

Chapter Thirteen

“This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine.”

“THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST: ITS CANDLESTICK METAPHOR”

Revelation 1.12, 13, 20; 2.1, 5

In his contribution to *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 warns his readers. Granting that the Spirit of God must illuminate the Bible student for him 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

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

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 the truth about the Church, that is the concern of this chapter. It is a very important topic. Previous chapters are 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.” In this chapter, I will not attempt to deal with all of the 80 to 100 images in the New Testament that refer, in one way or another, to the Church of Jesus Christ.³ And though I will refer to two different images used in John's Revelation in this chapter, only one of them is a metaphor for the Church of Jesus Christ.

Concerning this word metaphor, let me refresh your memory. When the Apostle Paul identified the Church of Jesus Christ in his epistles as a body, specifically “the body of Christ,” his use of that metaphor was 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.”⁴

² Minear, page 13.

³ Ibid., page 28.

⁴ Perrin, page 235.

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 previously 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, and you can see it. Therefore, when the Apostle Paul's Spirit-inspired epistles identify the Church in Corinth as the body of Christ, he was not stretching the limits of our imagination by simultaneously changing the basic nature of the Church of Jesus Christ. The Church is still local and visible even when described using a metaphor. It cannot be otherwise. Metaphors do not change what they are used to describe. Thus, choosing to employ the metaphor of a candlestick does not alter the nature of the Church of Jesus Christ in any way.

The Apostle Paul was not alone in the New Testament in making use of metaphors to reveal to us 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.

Turning to John's Revelation, there are two images, one of which refers to the Church and another, which can be distracting if we are not careful, that 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;
- 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, with the metaphor of the stars used to describe the angels of the Churches, and the metaphor of the candlesticks used 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 metaphor of the candlesticks, 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 warned the congregation in Ephesus. He would remove their “candlestick out of his

place” if they did not repent. He seriously wanted that congregation to return to their first love, which is Him.

Before carefully 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* used to represent *anything* like a universal, invisible church. 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.

Journey back in time with me to the first century. You and I are with a few others in a small, dark house just after sunset. There are no windows and a single entrance 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 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 – like the one on the table – were mounted. The function of a candlestick, whether made of gold or anything else, is simple. Elevate 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 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 the table.

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

The same would hold true in Revelation 2.1. However, in Revelation 2.5, the warning was 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 Herod's Temple by the Romans in 70 AD would be remembered, along with 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 WAS 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 in understanding that the comparison made does not alter the basic nature or characteristics of the original thing. Thus, the nature and function of the Churches are not in any way altered by likening them to candlesticks.

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 is nothing like a duck in most respects, and is only somewhat similar to a duck in one limited respect. If you watched Bert walk you would be reminded of the way ducks walk. Thus, the metaphor compares in only one way two things that are otherwise dissimilar. So it is with the metaphor of a Church and a candlestick.

It is also important to understand that the metaphor is something familiar to the audience. When Paul used the body metaphor, he assumed his readers were familiar with the human body. When Peter used the priesthood metaphor, he assumed his readers were familiar with priests. When the Lord Jesus Christ made use of the flock metaphor, He recognized His audience would be very familiar with things related to 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. Jesus Christ is the light of the world.⁵ A Christian's testimony to the truth is said by the Savior to be a light.⁶ Therefore, 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 typically imagine that verse to be a reference to Christ's crucifixion, and rightly so. But I am persuaded it is also a reference 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 using 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:

- 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 that are in the house, to glorify your Father which is in heaven. But the

⁵ John 8.12; 9.5

⁶ Matthew 5.14

candlestick is the Church where you are a member. So, it has always been the Savior's design for His disciples to be members of a Church where their light can best shine as it is held up by the congregation 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 para-church ministry? What about Gideons? What about Women's Bible Fellowship? What about the Navigators?" Why settle for something that seems good 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 certainly be familiar with the usefulness of a small oil lamp in a domestic setting. Hold the lamp up, and the effectiveness of it is predictable. Leave the lamp in a low place, on a table or 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 is imagery for a distinct congregation? That the seven 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 function of the candlesticks 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 being comprised of Christians with all of our faults and flaws, Christ is lifted up by Church ministry in a way unlike any other, and 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 strongly associate the threatened removal of a candlestick with God's judgment and return to almost total darkness. Thus, they would know the very practical 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." Also, in the Bible, the Lord Jesus Christ taught His followers, "Ye are the light of the world." 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 unbelievers need to see. Our lights are supposed to shine.

In a Church's Sunday School ministry little children are frequently taught a song, "This Little Light Of Mine." Hide it under a bushel? No. I'm going to let it shine. It's a wonderful sentiment, don't you think? In Revelation chapters one and two, we see reference made to 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 see the importance of Churches exalting the Lord Jesus Christ, the light of the world, and to holding up our lights for all to see.

Here is where we bring it home and apply the importance of the Church to your life and testimony as a Christian. If you are a Christian, 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, you would not. That is not something Christians should do. What does the Savior want Christians to do concerning the candlestick, which is your Church? 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 Sunday School or it may not. But it does involve your participation in some aspect of ministry, does it not?

Do you have unsaved family members? Do you have unsaved friends and loved ones? Do you have unsaved neighbors and colleagues at work? Concerning those unsaved people, have you any concern whatsoever for the salvation of their eternal and undying souls? If so, the Church of which you are a member is vital to you reaching them with the light of the Gospel message because in some mysterious way your Church is 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 is the metaphor of the candlestick as it is used to explain the importance and the function of the Church of Jesus Christ.

How do you make the best use of your Church? It depends upon you. Perhaps a better question would be to ask how your Church can make best use of you.