

Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:32). In that context, husbands were called upon to model Christ's love for the church in their relationship with their wives. "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:25-27). The response of the wife to her husband was to follow and respect his leadership (Eph. 5:24, 33). This is the ideal response of the bride/church toward her husband, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The fourth picture of a church was the relationship between Shepherd and sheep, that is, the church is a *sheepfold*. John the Baptist described Jesus as "the Lamb of God" (John 1:29), and Jesus described Himself, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep" (John 10:11). Then Jesus described the church as a sheepfold (a pen where sheep are kept): "Other sheep I have which are not of this fold" (John 10:16). The church is a flock that follows the Shepherd. Jesus noted of His church, "Them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock" (John 10:16). There is much emphasis in Scripture about the relationship of the Shepherd and sheep, but perhaps this relationship is best summarized in Psalm 23, "Because the Lord is my Shepherd, I have everything I need" (Ps. 23:1, TLB).

The fifth picture that represents a church is a *garden*—the growth of plants, vines, or trees. Jesus uses the metaphor of a vine to describe His relationship to individual Christian believers: "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser" (John 15:1). This was Jesus' way of describ-

ing the unbreakable bond that existed between Himself and those who trust in Him. In the context of this metaphor, the vine is lifted up and pruned to insure it produces its greatest potential (John 15:2). The emphasis of the metaphor is an abiding relationship between Christ and believers, "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

The sixth picture of the church is a *family*, where believers are called children or sons of God. The family is the foundational social institution of society. In this description, a family connects the father to his children. Jesus described the experience of becoming a Christian in the context of being "born again" (John 3:3, 7). In that context, "as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name" (John 1:12). When teaching His disciples to pray, Jesus urged them to address God as their Father in heaven (Matt. 6:9; Luke 11:2). Christians throughout history have referred to one another as "brothers and sisters" because of this description of the church as the family of God.

The seventh picture of the church is a *priesthood*. While this analogy is foreign to the thinking of most in Western culture, the Jews who originally received the Scriptures quickly recognized it. Peter, whose primary ministry focused on introducing people from a Jewish background to Christianity, portrays the church as a priesthood working together in the service of God. He describes Christians as "a holy priesthood" (1 Peter 2:5) and "a royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9).

While some Christian denominations today use the word "priest" to designate a specific clergy office, the early

church viewed every believer as a priest with direct access to God. Jesus Himself held the office of High Priest, and all other believers were viewed as “a kingdom of priests” (Rev. 1:6, literal translation). Most evangelical Christians describe this doctrine as “the priesthood of believers.” It’s significant that this metaphor is always used in the plural, suggesting a team approach to the priesthood—believers working together to accomplish their responsibilities before God. In the context of the Hebrew priesthood, the duties of the priests involved the worship of God, praying to God on behalf of others, and systematically teaching the word of God to others.

God designed the church to be a place where interactive relationships help believers to experience God. Christians gather together for corporate worship, the reading of the Scriptures, and a message to encourage and challenge them as they live life. While a growing number of people try to nourish their Christian life through various media ministries and Internet Web sites, that alone is not enough. People need face-to-face encounters with each other that will hold them accountable to their shared faith. While Christianity is often viewed as a private religious experience, it’s also a corporate expression of faith and worship. What is Christianity all about? Christianity is seen in the church—the body of Christ. Without a church, many would not understand Christianity.

Think about It

Question: What is it about local churches that so many misunderstand Christianity? What can churches do to become a better reflection of Christianity?

Answer: People misunderstand Christianity because of the attitude of Christians toward their local church and the way local churches act. There are times when Christians fight in their churches about things of little or no consequence. At other times, the church fights the world or cultural practices around them. Outsiders don’t understand the reasons Christians fight. Their big concern is, “Why doesn’t the church express more love to the world and to one another?”

It’s probable that the church does need repentance. Some churches need to *repent* of the evil they cause and the confusion they sow into the world. Still other churches need *renewal*, which is when the believers recommit themselves to the biblical practices that Christ expects of them. Finally, churches need *revival*. This is defined as God pouring Himself out on His people (Joel 2:28). The answer to these concerns is God living among His people in the church. Then and only then will the world understand what Christianity is all about.