

Going Nowhere Fast?

I often find myself fearful for the survival of groups of Christians, and for the individual spiritual survival of those in those groups. As I ask myself why this is, the answer comes back clearly:- **No sense of the purpose of God.** Many Christians seem to behave as if they had found a nice hobby, something which they enjoy being involved in, something which they feel is somehow beneficial, but that is as far as it goes.

Often the groups themselves have contributed to the problem in one of two ways. Either they also have no sense of purpose as a group or, perhaps more commonly, they have defined their purposes so tightly that there is little or no room for God's purposes to be worked out in practice. This is especially true in groups of Christians that have defined themselves as 'churches'. It is comparatively easy to start a 'church'. It is even easier to just 'keep on going' in the same old way, week after week, year after year. To be prepared to admit that we need to change and then go ahead with those changes takes humility, real grace and a readiness to learn from the Lord — especially if we find ourselves having to do the same again later on! In reality, we need to be ready to change and go on changing.

One danger signal to look out for is when we find that we are trying to make Scripture fit the way we do things, rather than being prepared to alter our practical approach to fit in with what the Bible actually says! The most obvious example may be our approach to 'church life'. We all of us have 'baggage' on this one — things from our past experience that we want to repeat (or avoid!); ideas that we have gleaned along the way and would like to put into practice; loyalties to a particular group or person; something we have read in a book; the latest speaker we have heard . . .

At the risk of putting myself in that last category, let's look together at some very simple but amazing pointers to **the purpose of God** for us in our life together with other Christian believers.

Paul's letter to the ***Ephesians*** is well-known as the letter which probably concentrates the most teaching about the church into its six chapters, but we are going to look at **chapter 2**, which, although it doesn't use the word 'church' even once (at least in the translation I use!), certainly has much to teach us about **God's purpose for his church**.

Paul starts (**v.1-3**) by talking about **how we used to be**. He talks about them in **v.1**, but soon includes himself in **v.3**. A short but accurate description of all of us before we came to Christ!

Then (**v. 4-6**) he reminds us of what God has done for us in Christ, turning us around from death to life, from rebels to heirs, from world-based to

heaven-based. And then a little hint of **God's purpose**, as Paul writes, “. . . so that . . .” in **verses 7-10**.

What does this mean? At the very least, it means that **God's purpose for us** is not just to rescue us from the terrible state we were in before we came to faith in Christ. “In the ages to come”, he intends to show the riches of his grace in saving us — but that's not all!

Yes, we have been saved by God's grace, through the faith that he has made possible for us. Not for boasting, nor even for the Lord's future glory, but in order to fit in with the plans that he has for us. These are not just in the future but in our daily lives now.

So, says Paul (**verses 11-13**), remember that you were once **miles away from God's purpose** but now have been brought right into it. This is why we have been included in God's rescue plan, not as an end in itself but to enable us to be part of his future plans.

An important point first. Who is Paul writing to? Even a quick read-through of these chapters makes it clear that the only people who can be included in God's forward plans are those who have put their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. Even the verses that we have looked at in this chapter make that clear. The purpose leads on from personal faith and salvation. Being saved “by grace . . . through faith” is **the doorway into discovering God's purpose**. Just as it is pointless to go through the doorway and not move forward, so it is impossible to move forward until we have come through the doorway!

And then (**verses 14-18**) there are all the other people who have come through that doorway! Every one in this together; division and enmity are dead. He even says that we have been made into ‘one new man’ together. Remember, this only applies to those who have come through the door of salvation, by grace through faith. As far as I can see, many (perhaps most) of the problems of ‘Christian unity’ are caused by first including non-believers in what we might try to call ‘churches’, and then trying to get those ‘churches’ together. The only church Paul is talking about is the one made up of those who are ‘in Christ Jesus’.

We may find this hard to handle. We are probably used to having ‘churches’ with membership, rules and rituals. Isn't a church based only on being ‘in Christ’ rather difficult to organise? Maybe what we need most is a radical rethink on what the church actually is, from God's point of view. Perhaps we think of a successful church as having all sorts of activities, for children, young people and other special groups? There is nothing against any of these, as long as we realise that they are not the church, nor part of the church. If we insist on counting them as part of ‘our church’, we shall probably **miss out on God's purposes** for us, because we shall have undermined the

basis of the church as God sees it, “all one in Christ Jesus”. The church is not made up of lots of groups glued together, but of many individuals who have each been joined to Jesus. (See **1 Corinthians 12:27**.)

As Paul moves on to write more about the church, this lesson of unity is vital. It was important in Ephesus, just as it is in our own villages, towns and cities, that the Christian believers were seen to be together. He spent several chapters of his first letter to Corinth trying to help the Christians there to see this same fact. Without real unity, based on our shared life together in the Lord Jesus Christ, it is impossible for us to move forward to fulfil the purposes that our Father has for us.

So to the last few verses (**19-22**) of this chapter, where we see some wonderful things about what we are now and what is **God’s purpose for us**.

1. We are **fellow citizens together (verse 19)**. Not foreigners, no longer cut off from the plans, promises and purposes that God has for his own people.

2. We are **God’s household together (verse 19)**. Living ‘under the same roof’ as our Father. The word translated ‘household’ means ‘in or of the house’, so this simply means that we live with him as part of his family group. A real sense of belonging!

3. But we are also **God’s house together**, in two ways, linked but distinct (**verses 21-22**). Being his house means that together we are the place where he makes his home, and Paul here is concentrating on two ways in which the church is that dwelling place, not so much the individual believer, though that is obviously a vital necessity too.

a) **The whole building** is being fitted together, as one enormous temple (literally, ‘sanctuary’) in the Lord (**verse 21**). This is the whole church, every single believer, joined together into one great ‘building’ where God is seen to dwell, just as he was seen to dwell in the Jewish tabernacle and temple in the Old Testament. It was already growing into a big building as Paul wrote. It is even bigger now.

b) But there in Ephesus, says Paul, you are also being built into **a place for God to live** (literally, ‘a house to settle down in’), where the life of the Holy Spirit is in residence (**verse 22**). This is exactly that he wants for us in our communities in these days. **His purpose has not changed!**

In both these aspects, the church is built on foundations and has a corner stone (**verse 20**). In another place (**1 Corinthians 3**), Paul writes that there is only one foundation for the church, Jesus Christ, but here he talks about ‘the foundation of the apostles and prophets’ and the Lord Jesus being the corner stone. What does he mean?

Looking at the second part first, we have already seen that a personal response to the grace of God in the Lord Jesus Christ is essential for anyone

to become part of the church. Each part of the building, each 'living stone' as Peter calls us (**1 Peter 2**), needs to have the basis of being 'in Christ'. So Jesus is the foundation, but he is also the corner stone, the constant reference point, the datum line from which every part of the building takes its reference and position.

As Paul says in **verses 21 & 22**, this applies in both the enormous temple/sanctuary of the whole church and in the much smaller local 'dwelling place of God in the Spirit'. Our position and function in the local fellowship of believers is designed to be always referred back to our being 'in line' with Jesus the corner stone. Amongst other things, it is another way of saying that we all need to be living 'in Christ' in order to fit in and work as part of the local church. It really is impossible otherwise.

But what about 'the foundation of the apostles and prophets' (**verse 20**)? Do we get a bit worried about the idea of ordinary people being in the foundations alongside Jesus? Don't worry!

Foundations need to be in place before the main building can go up. In a very practical sense, we can see that New Testament churches all needed input from men with either apostolic or prophetic ministry, often both, in order to get going on a right foundation. These are foundation layers, men 'in whose heart are the highways to Zion' (**Psalm 84:5**). They have at least started to learn from God what it is that he wants to accomplish in and through his church, and some of the ways in which he can and will bring about those aims in the lives of those who are joined together in Christ in a locality.

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So, how about it? Would we rather just keep on going in our well-established routines, or are we prepared to run the risk of seeking out God's purpose for his church and actually allow him to show us how we need to change and be changed?

How about those foundations? As individuals, are we sure that we are joined to Jesus? Having made sure of that, are we prepared to check through our 'church life' and make sure that it is solidly based on the Lord Jesus and linked back to him at every point?

And finally, however much we may feel moved by what the Lord wants to do in his people, are we really going to do anything about it, or will we settle for just 'going nowhere fast'?

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January 2004