

The Bible The Baptists and The Bride of Christ

by

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One of the most controversial subjects being discussed in independent Baptist churches today is the identity of the Bride of Christ. Unfortunately, more confusion exists as to the meaning of the term, than as to the identity of the Bride. Much of the controversy surrounding the identity of the Bride is centered on our understanding of Revelation 19:7-9. "Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints. And he saith unto me, Write, Blessed [are] they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb. And he saith unto me, These are the true sayings of God."

There are many differing opinions as to the true identity of the Bride of Christ. Some say the Bride is Israel, which will be reunited with its Messiah during the Millennium. The Old Testament does portray Israel as the "wife" of the LORD, but describes her as unfaithful, divorced, and rejected. Israel will be reunited with her estranged Husband at the time of the second coming, but according to Zechariah 12:10 and 13:9 that reunion will take place on earth, not in heaven as the events of Revelation 19 obviously do. Some say the Bride is all the redeemed from all ages (John Gill's note on Matthew 22:2 in his New Testament Expositor is a good example of this view). This cannot be true because, (a) Everyone that will be saved is not yet saved at this time (tribulation saints, and those born and saved during the Millennium), (b) John the Baptist was definitely saved, but said he was not part of "the Bride" (John 3:29).

And some say the Bride is "The Church", meaning the universal, invisible, mystical body of Christ made up of all of the redeemed from the time of Christ until the rapture. This is by far the most prevalent view held today by most Baptists. Those who hold this view generally interpret Ephesians 5:23-33 and 2 Corinthians 11:2 to mean the "universal" church rather than the local church, to whom the letters were addressed. The problem with this position is Eph. 4:4&5, "There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism..." It is obvious here that the Bible clearly teaches there is only one body. This passage does not indicate a numerical singleness, but a typical singleness. By this I mean there is only one type of true New Testament church (called the body in Col. 1:18) . We must now ask ourselves a question. Which type of church is the true New Testament church? Is it the "universal, invisible" church of liberal ecumenical protestantism, or the local, visible church of the Independent Baptists? There are three positions that prevail today. (1) The true church is local, and visible. (2) The true church is universal and invisible. (3) The true church is both local and universal, both visible and invisible. The first position is both logical and Biblical, having over 99 verses of Scriptural support. The Second position is logical, but without any Scriptural support. The third position assumes the Bible is wrong, not one (type of) body, but two (types of) body, which of course means, if the Bible is wrong, God is a liar!

So, what is the answer. Does the Bible specifically say, one way or the other, what the identity of the Bride of Christ really is? I believe it does, and does so most emphatically.

I believe much of this confusion is based on two unfortunate facts. 1. A misunderstanding of the identity of the true New Testament church. 2. A misunderstanding of what is meant by the term "Bride of Christ." If we can clarify these two areas of confusion, we can make much progress in identifying the Bride of Christ.

The word "church" is used seventy-seven times in the New Testament. The word "churches" is used thirty-seven times. Of these 114 references to "church" or "churches," by reading the context, you can see that 99 references are to local churches. One reference is to the assembly of the Nation of Israel in the wilderness, and the remaining 14 are references to the "church" generically, that is, no church specifically, all churches in general.

In referring to the true New Testament church, the Bible uses three metaphors: The Body of Christ (Colossians 1:18, 24), The Bride of Christ (John 3:29; Rev. 18:23; 22:17 cf. Eph. 5:31-32; 2 Cor 11:2), and The Building of Christ (1 Cor 3:9; Eph. 2:21). I fear that many (if not most) who call themselves Baptists, misunderstand one, two, or occasionally all three of these metaphors. Most Independent, Unaffiliated Baptists realize the church of the New Testament is Local, Visible, Organized (having officers: Pastors and Deacons), and duly Constituted (having been properly planted, exercising church authority, and having a membership roll). However, when we see the metaphors: Body, Bride, and Building; we often revert to the "universal, invisible, mystical" thought patterns of protestant teaching.

When we see the term "Body of Christ", we often forget this term is a metaphor used to illustrate truth concerning the true New Testament church. The term "Body" when referring to the church is never used in a mystical fashion, but is used simply as an identifier. Here at First Baptist Church, we have a day school ministry called Spring Valley Baptist Academy. Our Academy has a "student body", this body is not mystical, or universal, or invisible, but merely identifies our students as a group of young people belonging to Spring Valley Baptist Academy. The "Body" of Christ is said to be "fitly joined together" in Eph 4:16. That word "joined" is the same root word we use for "joint", as in the "elbow joint", the "knee joint", and so forth, indicating our body is all one piece, joined together in one place, visible, and organized (the arm bones are connected at the elbow, if one arm bone and one leg bone were joined at the elbow, we would not be very well organized!), and the "Body of Christ" is joined together, in a local, visible, organized body. In like manner, "the Body of Christ" is a metaphor of identity, a group of people, joined together, belonging to Jesus Christ! There is nothing mystical about it. The term "Body of Christ" is simply a way to illustrate the relationship between Jesus Christ and His local, New Testament churches. The "Body" metaphor illustrates the church's service to the Lord. That service is Pastoral (caring for established churches), and Missionary (establishing new churches). Every person in a true New Testament church ought to be involved in one of these areas of service. Deacons assist the Pastor in caring for the people in the church. The Sunday School teachers help teach the people in the church. The nursery workers help greatly in assisting the Pastor by providing safe and loving care for infants and toddlers during the services. The members of the church assist the Pastor, and the Missionaries, by the regular giving of their tithes and offerings. The term "Body of Christ" illustrates the relationship of Christ to His church in the area of service.

Likewise the metaphor "Building" is simply a reference to that which Christ has built, namely His true New Testament church (Matt, 16:18). In Eph. 2:21, the "Building" is said to be "fitly framed together." Together means "all in one place", or local, and if local, then also visible, and organized (not a pile of wood, but a framed together building). The term "Building" refers to the relationship between Christ and His church in the area of His guarding, keeping, and protecting the church. As a building is a place of shelter and safety during a storm, so also is the true New Testament church a place where we will be kept safe and sheltered from the storms of daily life, and be protected from the onslaughts of the world, the flesh, and the devil. The "Building" or Temple of God also speaks of our worship of Him as a "Royal Priesthood," offering Spiritual Sacrifices to Him who is our keeper and protector. Now we come to the "Bride." Each true New Testament church is pictured as a bride, with Christ as the Bridegroom. This metaphor is used to illustrate the love relationship of Christ for His churches, and the obligation for the Lord's churches to be faithful, in contrast to the false churches that are pictured as a harlot in Revelation chapter 17. "And there came one of the seven angels which had the seven vials, and talked with me, saying unto me, Come hither; I will shew unto thee the judgment of the great whore that sitteth upon many waters:" This false church is (a) unfaithful [a great whore] (b) condemned [under judgment] (c) universal [sitteth upon many waters]. This chapter goes on to say, "With whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth have been made drunk with the wine of her fornication," which identifies this false church as a state church ("with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication"), formalistic ("And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication:"), and persecutes the true New Testament church of Jesus Christ ("And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus: and when I saw her, I wondered with great admiration."). So we see that the term "Bride" refers to the relationship of Christ to His churches in the area of purity (separation), and possession (the Bride belongs to the Bridegroom), in contrast to the false, unfaithful "church" called a "harlot".

There are two passages of Scripture to search in order to properly identify the Bride. In Genesis chapter 24 we see a beautiful picture of the Bride. Abraham (type of God the Father), sends his servant (type of the Holy Spirit), into a far country to call out a bride for his son Isaac (type of the Lord Jesus Christ). In reading this passage there are some very important things to notice. (1) The servant (the type of the Holy Spirit) was sent (in verse 4) "unto my country, and to my kindred, and take a wife unto my son Isaac." The servant was sent only to the country (kingdom) of the Father, to call out a wife only from the kindred (family) of the Father. In the New Testament the Kingdom of God is clearly identified as consisting of all of the redeemed (Matt 8:11; Luke 13:28-29), and the family of God (Eph. 3:15) is identified as also including all of the redeemed. It is from this kingdom, and from this family, that the servant is instructed to call out a bride for the son. The bride is to come out of the kingdom of the father, and out of the family of the father. You will notice that Isaac did not marry the whole family, but only one part of the family, Rebekah (the one who was faithful in doing all that the servant asked of her). All of the redeemed will not be part of the Bride, but only those members of the family of God who have proved their love for the Lord through true obedience to His Word, by being faithful to His true New Testament church, and all that church membership entails.

The second passage that we must look closely at is Hebrews chapter 12:22-24. "But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven,

and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than [that of] Abel." Here we see a prophecy of our coming into heaven and seeing all that is in store for us there. We see first of all (1) an innumerable company of angels, (2) the general assembly, (3) the church of the first born, (4) God the Judge, and (5) the spirits of just men made perfect, (6) Jesus the mediator, and (7) the blood of sprinkling.

Number 1, the angels, is self explanatory.

Number 2, the general assembly, is an interesting group. In the time of Christ the Greek nation was divided into many independent City-States. Each City-State had its own Assembly, or governing body, that made all of the laws for that City-State, and functioned as a general court of last appeal. We see this City-State Assembly illustrated in Acts 19:28-41. However, all of the people living in the Greek nation at that time did not live in one of the organized City-States, some lived in the rural areas, not under the governing authority of any of the City-States. These un-represented people (not part of any particular assembly) would meet together once a year in a great General Assembly and conduct the business of the rural areas of the nation. The Bible says there will be a General Assembly in heaven, that is, a group of people who are not represented by, or under the authority of, any of the organized specific assemblies. The Bible clearly identifies the specific Assembly as the local New Testament church (see Scripture quotations from above paragraphs). This heavenly "General Assembly" are clearly those folks from the gospel era who were saved, but were never baptized into the membership of, and faithful to, any of the Lord's specific assemblies, the New Testament churches.

Number 3, the Church of the First Born, is that group of saved, baptized people who were members of, and faithful to, the Lord's (the First Born, Col. 1:18) true New Testament churches.

Number 4, God the Judge is also self explanatory.

Number 5, the spirits of just men made perfect, is a reference to the Old Testament saints according to Hebrews 11:32-40.

The rest, 6 & 7, are also self explanatory.

So then, we see there will be a gathering in heaven of three distinct groups of redeemed people, (a) the General Assembly (those saved during the Gospel era, but not members of, or under the authority of, any Special Assembly), (b) the Church (Special Assembly) of the First Born, and (c) the spirits of just men made perfect (Old Testament Saints). These three groups will be (a) General Assembly: the friends of the Groom (John 3:29), (b) the church: the Bride (Eph. 5:31), (c), Old Testament Saints: the honored Guests (Rev. 19:9). We see, therefore, that the Bride of Christ is not all of the redeemed, nor even all of the saved from the Gospel Era (Church Age), but only those faithful members of true New Testament churches.

WAIT A MINUTE!!! It sounds to me like the writer of this article is a "Baptist Brider." That depends on what you think a "Baptist Brider" is.

If the average Christian is asked for a definition of the "Baptist Bride" position, he would be hard pressed to give an intelligible answer. Some would say the "Baptist Bride" position means "Only Baptists are going to Heaven." Others would say, "Only Baptists will be raptured." Others would say only, "I don't know." If the Baptist Bride position means only Baptists are going to heaven, then I'm not a Baptist Brider. If the Baptist Bride position means only Baptists will be raptured (partial rapture theory), then I'm not a Baptist Brider (nowhere does the Bible ever teach the "rapture of the Church", but it does teach the rapture of the saints, all of them: Old Testament saints, New Testament saints, church members, and non-church members, all will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air). But if you believe the Baptist Bride position means the Bride of Christ will be made up of those who have been faithful to the true New Testament church of Jesus Christ, then, yep, I'm a Baptist Brider! I have to be. You see, I believe the Bible - all of it! The Bible says the Bride is the Church. It also says the Church is local and visible. If you have a local, visible church, then you must also have a local visible Bride, for the Bible teaches they are one and the same thing. If you have a universal Bride, you must also have a universal church, for they are still one and the same thing!

Why is all of this so important? If we win souls, but do not make every effort possible to baptize them into local New Testament Baptist churches, and teach them to be faithful to the local New Testament church, we cheat those precious souls out their full reward (2 John 1:8). A proper understanding of the true New Testament church is absolutely necessary in order for our church members to realize it is their faithfulness to their local church that will enable them to be called out of the family of God and placed into the Bride of Christ following the judgment seat of Christ, at the Marriage feast of the Lamb, and receive their full reward. Every pastor must be made to understand that his job is to: Pray, Prepare, Preach, Protect, Preserve, and Perfect the Flock. The pastor's final task will be to Present the church, the Bride of Christ, faultless, a chaste virgin, to the Bridegroom, the Lord Jesus Christ, at the Marriage Feast of the Lamb. Think about it.