of sheep	a community
a vineyard	a city	a group of slaves
a fig tree	a temple	or friends or
a building	a sacrifice	servants or
a house	a new creation	children
a lady	a new race	a brotherhood
a bride	a kingdom	a body

3. On and on the NT writers go, piling up one image on top of another, trying to find pictures of the church that will communicate something meaningful to us.
  - a. It is as if they were explaining color to a blind man or harmony to one who is deaf.
  - b. Where do you begin? What words can you possibly use?
  - c. How do you explain something that is so far beyond the experience of your audience, so radically different from anything they have seen or heard?
  - d. About all you can do is pick up a verbal pen and begin, “The church is like ...”
4. The abundance and variety and richness of these pictures of the church ought to do at least two things for us:
  - a. It ought to underscore the wonder and majesty and broad compass of the church of Jesus Christ as it exists in the mind of God.
    - i. No one symbol of the church is able to do justice to the real thing. The church is bigger and deeper and more profound than any single picture of it.
    - ii. Only as these figures are piled up one on top of another, in all their diversity and beauty does a clearer picture of the church begin to emerge.
  - b. It ought to rebuke us for thinking that we can easily and quickly grasp what the church is.
    - i. It defies our neat little boxes and categories and definitions.
    - ii. In the end, our best understanding of the church is little better than the child’s hand-game: “Here is the church, here is the steeple; open the door and see all

## II. Learning to speak in metaphor.

### A. The way Jesus talks about the church is not our native language.

1. We are ill-equipped to think about church using the tools given us by NT writers.
  - a. We would be far more comfortable with a dictionary definition than with the scores of images used by Jesus and his apostles.
  - b. Blame it on our Western mind set, but we want something more concrete, more literal, more definable to shape our understanding of the church.
2. But Jesus has determined to speak to us about the church in parables and figures.
  - a. It is not our native language. We have difficulty understanding.
  - b. Still, it is our duty, like every audience who has listened to Jesus teach, to “consider carefully” what we hear and grasp the lessons Jesus is sharing.

### B. Two Basics for understanding the language of the church.

- a. Using Mt 5:13 as an example. “You are the salt of the earth.”
- b. Jesus, by extension, makes a comment on what the church is.
- c. He compares the church to salt. The role the church plays in the world is analogous to the role salt plays on food.

#### 1. *Do you get the point?*

- a. In what ways is the church like salt?
  - i. Salt is white, it is iodized, it comes in little containers with holes on the top and “Morton” on the side. Is the church like salt in these ways?
  - ii. Salt *seasons* the food upon which it is poured. Salt affects and changes and flavors whatever it is added to.
    - In a similar way, the church of Jesus is intended to flavor the world.
    - The church is an element that God is pouring into the world which is intended to impact the world and make a difference in how the world tastes.
  - iii. Do you get that point?
- b. The very nature of this symbolic language requires us to use wisdom and discernment.
  - i. Jesus simply says that we are like salt to the world.
  - ii. He doesn’t say exactly *how* we are like salt. But he clearly expects us to use our heads to figure out what he means. (Context gives one clue.)
  - iii. Nor, by the way, does he tell us when we are taking the symbol too far. There are obviously many ways the church is *not* like salt. We are not mined out of the earth or distilled from sea water or poured from shakers.
- c. The language of symbols necessarily puts the burden on us to figure out just exactly what Jesus is talking about.
  - i. That involves a certain amount of **boldness** and **imagination** on our part to supply what the NT means when it uses a particular figure.
  - ii. It requires a depth of spiritual **discernment** that makes us nervous but is absolutely essential if statements like this are to have any meaning for us.

**Transition:** Do you get the point? Do you understand what Jesus or one of his disciples is saying about the church when he reaches into his palette of words and paints a fresh picture of the church for our instruction and encouragement?

## 2. *Do you get the function?*

- a. The church is like salt, not because it is naturally flavorful, but because it is expected to function as salt does, to do the job salt does, to behave like salt should.
  - i. In fact, this is the critical issue. The rest of Mt 5:13: “But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men?”
    - Salt that doesn’t flavor is useless and should be thrown out and trampled.
    - The church that doesn’t flavor is equally useless and will be discarded.
  - ii. Though the church ought to act like salt, there is a real danger that it won’t.
    - 1) Jesus’ statement here is not so much a definition of what the church is.
    - 2) It is a warning about what the church should be, of what the purpose of the church is, of how the church should function.
- b. All of these figures and symbols of the church have function as their bottom line.
  - i. The church is like a *net* in that it functions to draw people to the kingdom of God.
  - ii. It is like *unleavened bread* in that it functions as a holy people, without the old yeast of sin and corruption.
  - iii. It is like a *mother* in that it cares for, nurtures and grows into spiritual adulthood the children whom God has entrusted to her.
- c. Always in these symbols there is the element of instruction, encouragement and warning to make the church be the church, to help the church understand its functions, and to ensure that the church does what God intends for it to do.
  - i. We have scoured the example of the first century church, meticulously picking out every detail of church life and ritual and structure. We have camped in the book of Acts and thought we could understand what the church is by watching every move that early church made.
  - ii. All the while, these potent, profound, pregnant word pictures of the church have been sitting in the gospels and in the letters of Paul and Peter and John:
    - crying out to teach us what the church is like;
    - begging to inform us what the church should be about;
    - describing, painting, translating into our paltry language what this great, eternal, majestic entity called the church is in the mind of God.

## Conclusion

1. Preview of next 4 weeks.
  - a. A study of the major symbols used to describe the church.
  - b. A look at what point they make and, particularly, what function they describe.
2. Like so much else of a spiritual vein, the church is a mystery. After doing all that we can to understand the church, we do not, thereby, make it any less mysterious.
  - We do not study the mystery of the church to explain, define and demystify it.
  - We study the mystery of the church in order to appreciate it.
  - Having done all, it still remains mysterious. And, because of that, it becomes even more precious and wonderful to us. For in the mystery of the church, we have a taste of heavenly things—something we do not understand fully now, but something we will understand when we see God face to face.



# THE CHURCH IS LIKE...

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Metaphor is a game we play with language. It is an inventive and forceful means of comparing one thing to another. By the clever use of words, metaphor allows us to associate two very different things and to show in what manner they are related, using a better known thing to explain or illuminate something lesser known.

Our language brims with metaphors. We talk about the *brain* of a computer, the *eye* of a camera, the *brow* of a hill, the *throat* of a carburetor (to name but a few of the metaphors based upon comparisons to the human body). Many of our favorite clichés (“beating a dead horse,” “going down the drain,” “on the rocks”) are, in fact, vivid metaphors.

Metaphor is essential to good theology. It is only possible to talk about God and the spiritual realm metaphorically, comparing things of which we are ignorant with more familiar and common matters. When the Bible speaks of God’s “kingdom” or God as our “Father” or “cleansing” from sin, it is speaking the language of metaphor, informing us of spiritual realities by using comparisons drawn from politics, family, and hygiene.

*You are the salt of the earth.  
But if the salt loses its saltiness,  
how can it be made salty again?  
It is no longer good for  
anything, except to be thrown  
out and trampled by men.*

*Mt 5:13*

How do you talk about a spiritual matter like the church? In much the same way you describe color to a blind man. You struggle to say what it is *like*, all the while remembering that the best of comparisons is lacking in critical ways and that the reality itself is always greater than our most profound analogies.

## THINK ABOUT IT

- ♦ How would you talk to someone from the NT era about an automobile? Could you explain gasoline engines, radios, or cruise control? You would have to resort to the very thing Jesus used in describing the church to us—comparisons. “Cars are kinda like . . .”
- ♦ Metaphors require a certain amount of discernment and imagination to figure out. They can easily be misunderstood or taken too far. Is it simply necessity that causes God to use metaphors, or may it also be a sign of his confidence that spiritual people will be able to discern spiritual things?



TO WHAT SHALL  
I COMPARE IT?

SERMON 1

- ◆ *To understand what the church is requires that we listen to what the church is like. That means learning a new language, becoming fluent in parables, figures and metaphors.*
- ◆ *If God used 96 images to describe it, the church must be more important and involved than we realized.*
- ◆ *The first step to learning about the church must be admitting that we do not understand the church as well as we pretend. When we talk about the church, we are like deaf people talking about Mozart—we may have caught bits and pieces, but the reality far exceeds our experience.*

# WHAT'S YOUR POINT?

We all think we know what “church” means. After all, many of us were “raised” in it. We “go to it” on a weekly basis. We sit “in church” and try to pay attention “during church” and talk with our friends “after church.” We can even speak of the building as “the church.” Yes indeed—we all know what “church” means.

Isn't it surprising, then, that Jesus and the apostles have such a struggle talking about it? They offer no precise definition of the church. They lay down no careful and comprehensive ecclesiology. The church is never far from their thinking, but it is difficult for these men to talk about it directly. Rather, they constantly search for figures, for images, for analogies, and for comparisons. Somehow, language is insufficient for describing the church. What is required is a *picture* of what the church is and how it functions.

Paul Minear, in his book *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, identifies 96 figures used to describe the church by NT writers. The church is salt, the new Israel, a flock, pilgrims, the tree of life, the new creation, temple, family, body, boat, and army. The richness and variety of these symbols underscores the wonder of the church and our foolishness for thinking that we can easily grasp what church means. No one image of the church is able to do justice to the reality. Only as these writers (and Jesus himself) pile up figure after figure, does a clearer picture begin to emerge.

The sad fact is, however, that we are ill equipped to think about the church using the tools given to us by the NT writers. We would be far more comfortable with a dictionary definition than with the images and metaphors used by Jesus and Paul. We want something more concrete, more propositional, more definable. Blame it on our Western mind set, but we would prefer a logical, linear, literal explanation of the church over the images and symbols we have been given.

Jesus has determined to speak to us about the church in parables. It is our responsibility to “consider carefully” what we hear. Over the next few weeks, we will study some of the major metaphors used in the NT to refer to the church. These images carry important messages about what the church is and how it is to function.



# THE CHURCH IS LIKE...

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## Small Group Member's Guide

### ICE BREAKER

What is the difference between *simili* and *metaphor*? Have each member of the group make a statement about love using *simili*—as Robert Burns does with the line: "O, my luvie is like a red, red rose." Now go back around the group and say something about love using *metaphor*—as Shakespeare does with the line: "My love is a fever, longing still for that which longer nurseth the disease."

### LEARNING TO SPEAK IN PARABLE

I don't mean to resurrect old nightmares by reminding you of high school English classes, but do you recall the difference between concrete and abstract nouns? Concrete nouns, you will remember, have specific, tangible *referents*—you can *point* to a table or a radio or an automobile. Abstract nouns are more—well—abstract. How do you point to love or faith or hope?

Of course, that doesn't mean that abstract nouns describe things which are any less real! Just because you can't hold something in your hand or put it under a microscope doesn't mean that it is illusory. In fact, most of the things which we truly value—those things which make us human—are abstract. Integrity, commitment, patriotism, justice—such things may be less tangible than "chair" or "bed," but they are certainly no less real or important.

We simply have to talk about abstract nouns differently than we do concrete ones. Instead of pointing and grunting, we are forced to become poets—to use figures of speech to help us paint pictures with words. Because we cannot hold "love" in our hands, we have to find other ways to talk about it. Abstract nouns make us talk in metaphors and similies.

*Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household . . . In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*

*Ephesians 2:19-22*



TO WHAT SHALL  
I COMPARE IT?

## To Discuss

Many people want to treat “church” like they do “table.” They want to point to a church building or name a certain denomination. “Church,” for them, is a place or a particular group of people. It is a concrete noun.

But the New Testament has a hard time talking concretely about the church. It gives no constitution, no dimensions, no careful and comprehensive ecclesiology (your \$10 word for the week). Instead, Jesus and his apostles painted word pictures. “This is what the church is like . . .” or “The church can be compared to . . .” or “Think about salt and light.”

You have to be something of a poet to talk about the church; or to understand what the New Testament says on the subject. You have to be fluent in the language of metaphor. When, for instance, Jesus says, “You are the light of the world,” what is he intending to tell us about the nature of the church? In what ways are “light” and “church” comparable? Is it light’s capacity to drive out darkness that is on his mind or its usefulness in showing the way out of darkness? Jesus invites us into a dialogue on the subject so that we become active partners in discerning his meaning.

You might think things would be easier if Jesus had talked about the church more concretely—“Here is the church. This is how it is organized. These are the things it is responsible for. Here are ten rules for how to run the church.” Instead, he and his apostles talked about the church as a bride, a family, a city, a body, a flock of sheep. Where we want lists, Jesus paints word-pictures.

That shouldn’t really surprise us, though. We do the same thing with really important stuff. You don’t give a dictionary definition for “love”—it would limit and reduce what we mean by that word. And you don’t communicate what “character” is about by making a list and checking it twice. Only examples, comparisons, and poetry will do. Even then, we have not covered everything. After Burns and Shakespeare have done their best, there is still much to say about “love.”

The same is true of the church. There is something so grand, so wonderful, so imaginative about the church that no list, no definition, no carefully worded constitution will ever do justice to the idea. It requires a story, a metaphor, a poem to get at the essence of the thing.

What is the church? Well, it’s kinda like a loaf of bread . . .

- ♦ *Brainstorm in your group. How many “images” of the church used in the New Testament can you think of in a 5 minute period?*
- ♦ *Do you agree that some of the most important things in our lives are “abstract” and that, to talk about them, requires us to use a different kind of language?*
- ♦ *If you were going to compare the church to something, what would it be? Make up your own metaphors for the church and talk about them in the group.*
- ♦ *Do you think that we “moderns” are less able to talk in figures and parables than ancient people were? How does this impact the way we talk about the church?*

