

Part 8: The Church is Not the Bride of Christ

Traditionally, Jewish weddings were arranged between the fathers of the proposed couple. After the parents came to an agreement to the marriage, the couple were considered “espoused.” This was a formal legal contract into which the couple had entered, and for all intents and purposes, the couple were considered “married” even though the marriage had not yet been consummated. This espousal period could have lasted for up to a year. During this time, the man returned home to make preparations for his bride, and the bride-to-be prepared herself for becoming a wife. Her fidelity to her bridegroom was on display during this period as well.

On the actual wedding day, the bridegroom led a procession of his friends through the streets of the village to go and meet the bride. This usually occurred between sunset and midnight. Much pomp and celebration occurred along the way, and as the procession continued, people exit their homes, bringing a torch or lamp along with them to help light the way, and so the “wedding party” grows larger and larger as more and more “guests” join in celebration with the bridegroom. The bridegroom then receives his bride, and the two, along with the entire party of friends and guests return to the bridegroom’s house where the wedding ceremony occurs with a grand feast and celebration following.

One of the major tenets of Protestant/Reformed/Catholic orthodoxy is that the “church” is the “bride of Christ.” This doctrine can be traced as far back as Augustine. But while originally a Catholic doctrine, evangelicals and fundamentalists still cling to this teaching to this day. You cannot go into any church of any denomination where you won’t hear this taught or not find it in its “statement of faith.” However, what they fail to conveniently mention is that the phrase “bride of Christ” is found nowhere in the Bible. Let me repeat that; the phrase “bride of Christ” is found NOWHERE in the Bible.

The doctrine of the “church” being the “bride of Christ” is a FALSE doctrine. Why is that? Because the Bible tells us who the Bride is specifically, and it is not the church. A plain grammatical interpretation of Revelation 21 reveals exactly who the Bride is.

Revelation 21:2, 9-10

“And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband...And there came unto me one of the seven angels which had the seven vials full of the seven last plagues, and talked with me, saying, ‘Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb’s wife.’ And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God...”

Here in plain terms, the Bride is clearly and explicitly shown to be the New Jerusalem. The angel says, “I will show you the Bride,” and he shows John, not a body of people, but the New Jerusalem. The remaining verses of chapter 21 go on to give in great detail a description of what this city looks like. Notice that nothing is said about the inhabitants of the city. The focus of the chapter is the actual city itself. Not only does the angel tell John that this city is the Bride, but in case there

was any doubt, he reinforces that fact by stating plainly that this city is the “Lamb’s wife.” While the Bible never uses the expression, “bride of Christ” it does use the terms “the Bride, the Lamb’s wife.” But that title is clearly given to the New Jerusalem and not the “church.”

Moreover, even the nation of Israel is not referred to as the “bride.” If the “church” is not the “bride,” and Israel is not the “bride,” where exactly does the church and Israel fit in to all of this? Again, Scripture tells us plainly. Elements of the Jewish wedding tradition are clearly visualized when Jesus described the “Kingdom of Heaven” in the parable of the wedding feast (Matthew 22), and the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25). Let’s begin with the parable of the wedding feast in Matthew 22.

Matthew 22:1-10

“And Jesus answered and spake unto them again by parables, and said, ‘The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son, and sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding: and they would not come. Again, he sent forth other servants, saying, Tell them which are bidden, Behold, I have prepared my dinner: my oxen and my fatlings are killed, and all things are ready: come unto the marriage. But they made light of it, and went their ways, one to his farm, another to his merchandise: and the remnant took his servants, and entreated them spitefully, and slew them. But when the king heard thereof, he was wroth: and he sent forth his armies, and destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city. Then saith he to his servants, The wedding is ready, but they which were bidden were not worthy. Go ye therefore into the highways, and as many as ye shall find, bid to the marriage. So those servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all as many as they found, both bad and good: and the wedding was furnished with guests’” (KJV).

It should be fairly obvious that, as Jesus points out right at the beginning, this parable is used to describe a particular aspect of the Kingdom. In this parable, He is using the metaphor of the traditional Jewish wedding, with the wedding feast being the focus. Of course, this would have been a familiar metaphor to His audience since they were all Jews.

The theme of this parable revolves around two particular groups of people. The first group is made up of those who already had invitations to participate in the wedding feast. These were the King’s special invited guests. They received their invitations first. One would think that since these people have been given such a special invitation from the King that they would not hesitate to respond. But notice what happens. On the day of the feast, none of them show up. They reject the gracious invitation. They view it with an attitude of indifference and make all kinds of excuses why they cannot attend. Some even killed the servants who were sent to them to tell them that everything was ready for them to attend the feast.

This first group is a description of national Israel. This is the very nation whose God was Jehovah, but who rejected every prophet that God sent unto them to bring them unto Himself. Stephen accused them in Acts 7:52 when he said, “Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have

been now the betrayers and murderers?” accusing them of killing Jesus, their Messiah. And for this God judged them with the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

But there is a second group mentioned in this parable. Since the King made all these preparations, it was his desire to have the feast furnished with guests. So, he instructed his servants to go out and issue an invitation to anyone, as many as they could find. This second group represents the nations of the world, or the Gentiles, those whom God would redeem by the blood of the Lamb out of “every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation” (Revelation 5:9, 14:6). It is important to note that this second group would also include repentant individuals from the first group, or converted Jews.

Nevertheless, the point to take from all of this is that neither of the two groups in this parable are the bride. They are guests, and this is important. What we have is a body of individuals that make up the “church,” or using the correct Biblical term, the εκκλησια (“ekklyasia”), the “called out” (invited) assembly that makes up the Body of Christ. In this parable they are not the bride, but they are clearly the guests at the wedding.

Take a look at the second parable in Matthew 25.

Matthew 25:1-13

“Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom. And five of them were wise, and five were foolish. They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them: But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept. And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him. Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out. But the wise answered, saying, Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you: but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves. And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut. Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us. But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not. Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh” (KJV).

Now the point to make here with this parable is not to determine who the foolish virgins represent and who the wise virgins represent. The point is to show that all of these “virgins” represent those who would go out to join the procession of the wedding party as the bridegroom goes to meet his bride and return with her to his father’s house for the wedding feast. As the procession goes through the streets of the village, more and more people come out of their houses carrying a candle or “lamp” and join the procession. Notice that this happens at “midnight” or more literally, sunset. The young girls in the parable are not going to the wedding to marry the bridegroom. The bridegroom already has a bride. The young girls are simply guests at the wedding.

This is not the first instance that Scripture posits this notion of wedding guests. Matthew 9:15, Mark 2:19, and Luke 5:34 use the term “children of the bridechamber,” referring to Jesus’ disciples; those who were called by Christ to follow Him. That would include not only the twelve, but all those who would be saved by faith in Christ, the “ekklyasia.” In John 3:29, John the Baptist referred to himself and any others “which standeth and heareth Him as a “friend of the bridegroom.”

In terms of the picture of a traditional Jewish wedding, all believers, members of the Body of Christ, are referred to as “guests” and “friends of the bridegroom,” but they are NOT the bride. They go out joyfully with the Bridegroom as He goes to receive His Bride. But clearly from a Scriptural standpoint, the wedding guests cannot be the Bride.

Now there are questions that remain. For example, if the “church” is not the Bride, then what about all those New Testament passages that seem to refer to the “church” in “spousal” terms. One such passage used often follows:

Ephesians 5:22-33

“Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. 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” (KJV).

Read through that passage again, and in each place where you see the word “church,” replace it with “assembly.” This will have a tremendous impact on the way you understand this passage. “Church” connotes building, place, institution. “Assembly” connotes “body,” for that is the meaning of the word. It is a “called out” body of individuals. It is also a secular, political term. A political body of individuals called together to accomplish a specific task. Moreover, this assembly is the “Body of Christ,” and that is especially significant in this passage.

Paul reinforces this idea at the end of verse 23 when he says, “and he is the saviour of the body.” This is not a stand-alone statement. And it is not a reference to your physical body or mine. It is a parenthetical clause that further establishes the main clause just prior to it. Notice the colon that appears at the end of the previous clause.

“Christ is the head of the [assembly, ‘called-out ones’]:”

The very next clause modifies this statement.

“- and he is the saviour of the body”

This is the actual Greek word for “body,” σῶμα (“soma”). The structure of the end of this verse is interesting. The word “and” is the Greek word καί (“kai”), and it is used as a joining word, just like a conjunction creates a list or connects words or clauses or ideas. It is also used to show equivalence or parallel thought. This kind of writing style is common in Hebrew writing, especially in poetry, this parallelism. And you can see Paul’s Hebraic style of writing in the parallelism in this verse. Paul is stating that Christ is the head of the assembly, and furthermore, not only is He the head, He is the Savior of the whole body of the assembly. In this one verse, Paul has established that the assembly is the body and Christ is the head. Paul is not establishing a husband/wife relationship, he is establishing a head/body relationship. Keep this relationship in your mind.

Now, when someone wants to make the case that the “church” is the “bride of Christ”, they usually go right to verse 24 and pull this one particular phrase out of context:

“Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church...”

Their reasoning goes something like this:

“Husband” is to “wife” as “Christ” is to “church.”

Therefore:

Christ = husband

church = wife

Therefore:

The church is the bride (wife) of Christ.

And while that may seem to be a reasonable logical conclusion, it fails because it is beginning with the wrong premise which results from failing to understand the context of the entire passage. Paul is instructing men on how to love their wives, but he is not using a metaphor of a husband/wife relationship. He is using the metaphor of a head/body relationship. The reasoning of the metaphor is better understood like this:

Husbands are to love their wives.

How do they do that?

Well, no man hates his own body.

Man loves himself (i.e. his body).

Therefore, love your wife in the same way you love your own body.

This is the context of the entire passage. Period. Nothing more. It's that simple. Now Paul goes on to elaborate on that point by giving examples of how one loves their own body. He says that man shows that he loves his body because he feeds it and nourishes it and cherishes it. Thus, men thus show love to their wives by treating them just as they would their own body, by feeding, nourishing, and cherishing. Obviously, he means from an emotional standpoint.

To further emphasize his point about loving one's own body, Paul draws a comparison to Christ and the assembly. Christ is the head, and the assembly is the body. Just as a man loves his own body, Christ also loves His own body, which is the assembly. Christ also shows his love towards His body/assembly by feeding, nourishing, and cherishing it. And Paul is also quick to point out that Christ gave himself for His body/assembly. More than that, He also sanctified and cleansed it. How? With the washing of water by the word. These are the very same words that Jesus prayed to the Father in John 17:17, "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth!" once again showing that the believer is sanctified by the word of God.

This whole portion of the passage regarding Christ and the assembly is actually a parenthetical thought apart from the main thought. The main thought of the passage, as already pointed out, is about how men are to love their wives. But Paul digresses into this parenthetical aside as an illustration: man loves his own physical body; Christ also loves His body, the assembly of believers. It appears that Paul even recognizes that he has digressed from his main point. At the end of verse 32 there is one particular clause that sticks out, "but I speak concerning Christ and the assembly," and in the very next verse we read, "Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so [thus, in this manner] love his wife even as himself."

Here in verse 33 Paul brings his readers back to his main point by offering a final summarizing statement: love your wife as you love your own body. To take this passage and make it a treatise on how the assembly is the "bride of Christ" is reading more into the illustration (eisegesis) than Paul intended as with other passages that are misrepresented for this purpose.

In many places, the Bible uses a marriage illustration to make a point about some aspect of Christianity, but illustrations are used to explain objective truth and literal conclusions. This doesn't mean that illustrations, symbols, and allegory are to be taken literally. Overall context is the issue. Regarding the objection in the form of a question, "How can Christ marry a city?" the answer follows: it's an illustration that explains an objective truth. What is that truth?

"New Jerusalem" coming down from heaven to earth consummates the ultimate goal of redemption; the new heavens and new earth when God's final enemy is defeated, that is, death. The apostle Peter pointed to this event as the one Christians ultimately look to.¹ From the very beginning, the father of our faith, Abraham, looked for that city built by God.² Additionally, we must remember that the earthly Jerusalem and the Jerusalem in heaven are represented by two different covenants represented by two different women.³ The Jerusalem in heaven is also referred to as the ekklesia's "mother." These are all illustrations pointing to the one great final wedding

¹ 2Peter3:13

² Hebrews 11:10

³ Galatians 4:21-28

feast in the new heavens and new earth where eternal righteousness and life will dwell in love, not law. This is a complex doctrine using marriage as an illustration that ties biblical truth together from beginning to end.⁴ If false doctrines are allowed to rearrange the furniture in the illustration room, true understanding that sets us free will be circumvented.

So, we must always ask; why? In proving a crime in a court of law, determining motive is important. What is the church's motive for presenting itself as the bride of Christ? Well, first of all, it's a Catholic doctrine passed on to Protestantism in spite of the Reformation. Please remember that the Reformation was meant to, as the name implies, reform the Catholic Church but not replace it. The forefathers of the Protestant Reformation NEVER left the Catholic Church. And as mentioned earlier, BOTH claim Augustine as their Doctor of Grace.

In considering the many lies that make up the one big lie that is church, we now consider the lie that Catholicism is at odds with Protestantism. Both advocate an ongoing need for salvation by church as an additional mediator other than Christ. Both advocate their authority to forgive sin on earth by God's proxy. Both claim to judge one's salvation on God's behalf. Both dole out salvation on an installment plan through "sacraments." This is the reapplication of Christ's death for "present sin" that can only be ministered by "lawful ministers of the gospel" within the church.

Protestants renamed these sacraments as "ordnances" and the "means of grace." Mainline leaders of Protestantism like RC Sproul say that hard work in remaining faithful to the "means of grace" isn't really a work while effort at obeying the law is a work.⁵ Without launching into a major doctrinal treatise on this point, suffice to say it is a rejection of how the biblical new birth changes the believer's relationship to the law, viz, faith working through love rather than works justification under the law of sin and death. It's the Galatian problem where traditions of men fulfill the law rather than love fulfilling the law.

Hence, in this single perspective on the law, the law can only condemn, so the church makes up its own system of works that are "by God's grace" or **grace works** that are supposedly not works. So, when we work hard at church stuff, or "do church" faithfully, Christ fulfills the law FOR US. This is often couched in terms like, "Christ working through us." In contrast, the new birth cancels the one law that condemns by putting the old man to death with Christ and resurrects the new man who now serves the new law of Christ. This is a onetime final event. It's the same law, but its ability to condemn has been vanquished, and "where there is no law there is no sin." Consequences for sin are now a family matter and not a matter of remaining under the "law of sin and death." Simply stated, the church totally misses the point of Romans 8:2 and its relationship to the new birth. But is this deliberate? After all, if the biblical new birth is true, what do we really need church for?

With this said, back to the original point: the Catholic concept of the church being the bride of Christ is based on one these aforementioned sacraments, and passed on to Protestantism. That's the smoking gun on this point; that's the motive behind the theological felony.

⁴ <https://paulspassingthoughts.com/2013/06/04/christs-bride-is-the-city-of-love-not-the-church/>

⁵ <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/should-i-let-go-and-let-god/>

The Church Fathers have seen that the blood and water from the opened side of Christ as the “source” of the Church, the way Eve came from the opened side of Adam. And just as Eve is the bride of Adam, so is the Church the Bride of Christ. (CCC §766) From this metaphor, we can say Christ died for his bride. So the sacrament of Holy Matrimony configures a bridegroom to be like Christ in his self-emptying for his bride and vice versa. (CCC §766, 1609, 1644)⁶

Though Protestants don't refer to it as the "sacrament of Holy Matrimony," the same basic idea is proffered constantly in the Protestant church. In the same way Bible doctrines fit together to confirm its truth, every church lie and false doctrine has its part in the one big lie; that is, the church is God's appointed authority over the salvation of men on earth.

⁶ <http://www.catholic365.com/article/6752/the-sacraments-are-meant-to-make-us-more-like-christ.html>