

## What Is a Church?

Ephesians 2:19-22 (11/17/17)

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*Ephesians 2:19-22, So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.*

When I was a kid I went to market with my parents in center city Philadelphia. Behind the market was an alley where we threw our trash into a dumpster – chicken guts, heads, everything. That area was also a hangout for drunkards and homeless people. I can still remember one poor soul standing there holding a bottle in a paper bag, his face puffy and purple, his clothes all soiled, and saliva drooling from his lower lip. I saw many homeless people sleeping on benches, lying over exhaust grills, and huddled in doorways trying to find some warmth and a little comfort. According to statistics, there are over one-half million homeless people in the United States.

I have always been blessed to have a warm home, a comfortable bed, good meals, and parents who cared for me. I was never abused, except that one time when mom threw a slipper at me when I wouldn't come out from under the bed. After flushing me out, she used a large clothes brush to "abuse" me even more, in love teaching the importance of obedience. It is hard for me to even imagine what it would be like to be an abused, mistreated child in a miserable living situation, scrounging the streets for a little food. But many live that way. How wonderful it must be, especially for children, to be rescued from these horrid conditions we read about and to be brought into a loving home, given a soft bed, delicious food, and lots of love.

Being taken from a horrid situation to a loving and caring situation is what Paul wants us to sense as he unfolds for us in our passage what it really means to belong to God's church. Never take the church for granted. God loves the church and we should too. Let's learn to be so ever thankful for what God has done in bringing us into His family. We were once His former enemies, but now are reconciled to Him through His Son and His work on the cross. What does it mean to be part of God's church?

### **First, God has graciously rescued you out of your alienation from Him and made you part of His loving family forever – v. 19**

*Ephesians 2:19, So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household,*

"So then..." looks back, probably all the way to the beginning of this chapter, where God rescued you from the graveyard of sin, from Satan's authority, from God's wrath, and saved you by His grace and love and mercy through faith alone in Jesus Christ. He made you spiritually alive by pure grace; you did nothing to earn your rescue. Then He reminded you to look back when you were Christless, hopeless, godless in this world, alienated from God. You couldn't have been worse off. But when you were still God's enemies in your sin, He sent His Son to reconcile you to Himself so you now have peace with God, the Almighty Creator and Sustainer of the universe. You couldn't be more blessed.

God reminds you again in verse 19 that you were strangers. You were aliens. You didn't belong to God. You were outside the gate, outside the family. You may have been close and even looking in through the gate, but you weren't in, you didn't belong. Many years ago Carolyn and I spent a little time in Cochabamba, Bolivia, as guests in the home of a woman named Senora Ponce. Cochabamba streets are lined on both sides with tall, cement walls. Along these walls at various places are large doors indicating a dwelling place on the other side. These doorways open into a courtyard with various rooms around the perimeter. Most nights, Senora Ponce allowed several campesinos, peasant farmers, to sleep just inside

the doorway area, but not in the courtyard itself. They were close, but they weren't in. They didn't belong to the family. That's the idea of these words "strangers and aliens." Most local churches have people who are living nearby and watching God's work going on, but they don't really belong. They are not part of God's family. They are still strangers and aliens.

That's exactly where everyone here was at some point. Then God drew you to Himself and rescued you and made you a citizen in His kingdom. Citizenship was highly valued in Paul's day. He identifies himself as a citizen of Rome, which gave him much privilege. And even greater privileges are given to every child of God because they are now citizens of God's kingdom. This citizenship comes with wonderful privileges like enjoying peace and joy and free access to God. This citizenship is permanent; no one can ever strip you of it. You're a citizen of heaven now, even when living here on earth.

Once you were spiritually homeless; you didn't belong in the family. But the moment you placed your faith in Christ, God adopted you into His family. You are of God's household. You belong. You are loved and cared for by God. He'll never abuse you or desert or leave you. These are truths to hold onto, because you as you walk in this world, you will feel like a stranger. Carolyn and I experienced this when we were in Cochabamba. We were newly saved and eager to serve others. But as we got to know the folks in our religious group, we did not sense a spiritual connection with them. We felt very alone. Then one day God brought us into contact with Paul and Tim Wyma and their wives, missionaries with New Tribes. There was an immediate spiritual closeness. They loved the Bible and the gospel like we did and we knew we were of the same spiritual family and we found great joy being together. What a contrast to what we had experienced before with folks who did not connect with God. They didn't belong to Him. Alienated and strangers. Hell will be a place of torment that will include being shut out from God's kingdom, from God's family, not for a season, but for eternity. You don't want to be there. Come to God. Become part of His kingdom and family forever.

### **Second, God is establishing your life on a firm foundation and perfect cornerstone – v. 20**

*Ephesians 2:20, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone,*

The most important thing about the church is the truth. 1 Timothy 3:15 says the church is the pillar and support of the truth. Ephesians 2:20 says in a powerful way that we who are in Christ are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. The church is not built on Peter. The Pope is not standing in Peter's place as the vicar of Christ. The church is not built on human traditions or human myths. The foundation spoken of here is the truth revealed by Christ through His Spirit to the first century apostles and first century prophets. God deposited His truth into the church through these men. Apostles like Paul and Peter and John were Christ's authoritative representatives given the high privilege of proclaiming Christ and laying the foundation of the truths that we now have in the Scriptures. There are no apostles today; none in Rome and none in Salt Lake City (Mormons) or anywhere else. The prophets in this verse were men closely associated with the apostles who received direct revelation from God in that first century. By the end of the first century all the apostles and prophets had died. There are no more prophets receiving messages from God. We have their messages contained in Scripture and that's why we teach and preach the Word.

Jesus sent the church into the world to make disciples, to teach all those who come to Christ whatever He commanded us (Matthew 28:19-20), and that is all found in your Bible. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 defines and describes this foundation: All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, reproving, correcting, and training in righteousness, that God's people may grow and change and become more like Christ. The church's purpose is to teach everything the Bible says, the whole counsel of God, as Paul said in Acts 20:27. We preach and teach on every level and in many different ways. It's all discipleship, helping people establish their lives on God's transforming truth.

But there is something about this foundation that is very important. It has a perfect cornerstone, the Head of the Corner. One expert said the cornerstone is "the primary foundation-stone at the angle of the structure by which the architect fixes a standard for the bearings of the walls and cross-walls throughout." Christ determines everything about this glorious edifice made of rescued humanity. All the doctrine and

practice of the church comes from Him and He casts His image over the entire building. Everything in the church is to reflect Him. Everything necessary for salvation, for life, and for godliness is found in Christ alone. No one must replace Christ with human inventions. No human leader or church is the cornerstone. Christ and Christ alone is the cornerstone. Our love and loyalty are to Him and everything that happens in the church must glorify Him.

There are many false and substitute foundations and cornerstones going in the name of the church. Churches built on legalism or human merit rather than grace alone, faith alone, and Christ alone, have a false foundation. Churches built on selfish appeals to health, wealth, and prosperity and churches that pump up your self-esteem and positive thinking rather than calling people to take up your cross, deny yourself, repent of sin, put off ungodly desires and lusts and put on godly desires as Ephesians 4 and Colossians 3 emphasize have a false foundation. Churches built on human opinions and casual views of Scripture and its authority, accepting evolution and gender blending and approving same sex marriage has a false foundation. Churches that drag in the latest and greatest methods and sure-fire programs to make your church a huge success, or programs based on humanistic psychology have a false foundation. Churches that ignore the more severe teachings of Scripture and never warn their people about judgment and the lake of fire have a false foundation. Churches that downplay the exclusivity of Christ and the absolute necessity of the new birth have a false foundation. Churches that give friendly chats and inspiring talks about various ear-tickling topics but do not preach and teach the Word with conviction, reproof, rebuke, and a call to full-throttled living for Christ in a godless world have a false foundation. Churches that entertain and make no distinctions between the holy and the unholy are not true churches. These are all examples of churches with false foundations and cracked cornerstones.

Some churches have pared the sermon down to ten minute talks. I'm not big on long sermons, but ten minutes? One preacher was waxing eloquent in his sermon when suddenly a gentleman got up and headed for the back door. "Yo! Where are you going?" "I'm going to get a haircut." "That's ridiculous reason for leaving. Why didn't you get a haircut before you came to church?" "I didn't need one then." Whether lengthy or short, sermons must be an exposition of truth to maintain a firm foundation.

### **Third, God is fitting and growing you into His holy temple – v. 21**

*Ephesians 2:21, in whom the whole building, being fitted (joined) together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord,*

Remember that the church in this text is the universal, invisible church including all people of all time and space who have bowed their knee to Christ and become a disciple or follower of Christ. Here in verse 21 you are looking at an active construction site where workers are building and laboring over the growth. It can be messy at times, but the end is satisfying. There are two present tense verbs here – being fitted, and growing. These can be applied to every individual believer. This applies to you as part of this local construction site, and also to the whole building which has been going on for centuries and will continue until the last stone is slid into place.

Notice first that the whole building is being fitted together. Have you ever watched a stone mason at work with his hammer and chisel and plumb line? He chooses a stone for a particular spot and then works over it until it fits nicely into place. That's the picture here. You are not in your position in God's church by accident. Christ is building this temple and He is fitting you in. He has a special place for every one of His living stones in this living edifice. The Greek word for "fitted together" includes the word "harmos," where we get the word harmony. It means joint or fitted. Your knee is a joint and a complicated one for sure, with all the parts fitted together beautifully and working in exquisite harmony. God uses preaching and teaching to fashion and prepare us and to smooth off rough edges to harmonize us into just the right place in His building. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says if reading and preaching don't smooth you out so you fit in nicely, God has a mighty chisel and a heavy hammer and He knows how to knock off those proud corners and stubborn edges that must go. That's why God ordained trials for you – to work you over and get you to harmonize with the body. The spiritual harmony of a loving, serving, caring, evangelizing and teaching local church is something beautiful to see.

Not only is God fitting you in, but He keeps growing this temple. God will not stop until the last stone is in place. Ever since the day of Pentecost and then as the Gentiles came flooding into the church, God is growing His temple one century after another. This growth continues despite seeming failure and heresy and fights and blood. The world attacks the true church, and sadly, sometimes the church cannibalizes its own. But it's growing. This is why I love church history; it shows us God's work through the ages. Throughout the early church, medieval, and modern periods, the battle for the faith continues. Sometimes God's people are like sheep led to the slaughter sailing through bloody seas, but the blood of the martyrs has always been the seed of the church. The more they try to stamp out our voice today, the stronger we must become. With Luther, we must be captured by the Word of God and claim, "Here we stand!"

#### **Fourth, God is building you into His eternal dwelling place – v. 22**

*Ephesians 2:22, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.*

I want you to read this verse and apply it to yourself personally. In Christ you are right now being built together with every other believer. You may be flitting through your life like a happy butterfly in a full-bloomed garden or you may be struggling just to get through each day, full of anxiety, worry, fear, depression, dealing with anger and spite. God is working in your life through good times and through your hardships. Yes, even through the evil from other people. God is building you to be part of His grand cathedral, to fit into His holy temple where He sits, where He dwells, where He lives for you and for His glory, right now, by His Spirit. Where is God? He is dwelling forever in His reconciled people. He is living in you. You are His dwelling place. This is His grand purpose in the church.

*2 Corinthians 6:16, Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, "I will dwell in them and walk among them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people."*

*Revelation 21:3, And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them."*

This is what God is preparing through the ages and right here, right now, in this place, for His glory, and our blessing, forever.

#### **SO WHAT?**

Our local church is a discipling center to help God's people to become more and more like Christ. That includes everyone God brings here. Every aspect of our church should feed into this single purpose to exalt our Cornerstone. Every Sunday School class we teach, every guest we welcome, every small group we are faithful to, every nursery we serve in, every meal we take to the sick or newborn families, every loving word from a husband to a wife, from dad to daughter, from mom to son, every key deftly plunked on that piano, every beat of that drum, strum of that guitar, vocals of that song, every prayer we send up, every gift we give, every encouraging word, every laying down our lives for others – all to glorify Christ and showing this lost world that God is dwelling in us by His Spirit. May God help us to be faithful to this high and eternal calling.