

Parish of Central Saanich - St. Stephen's & St. Mary's
 LENT 2018 - BIBLE STUDY SERIES
"What the Church Is All About"

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Ephesians Study #1: "The Nature of the Church"
(Chapters 1, 2, 3, 5)

Opening Prayer:

Heavenly Father, in Jesus Christ you have brought to birth your Church; help us now, by your Holy Spirit, to see our calling as your Temple, Body and Bride and catch the vision of our role in your eternal plan, to your honour and glory. Amen.

Introduction

When you hear the word "church" what image comes to your mind? Is it the building? - "You have such a beautiful church!" Is it the worship service? - "Are you going to church on Sunday?" Is it the clergy and institutional aspects of religious life? - "I want the Church to speak out more clearly on the issues facing our society." Is it the people who are involved? - "My church is so welcoming and friendly; they really make me feel I belong." Or is there something more?

We have a problem in English because the word "church" has come to mean all these things. It is like the word "love" - "I love that new hat you're wearing"; "I'll love you forever"; "I'd love to wring his neck!" Having different meanings for the word "church" has caused major problems for us; it has meant that the real nature and purpose of "the church" has become obscured and confused. If "church" is mainly the building, then we might concentrate all our efforts on preserving it. If "church" is mainly the worship, then I might feel it doesn't matter whether I am involved in any other way with the congregation around me. If "church" is mainly the institution, then we might feel that running it like a profitable business is absolutely essential. If "church" is mainly the people, then we might think that the social activities of the church should receive our major attention. How we view the church deeply affects our actions concerning it.

Valid as some of these images are, what I want to tell you this evening/today is that the Church is primarily "something more" than the images I have just presented. In fact, it is the "something more" which is at the heart of what the Church is all about. In this Lenten series in Ephesians, we will be looking at *"What the Church Is All About"* - what the Church really is, what it is for and how it should function.

I chose this book and focus on how we understand the nature of the Church and live out its reality in light of our welcoming a new incumbent and embarking on a new chapter in our life together. Some of what we will see will be "old hat" to some of us but it is good to be reminded of it

otherwise we will miss out on much of what God has in mind for us.

The Letter to the Ephesians

Ephesians is one of my favorite parts of the Bible precisely because of its focus on the church. Much of Western Christianity has focused on the individual nature of our salvation. This has arisen out of our Reformation heritage where we rediscovered that it is by grace we are saved through faith (as we will see when we look at chapter 2) and not through the mediation of a religious leader conducting certain rites. Unfortunately, this has led us to think of Christianity as primarily an *individual* experience; and this is true both for those who are more “evangelical” – “I have made *my* decision for Christ”, or catholic - “I make *my* communion”. Ephesians corrects this error by showing us essential *corporate* nature of the faith – that our individual salvation is in the context of community without which it doesn’t make much sense – both in terms of what it means to “be saved” and what we are “saved” for.

Although our main focus will be Ephesians itself, we will be not be studying it through chapter by chapter but will be organizing our sessions around different themes relating to our over-all topic of what the Church is all about. Some weeks, we will be jumping from chapter to chapter, other weeks we will focus on just one or two chapters and next week when we talk about the mission of the Church we will be looking more at scriptures outside Ephesians.

According to tradition, the Apostle Paul wrote the letter while he was in prison in Rome (around AD 62). This would be about the same time as the Epistle to the Colossians (which in many points it resembles – about one third of the words of the latter appear in the former¹) and the Epistle to Philemon (who is generally thought to have been a member of the church in Colossae). Paul's first and hurried visit for the space of three months to Ephesus is recorded in Acts 18:19–21. The work he began on this occasion was carried forward by Apollos and Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:24–26). On his second visit early in the following year, he remained at Ephesus "three years" (see Acts 20:31), for he found it was the key to the western provinces of Asia Minor. Here "a great door and effective work" was opened to him, (1 Cor. 16:9) and the church was established and strengthened by his diligent labours there (Acts 20:20,31). From Ephesus the gospel spread abroad "almost throughout all Asia." (Acts 19:26) despite all the opposition and persecution he encountered.²

Now it is interesting that, unlike his other letters, there are no personal greetings to individual members of the church there, which is surprising considering the amount of time he had spent with them. The explanation of this might be seen in the fact that the words "in Ephesus" (1:1) do not appear in the best and earliest manuscripts of the letter but are replaced by a blank and this has led many to think that this was a circular letter sent to not only Ephesus but to other churches in the region of Asia, the province of which Ephesus was the capital. This is supported by the reference in Colossians to a letter to the church at Laodicea, one of those other cities (Colossians 4:16). In both Ephesians (6:21) and Colossians (4:7) Tychicus is mentioned as the bearer of Paul's news and letters; in 2 Tim. 4:12 Paul says that he “sent Tychicus to Ephesus.” So, the scenario is that, along with the letters to the Colossians and Philemon, Paul sent a circular letter to nearby churches,

¹ C. Leslie Mitton, *Ephesians*. (London: Oliphants, 1976), pg. 11.

² With thanks to Wikipedia for many of the points in this paragraph taken from the article “Epistle to the Ephesians”, found on https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epistle_to_the_Ephesians

all by the hand of Tychicus, and what we know as “the Letter to the Ephesians” is that letter.

So we begin our series on “What the Church Is All About” by looking at “The Nature of the Church.” We will organize our thinking by looking at and unpacking the three images Paul uses in the letter to describe the Church: the Church as “Temple”; the Church as “Body”; and the Church as “Bride.”

We will see that the church is not primarily an institution of individuals defined by its clerical hierarchy but a living organism and community whose very nature is to serve as the demonstration and agent of God’s plan for the salvation of the world. We will now look at the nature and purpose of the church under the following descriptions: the Church as “Temple”; the Church as “Body”; and the Church as “Bride.”

The Church as “Temple”

In Ephesians 2:19-22 we read that, “You... are fellow citizens with God’s people...built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.” Where have we seen this picture of the Church as being a temple before? In 1 Corinthians (3:16), Paul tells us “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you?” (plural – the individual reference of our bodies being temples is 1 Cor. 6:19). Now a temple was seen as a place where not only worship occurs but also where the god lived, or, in the case of Israel, where God’s presence was made known. So the picture of the Church as a temple means we begin our definition of the Church not by looking at how we relate to one another, but to Christ through the Spirit. In the first three chapters of Ephesians, Paul emphasizes the Spirit’s role³ in bringing the church into being and sustaining it; in the last three chapters, he shows how to co-operate with the Spirit’s continuing work within us. This shows us that we as a Church are not held together primarily by organizational or institutional bonds but by the indwelling presence of Christ through the Holy Spirit. We are a living temple.

Now this aspect of the nature of the Church as temple helps us understand our purpose. In Ephesians 1:10, we read of God’s goal for creation: “to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.” This is expanded upon in Colossians 1:20, “...through Christ to reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross.” Even though we have been estranged from God through our sin and rebellion, he has made it possible for us to become friends with him again. This is at the heart of the church's message; we have good news to share, "Be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:20).

But not only is this reconciliation at the heart of the church's *message*, it is also at the heart of the church's *experience*. "Yes," you might say, "I know I have been personally brought back to God through Jesus, but what has that got to do with the church?" In Ephesians, Paul points out that

³ The Spirit has sealed us, keeping us in the life of Christ (1:13); he enables us to know Christ better (1:17); he is the means by which we have access to the Father (2:18) and the means by which God dwells within us (2:22); he reveals the plan of God to us (3:5); and strengthens us with God’s power (3:16).

being reconciled is not merely an *individual* experience, it is essentially *corporate*. In chapter two, just before the verses describing us as a temple, he speaks about the old divisions between Jew and non-Jew, or Gentile. He says that Christ's purpose was "to create in himself one new man out of two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross." (Ephesians 2:15, 16). This "one body" is not just the physical body of Christ sacrificed for us on the cross, it is also the body which Jesus has brought into being through his resurrection, the church, of which he is the head: "He raised him from the dead...And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body" (Ephesians 1:20, 22, 23). Then, in chapters four to six, he speaks about living out that reconciliation in everyday relationships within the congregation.

Thus the church is to be the living experience and demonstration of the reconciliation and new life that Christ brings. This is made clear in chapter 3: "His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known" (Ephesians 3:10). As we have seen God's love in Jesus, so we are now to see it in and through the church. The church is both the agent *and* the demonstration of God's plan to reconcile all things to himself. We don't just *tell* people about it. It is in and through us as the church that people are to *see* it taking place. As a temple composed of diverse elements put together into a harmonious whole, the Church is the living demonstration of the reconciliation and new life that Christ brings.

The Church as "Body"

Well, if this is true, then that affects how we think of ourselves. Returning to the images we began with, if the church is seen primarily as a building, you can't see people being reconciled through stones and mortar. If it is primarily the worship service, we can certainly show our reconciliation as individuals to God, but what about interaction with one another? If the church is primarily an institution, there can be some demonstration of reconciliation, but it would only be amongst the hierarchy and church structures. If the church is primarily people, then we can certainly see reconciliation in how we relate and interact with one another, but what would be the difference between us and the YM or YWCA? There is something more.

That "something more" is understanding the church as a "body" with Jesus Christ as its head. Paul speaks of the church as "the body of Christ, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way" (Ephesians 1:23). The way Jesus lives in us as a body is through the Holy Spirit, as we saw earlier: "In him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Ephesians 2:22). You see, the Church is not primarily a religious building, a worship service, an institution, or a social gathering - we are a body, an *organism*, "a life-pulsating people who are animated by the indwelling presence of Jesus Christ."⁴ We are not held together primarily by organizational or cultural or even religious bonds - we are held together by the Holy Spirit who lives in us both as individuals and as the body of God's people. We are the Body of Christ.

This image is expanded in chapter 4, where Paul urges his readers to live a life worthy of their calling to be the reconciled community, the demonstration of God's plan. When Christians live in unity and harmony, they demonstrate that "There is one body and one Spirit" (verse 4). He urges them to use their spiritual gifts "so that the body of Christ may be built up" (verse 12) and the

⁴ Greg Ogden, *The New Reformation*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), pg. 40.

result of our living harmoniously and using our gifts for the benefit of one another will be that “the whole body...grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (verse 16).

What does this image tell us? Three things:

1. ***Jesus needs us and we need him:*** If we are the Jesus’ “body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way” (1:23), Jesus needs us and we need him. First, Jesus is in us as the means through which he works on the earth. He has chosen to work through us. He needs us. Secondly, we can not work without him. In Ephesians 4:15,16, Jesus is described as the head of the body “into whom and from whom we grow,” which echoes the vine and branches analogy in John 15:1-11. He is our origin and goal, our source of life. He is the vine and we are the branches (John 15:5). We can produce nothing without him and yet he has limited himself to producing fruit through us. Our destinies are totally interrelated. Jesus needs us and we need him.
2. ***Jesus is our ultimate authority:*** Secondly, Jesus as head of the body is our ultimate authority. A key chapter on how the body of Christ functions, 1 Corinthians 12, begins with the necessity to affirm that “Jesus is Lord” (verse 3). Unless we are listening to him to discover the gifts and role God has given each one of us to fulfill within the body and are using those gifts in obedience to his direction there will be discord and disharmony. Each part of the body is coordinated and works properly only when it is connected to the head as its ultimate authority. Jesus is our ultimate authority.
3. ***Unity in Diversity:*** The third thing we note from the analogy of the Church as a body is that, just like a human body, we work together in harmony and unity, while at the same time having a diversity of gifts and functions. We looked at this in greater detail in our study on Spiritual Gifts. Here, in Ephesians 4:7-16, Paul concentrates on the diversity of functions expressed in leadership gifts. When we recognize the diversity of gifts and allow them to function, the body of Christ “grows and builds itself up in love” (verse 16). Paul emphasizes the ministry of every believer and that leadership exists to enable others to do ministry rather than the other way around: “To prepare God’s people for works of service” (verse 12). In this way, leadership is seen in a servant role and an agent for enabling the body, working in its diversity, to grow and be built up. We will expand on this when we come to our fourth study. The diversity of gifts reflects the reality that the Church is the body of Christ.

The Church as “Bride”

For final analogy, that of Bride, we turn to chapter 5, verses 21-33. Now I am not going to address the issue of human marital relationships now (I will do so in our fifth study) but I am going to look at it here because, amongst the admonitions to wives and husbands Paul speaks again and again about the relationship of us as a Church to Christ as his bride. Without references to human marital relationships it reads:

Submit...out of reverence for Christ...Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour...the church submits to Christ...Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless...Christ feeds and

cares the church...for we are members of his body... and the two will become one...I am talking about Christ and the church (taken from verses 21-32).

Out of 221 words, 92 of them, or 40% of the passage, refer to Christ and his relationship to us! Although it doesn't specifically say that the Church is the bride of Christ, as it does in the book of Revelation (e.g. 21:2), this is its obvious implication. We as the Church are the bride of Christ.

In verse 32 Paul refers to the unity of husband and wife as a "profound mystery" and says that he "is talking about Christ and the Church." Paul has used the word "mystery" before in chapters 1 and 3 (see Ephesians 1:9-10; 3:9) where he uses it to describe God's plan – once hidden but now revealed – which we have seen is to reconcile all things to himself through Christ. The wonder is how two entities – a loving, holy God and a sinful, rebellious humanity could be reconciled and reunited. It is in Christ and through his "giving of himself up for the Church" (verse 25) on the cross that this reunification has been made possible. This reunification is of two that were once one but then became separated. This is the same situation as the depiction of man and woman in Genesis 2. Out of one human being, God makes two – who then come back together in a union of love - marriage - to complete that which was once whole. This is why Paul quotes Genesis 2:24 here: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." He then goes on to say that "I am talking about Christ and the church" (verses 31-32). The bond we have together with Christ is that of husband and wife, bridegroom and bride, lover and beloved. We have been reconciled, reunited to one from whom we have been separated.

The voluntary and joyful submission of man and woman to one another in the bond of marriage is a picture of the joyful union of the Church to Christ. As the Church we give ourselves willingly to Christ; this is now not just reconciliation, but joyful union. The Church is the supreme demonstration of great intimacy, the intimacy of bride and husband.

One of the main areas where this has profound implications for us is in the area of worship which we will look at in session 3 where we will see that worship and reconciled relationships with one another and with God go together.

Summary

What is the nature of the Church? Michael Griffiths has summarized the Biblical nature and purpose of the church as follows:

The Church is not a third class waiting room where we twiddle our thumbs while we wait for first class accommodation in heaven. It is a dynamic new community, winsome and attractive, and with an eternal significance in the purpose of God. The Bible makes it clear that the church is God's goal for mankind, for the new humanity in its new communities.⁵

The Church is not primarily an institution but a living organism called into being by the indwelling Spirit of God. As God's Temple, the Church, by its very nature and calling, is the demonstration and agent of God's plan in Christ to reconcile all things to Himself.

⁵ Michael Griffiths, *God's Forgetful Pilgrims: Recalling the Church to Its Reason for Being* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 9.

As the Body of Christ, it shows by its diversity of function and wholesomeness of relationships the unity and community of God himself. By its patterns of life, it reveals to the world what is the calling and destiny of those who have been reconciled to God.

As the Bride of Christ, the Church demonstrates and experiences the deepest intimacy with him who reconciled her to himself. This intimacy enables both the human and divine dimensions in reconciliation to be fully celebrated and present.

The Implications for Us

Once, when I was explaining this biblical picture of what the church is and how we are to function, one member of the congregation said, "If this is what we are about, then this means we really have to take a new look at ourselves." They were right. This is what we will be doing in this series. This new look will include the following five implications:

1. A new way of looking at the church: we will need to move away from seeing the church as something we "go to" to something "we are an integral part of." It means a move away from seeing the church as an institution with a hierarchy to the church as an organism, a family united and working together.
2. A new way of looking at ministry: This new way of working together as a body will mean we will look at ministry in a whole new way. No longer will it be seen as something somebody "does to me" or "on my behalf", it will be seen as the work of the whole people of God, equipped by their pastors and leaders. In a body, every part has a function, from the brain to the toenail.
3. A new way of relating to one another: Thirdly, being an organism means that how we relate to one another is of crucial importance. If we can not experience reconciliation amongst ourselves, then not only will people outside have good reason to reject our message, but we ourselves will cause blocks to our own spiritual health and development. After all, if the lung were to say it wouldn't have anything to do with the heart, the body could not function and both organs would collapse.
4. A new way of worshipping: Then, if we are a body, intimately related to Jesus and one another, how will that affect our worship? Certainly, we can no longer see worship as purely personal and distant from others. Søren Kierkegaard⁶ has said that worship should be like a play where God's people are the performers, the pastors the prompters, and God is the audience. The way we do things is more like the pastors are the performers, the people the audience and God is the prompter! Being a body implies a new way of perceiving and experiencing worship together.
5. A new way of looking at mission: Finally, seeing the church biblically will affect how we see the scope of our ministry. No longer will it be seen as only towards ourselves; we will see that each of us has a ministry in the world. What's more, we will see that this ministry takes place in a battleground against the forces of evil which seek to prevent God's plan of reconciliation for the world from taking effect.

⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), pgs. 180-181

When the Church is being what it is called to be, growth and renewal take place. Being precedes doing. The Church is able to carry out its mission in the world when it demonstrates most clearly the life of God in its midst. What this mission looks like we will examine in our next session.

Closing Prayer:

O God, the glorious Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, give us the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that we may know you better. Enlighten the eyes of our hearts that we may know the hope to which you have called us, the riches of your glorious inheritance in the saints, the church, which is the body of our Saviour, and your incomparably great power for us who believe. Amen.

(Adapted from Ephesians 1:17-19)