

Corporate Church - A brief definition

The term “corporate” simply means that which is bodily. Thus, when we say “corporate church,” we commonly mean a collective body made up of those who profess Christ in some way.

However, the Bible actually makes a distinction between the *eternal, invisible body* of Christ - consisted **only** of those who have thus far been saved by God’s good pleasure, including those who are currently with Christ in heaven - and the *earthly, visible body* which consists **both** those who are saved, and those who are not, and will never be, saved (yes, this means that during the Church Age, when God did recognize the earthly, visible body, the true child of God belonged in one sense to both the corporate and the eternal bodies simultaneously).

The Old Testament people of God, whom we normally refer to as Israel, were, as a body, the corporate church of the day. This means that they, as a collective body knit together either by being in Abraham’s bloodline, and/or the sign of circumcision, identified outwardly as God’s people, His children. Yet, in complete agreement with our definition of the corporate body, they did indeed have those who were very much not saved. In fact, the Bible teaches that most of them were unbelievers:

Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that **all** our fathers were under the cloud, and **all** passed through the sea; And were **all** baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; And did **all** eat the same spiritual meat; And did **all** drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ. **But with many of them God was not well pleased: for they were overthrown in the wilderness.** (1 Corinthians 10:1-5)

Wherefore I caused them to **go forth out of the land of Egypt**, and brought them into the wilderness. And **I gave them my statutes**, and **shewed them my judgments**, which if a man do, he shall even live in them. Moreover also I gave them my sabbaths, to be a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the LORD that sanctify them. **But the house of Israel rebelled against me in the wilderness: they walked not in my statutes, and they despised my judgments**, which if a man do, he shall even live in them; and **my sabbaths they greatly polluted**: then I said, **I would pour out my fury upon them in the wilderness, to consume them.** (Ezekiel 20:10-13)

God teaches that likewise, the New Testament corporate body is defined as:

- a) The collective body knit together under the name of Christ (as were the Jews of “Abraham’s seed,” John 8:33, 39-44), that is, she identifies externally with the “foundation that is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:11).
- b) That which “nameth the name of Christ” (2 Timothy 2:19; see also Matthew 7:21-23) - that is, the people who are of the supposed lineage of Christ (“Christians,” Acts 11:26).

And,

- c) The congregate unit whose members have ordinarily partaken of the sign of water baptism (replacing the Old Testament equivalent of circumcision, Acts 19:5, 10:47, 48), and do participate, when possible, in the only other ceremonial sign given the New Testament church - the Lord’s Supper (Matthew 26:26-29; 1 Corinthians 11:23-29).

This New Testament corporate body has always been full of those who outwardly associate with the name of Christ, but are actually “like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed **appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness**” (Matthew 23:27):

But in a **great house** there are not only **vessels of gold** and of **silver**, but also of wood and of earth; and some to **honour**, and some to **dishonour**. (2 Timothy 2:20; compare Romans 9:20-24)

For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation **gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble**; (1 Corinthians 3:11, 12)

The above are a description of the corporate church of any era, and most certainly includes that of the New Testament era – for the epistles to Timothy and to the church at Corinth were written post-Pentecost, in the New Testament period. God, in speaking figuratively, is first of all teaching that “gold,” “silver” and “precious stones” point directly to those who are saved:

And he shall sit as a **refiner and purifier of silver**: and he shall **purify the sons of Levi**, and purge them as **gold** and **silver**, that they may offer unto the LORD an offering in righteousness. (Malachi 3:3)

For thou, O God, hast proved us: thou hast tried us, as **silver** is tried. (Psalm 66:10)

And they set in it **four rows of stones**: the first row was a **sardius**, a **topaz**, and a **carbuncle**: this was the first row. And the second row, an **emerald**, a **sapphire**, and a **diamond**. And the third row, a **ligure**, an **agate**, and an **amethyst**. And the fourth row, a **beryl**, an **onyx**, and a **jasper**: they were inclosed in ouches of gold in their inclosings. And the **stones were according to the names of the children of Israel, twelve**, according to their names, like the engravings of a signet, every one with his name, according to the twelve tribes. (Exodus 39:10-14)

As well, “wood,” “hay,” “stubble” and “earth” have spiritual implications, pointing to natural, i.e., unsaved, man:

Where no **wood** is, there the fire goeth out: so where there is no **talebearer**, the strife ceaseth. As coals are to burning coals, and **wood** to fire; so is a **contentious man** to kindle strife. (Proverbs 26:20, 21)

Wherefore thus saith the LORD God of hosts, Because ye speak this word, behold, I will make my words in thy mouth fire, and **this people wood**, and **it shall devour them**. (Jeremiah 5:14)

All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field: The **grass withereth**, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the **people is grass**. (Isaiah 40:6b, 7)

And the house of Jacob shall be a fire, and the house of Joseph a **flame**, and the **house of Esau for stubble**, and they shall kindle in them, and devour them; and there shall not be any remaining of the house of Esau; for the LORD hath spoken it. (Obadiah 1:18)

My strength is dried up like a **potsherd** [same as “earthen,” or “earth”]; and my tongue cleaveth to my jaws; and thou hast brought me into the dust of death. (Psalm 22:15)

When the Old Testament corporate body was judged of God due to their corporate apostasy (Jeremiah 32:29-32), the people were commanded to flee, to come out of the external, visible body:

And unto this people thou shalt say, Thus saith the LORD; Behold, I set before you the **way of life**, and the **way of death**. **He that abideth** [remains] **in this city** [Jerusalem] **shall die** by the sword, and by the famine, and by the pestilence: **but he that goeth out**, and falleth to the **Chaldeans that besiege** you, **he shall live**, and his life shall be unto him for a prey [a spoil]. (Jeremiah 21:8, 9)

Indeed, for the true believers of the day, whom God calls “good figs,” the command of the Lord was loud and clear – *go out of* “**this place**” (Jerusalem, the Promised Land):

Thus saith the LORD, the God of Israel; **Like these good figs, so will I acknowledge them** that are **carried away captive** of Judah, **whom I have sent out of this place** [Jerusalem] into the land of the **Chaldeans for their good**. (Jeremiah 24:5)

It is very important to note that only a fraction of Israel did heed the warning of God spoken through His prophet Jeremiah, and left Jerusalem. Many did not. In fact, many openly mocked Jeremiah the prophet, and even attempted to kill him (Jeremiah 26). To most, the message that God would destroy His corporate people by a heathen nation, and was now commanding them to forsake their beloved city was utterly ludicrous – even blasphemous. Nevertheless, those who did not leave Jerusalem were eventually destroyed, as God had repeatedly warned. Likewise, for the New Testament corporate body, the warning of Christ comes through irrefutably:

And when ye shall see **Jerusalem** compassed with **armies**, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh. Then let them which are **in Judaea flee to the mountains** [the world *outside* of the corporate body, as Babylon, or Chaldea, was outside Jerusalem]; and let them which are in the **midst of it depart out**; and let not them that are in the **countries enter thereinto**. (Luke 21:20, 21)

Remember the stones which represented people? In Lk. 21:6, we read that there will come a time, called the time of the “great tribulation,” when the stones, or the corporate body, will be utterly decimated:

As for these things which ye behold, the days will come, in the which **there shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down**. (Luke 21:6)

Great Tribulation (Matthew 24:21; Mark 13:24; Luke 21:23) is a time when Satan, the “abomination of desolation,” has been allowed of God, as His instrument in judging the corporate body, to rule in the corporate body:

But when ye shall see the **abomination of desolation**, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, **standing where it ought not**, (let him that readeth understand,) then let them that be in Judaea flee to the mountains: (Mark 13:14)

Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that **he as God sitteth in the temple of God**, shewing himself that he is God. (2 Thessalonians 2:4)

Of course, this does not mean that God's true children are in danger of being harmed along with the corporate body. Nothing can separate them from the love of God (Romans 8:35-39); no imaginable force can snatch them out of the Father's hand (John 10:27-30). God, in judging the corporate church, is ceasing to *recognize*, to *acknowledge*, that earthly institution - which, as was mentioned earlier, is a composite of *both* true believers and "false brethren" (Galatians 2:4). His children, in one sense, begin their departure from the corporate church by also not recognizing any longer the validity of the corporate church. The physical withdrawal from the congregations, along with the termination of memberships, is simply a natural step that follows the realization *of* and obedience *to* the fact that God now only sees the "...gold, silver, precious stones...." who have been sent out of the corporate body (Jeremiah 24:5).