

“THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST: ITS CANDLESTICK METAPHOR”

Revelation 1.12, 13, 20; 2.1, 5

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In his contribution to the scholarly book titled *A Theology For The Church*, edited by Daniel L. Akin, well-known pastor, theologian, and commentator Mark Dever authored the chapter titled “The Church.” He begins the chapter,

“The doctrine of the church is of utmost importance. A theology for the church would be incomplete without a theology of the church. Though many earlier systematic theologies have largely omitted ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church is a crucial component of Christian truth. It is the most visible part of Christian theology, and it is vitally connected with every other part. A distorted church usually coincides with a distorted gospel. Whether such a distorted church results from misunderstandings of the gospel or leads to them, serious departures from the Bible’s teaching about the church normally signify other, more central misunderstandings about the Christian faith.”¹

While I wholeheartedly agree with Mark Dever’s opening paragraph, I am convinced his view of the Church is distorted in the very way he warned his readers about. Granting that the Spirit of God must illuminate the Bible student to apprehend spiritual truth, I leave it to you to carefully and cautiously consider yet another portion of God’s Word in which the nature of the Church of Jesus Christ can be discovered using imagery to convey truth to the Bible student.

Moving on to yet another book dealing with the Bible’s treatment of the Church, I read,

“So far as I know, there has been no similar effort within one volume to review all the Biblical pictures of the church and to examine their interdependence.”

Those words were penned by Paul S. Minear in 1960 in his book *Images of the Church in the New Testament*.²

It is on this topic of the Church and the use of images to convey truth about the Church that I speak to you. It is a crucial topic. Most of you are well aware that I have previously delivered messages from God’s Word titled “The Church Of Jesus Christ: Its Body Metaphor,” “The Church Of Jesus Christ: Its Temple Metaphor,” “The Church Of Jesus Christ: Its Priesthood Metaphor,” and “The Church Of Jesus Christ: Its Flock Metaphor.” This message is titled “The Church of Jesus Christ: Its Candlestick Metaphor.”³

¹ Daniel L. Akin, Editor, *A Theology For The Church*, (Nashville, Tennessee: B & H Academic, 2007), page 766.

² Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), page 13.

³ I also recommend Charles Hunt’s most excellent *The Body Of Christ: Metaphor Not Myth*, <https://www.classicalbaptist.press/pamphlets>

In case you are wondering, I will not attempt to preach on all the images between 80 and 100 in the New Testament that refer, in one way or another, to the Church of Jesus Christ.⁴ And though I will refer to two different images used in John's Revelation in this sermon, only one of them is a metaphor for the Church of Jesus Christ.

Regarding the word metaphor, I have previously used it. Let me refresh your memory about this approach to communicating called metaphor. When the Apostle Paul identifies the Church of Jesus Christ in his epistles as a body, specifically "the body of Christ," his use of that metaphor is to explain more clearly the nature and operation of the Church, and its importance to Church members. The same can be said whenever a metaphor for the Church is used in Scripture.

About metaphors, it has been written,

"A metaphor is the shortest, most compact of these comparisons; in it, the likeness is implied rather than stated explicitly. Typically the writer asserts that one thing is another (in some respect), or suggests that it acts like or has some of the qualities of something else."⁵

Thus, a metaphor is a literary device by which one thing is described using the reader's familiarity with another quite dissimilar thing.

We have already studied and discovered that the Church of Jesus Christ is an assembly and that its characteristics include both locality and visibility. A Church is at a place you can see. Therefore, when the Apostle Paul's Spirit-inspired epistles identify the Church in Corinth as the body of Christ, he is not stretching the limits of our imagination by simultaneously changing the fundamental nature of the Church of Jesus Christ. The Church is still local and visible even when described metaphorically. It cannot be otherwise. Metaphors *do not* change what they are used to describe.

The Apostle Paul is not alone in the New Testament in using metaphors to reveal the nature of the Church of Jesus Christ. You may remember, from First Peter 1.1-2 and 2.1-9, the Apostle Peter's use of the priesthood metaphor to describe the congregation. Even when the priesthood metaphor is used, the Church is still both visible and local. Priests occupy a place, and you can see them. Then, of course, there is the Lord Jesus Christ's use of the flock metaphor to describe the Church in John 10, with the Church even there being both local and visible.

Notice John's Revelation, where we find two images: one that refers to the Church and another that, if we are not careful, can be distracting and does not refer to the Church. We begin with Revelation 1.12:

1.12 And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks;

1.13 And in the midst of the seven candlesticks *one* like unto the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the foot, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle.

1.20 The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches.

2.1 Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks;

⁴ Minear, page 28.

⁵ Porter Gale Perrin, *Writer's Guide And Index To English*, (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1942), page 235.

2.5 Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.

Revelation 1.12 informs us that John *saw* “seven golden candlesticks.” Verse 13 informs us John *saw* the Lord Jesus Christ “in the midst of the seven candlesticks.” Verse 20 can be confusing if we are not careful to maintain the distinction between the “the seven stars,” which “are the angels of the seven churches,” and the “seven golden candlesticks,” also described as “the seven candlesticks,” which are “the seven churches” that John *saw*.

Thus, two separate metaphors are used in Revelation 1.20: the stars to describe the angels of the Churches, and the candlesticks to describe the seven Churches. Though both metaphors are things with location and visibility used to describe things with visibility and location, it is not helpful to us at this time to be distracted from the candlestick metaphor, which is the only metaphor used here to describe the Churches.

In Revelation 2.1, reference is again made to “the seven golden candlesticks,” while Revelation 2.5 records part of the Lord Jesus Christ’s warning to the Ephesian congregation for having left their first love:

“Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.”

Alarming to the most casual reader is the Lord Jesus Christ’s warning in Revelation 2.5. Even though the candlestick is obviously seen to be a metaphor for the Church of Jesus Christ (“the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches.”), the Lord Jesus Christ warns the congregation in Ephesus. He will remove their “candlestick out of his place” if they do not repent. The Head of the Church seriously wants that congregation to return to their first love, which is Him.

Before examining the implications of this candlestick metaphor, let us recognize the obvious that is so frequently overlooked by commentators, pastors, and casual readers of John’s Revelation: the candlestick metaphor *is not ever* used to represent *anything* like a universal or invisible church. Clearly, the seven candlesticks seen by John represented seven *actual* Church congregations, with no debate possible concerning the Lord Jesus Christ’s use of the candlestick metaphor to refer, *not* to all Christians everywhere, but to *that* congregation. Therefore, misusing the candlestick metaphor to represent all of Christianity or something like a so-called universal, invisible church does violence to the way Scripture intends the metaphor to be used. Candlestick refers to a particular congregation.

With that established, journey back in time with me to the first century. Picture you and me with a few people in a small, dark house just after sunset. There are no windows and a single doorway with no door. The flickering light in the room comes from the small oil lamp on the table, making it just possible to read John’s Revelation. Candles with wicks, such as those we are familiar with, were unlikely to be referred to here.

Thus, when John wrote “I saw seven golden candlesticks,” in Revelation 1.12, the mental picture that formed from his statement was of seven ornate golden stands on which small lamps, such as were on the table, were mounted. The function of a candlestick, whether made of gold or anything else, was simple. Lift up the lamp so the light it casts is more easily seen.

When the seven candlesticks were mentioned again in the next verse, the same mental picture would persist. When the seven candlesticks were once more referred to, this time in Revelation 1.20, all in the room could see, each in his own imagination, seven pieces of furniture whose function was to elevate an oil lamp, so its dim light was cast farther than if it remained on a table.

If those in the room were Jewish a menorah would be imagined, such as could be found in every synagogue. A menorah is really seven candlesticks joined to a single base. Only in this verse were the candlesticks explained to represent congregations, with each candlestick a Church.

The same would hold in Revelation 2.1. However, in Revelation 2.5 the warning was that the candlestick might be removed. The effect of this warning would be different depending on the individual. The Gentile Christian would expect relative darkness to return to a room whose candlestick was taken away.

However, the Jewish Christian might hearken back in his mind to the destruction of the Temple by the Babylonians when the menorah was removed from the holy place. Or, and this is even more likely, the destruction of Jerusalem and of Herod's Temple by the Romans in 70 AD would be remembered, and the horrors associated with that terrible time, only ten or fifteen years earlier.

Against that cultural and historical backdrop, we reflect on the metaphor of the candlestick as a Church of Jesus Christ:

First, HOW THE METAPHOR OF THE CANDLESTICK IS USED

Remember that a metaphor is a literary device whereby something dissimilar in most respects is shown to be comparable to another thing in some respects. The key to using a metaphor is understanding that the comparison made does not alter the fundamental nature or characteristics of the original thing. Thus, the nature and function of the Church is not in any way changed by likening it to a candlestick.

Allow me to illustrate: Bert is a duck. The reality, of course, is that Bert is a full-grown American male whose appearance and conduct are nothing like a duck in most respects and are only somewhat similar to a duck in one, limited respect. If you watched Bert walk, you would be reminded of the way a duck walks. Thus, the metaphor compares two things in only one way, even though they are otherwise dissimilar. So, it is with the metaphor of a Church and a candlestick.

It is also essential to understand that the metaphor is something familiar to the audience. When Paul uses the body metaphor, he assumes his readers are familiar with the human body. When Peter uses the priesthood metaphor, he assumes his readers are familiar with priests. When the Lord Jesus Christ used the flock metaphor, He recognized that His audience would be very familiar with matters related to sheep in a flock.

Thus, while a candlestick is most generally nothing like a Church of Jesus Christ, there is a way in which a candlestick wonderfully illustrates a Church. Recognize that Jesus Christ is the light of the world,⁶ and that a Christian's testimony to the truth is said by the Savior to be a light.⁷ As the candlestick holds up the lamp for all to better see and for its light to shine farther, so does a Church congregation serve to do spiritually what that piece of furniture does physically.

How important should a Church be thought to be in its role of lifting up spiritual light sources the way a candlestick hoists a lamp aloft? Consider only two passages:

John 3.14 reads,

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up.”

We usually imagine that verse to be a reference to Christ's crucifixion, and rightly so. But I am persuaded it might also refer to the role of a congregation to so elevate Christ through our efforts to make the name of Christ known among the nations. The Savior was held up once on the cross for crucifixion, but it is a Church's continual ministry to exalt Christ by means of our preaching, our teaching, and our worship. We hold Him up the way a candlestick upholds a lamp.

Next, there is Matthew 5.14-16, a portion of our Lord's Sermon on the Mount:

⁶ John 8.12; 9.5

⁷ Matthew 5.14

- ¹⁴ Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.
- ¹⁵ Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.
- ¹⁶ Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

Christian, your light needs to be put on a candlestick to give light to all in the room and to glorify your Father, who is in heaven. But the candlestick is the Church where you are a member. It has always been the Savior's design for His disciples to be members of a Church where their light can best shine as the congregation holds it up for all to see.

Thus, in a way that no other organization or institution is intended, the Church of Jesus Christ is singularly enabled to elevate for all to see Jesus Christ, the light of the world, and to elevate Christians so they shine brightest and farthest. "But what about a parachurch ministry? What about Gideons? What about Women's Bible Fellowship?" Why settle for something that seems reasonable but is not found in the Bible when God's best means of accomplishing the task is available, and is shown in the Bible to be God's will for every Christian?

Next, THE MEMORIES THE CANDLESTICK METAPHOR WOULD EVOKE

The memories of Gentile Christians in John's day are easy to predict. The Gentile Christian might be familiar with worship in a pagan temple and would undoubtedly be familiar with the usefulness of a small oil lamp in a domestic setting. Hold the lamp up, and its effectiveness is predictable. Leave the lamp in a low place, on a table, a stool, or a ledge, and its benefit is real but minimal.

The Jewish Christian, on the other hand, would be familiar with all these things and many more. The Jewish believer in Christ, drawing on his instruction from the rabbi in the synagogue and perhaps his experiences in Herod's Temple before the Roman destruction, would think of the menorah. Every synagogue had at least one, each holding up seven small lamps. Then there was the furniture in the holy place in the Temple, taken away by the Romans when they razed the city.

Is the reference to seven candlesticks a reference to a Jewish menorah? Are we to understand that each branch that holds a lamp represents a distinct congregation? That the seven are all fixed to a single base illustrates an implied reliance upon the Savior as the foundation upon which every congregation is supported? Perhaps.

Both Gentile and Jewish Church members would connect the candlesticks' function to the importance of their Church. There is light without a candlestick, but the light is not nearly so easily seen, its benefit not so easily realized. So, with the Church. For all the difficulties and challenges associated with Churches composed of Christians with all our faults and flaws, Christ is lifted up by Church ministry in a way unlike any other. A believer's light (as dim and flickering as it is) is held up to shine brighter and farther than is possible any other way.

Every believer of John's day would know the benefit of a candlestick to hold up a light in a dimly lit room. And all rooms were dimly lit in those days. Additionally, the Jewish believers would also strongly associate the threatened removal of a candlestick with God's judgment and a return to almost total darkness. Thus, they would know the efficient value of a candlestick and therefore the spiritual value to every believer of his Church.

In the Bible, the Lord Jesus Christ declared, “I am the light of the world.”⁸ Also in the Bible, the Lord Jesus Christ taught His followers, “Ye are the light of the world.”⁹ What is our purpose as lights? We are to shine the light of the glorious Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. It’s a crying shame for us to hide our light under a bushel, because that conceals the light that lost people need to see. Our lights are supposed to shine.

In Revelation chapters one and two, we see reference made to the seven Churches of Jesus Christ being likened to candlesticks. What do candlesticks do but hoist the source of light aloft so that light can more easily be seen? Thus, in this sin-darkened world, we know the importance of the congregation in exalting the Lord Jesus Christ, the light of the world, and in holding up our lights for all to see.

Here is where we bring it home and apply the importance of the Church, the congregation, the assembly to your life and testimony as a Christian. If you are a believer in Christ, you are a light to a sin-sick world. You wouldn’t light a candle and then hide it under a bushel, would you? Of course not. That is not something Christians should do.

What does the Savior want His disciples to do with respect to the candlestick, which is your Church, your congregation, your assembly? He wants you to hold up your light using the candlestick, does He not? That may involve your participation in Vacation Bible School, or it may not. It may involve your participation in the library park ministry, or it may not. But it does involve your participation, does it not?

Do you have unsaved family? Do you have unsaved friends and loved ones? Do you have unsaved neighbors and colleagues at work? Concerning those unsaved people, do you have any concern whatsoever for the salvation of their eternal and undying souls?

If so, the Church, the congregation, the assembly of which you are a member, is vital to you reaching them with the light of the Gospel message because in some mysterious way we are like a candlestick that holds a lamp up so its light shines farther, so its light shines brighter, so the darkness is dispelled and people can more easily find their way.

That, my friend, is the metaphor of the candlestick as it is used to explain the importance and the function of the Church of Jesus Christ. So, how do you make the best use of this Church, this congregation, this assembly? It depends upon you.

Perhaps you will come to understand how a pastor’s ministry of preparing you to serve God is joined to the role this Church is to play in your life, so you can make a decision that not only fulfills you but also helps you to reach those loved ones you care so deeply about.

⁸ John 8.12; 9.5

⁹ Matthew 5.14