

What's it all for?

Why did you first come to Christ? If we are honest, we have to admit that we came for what we could get. Sounds bad that way, doesn't it, but then we had heard that he had what we needed and was offering it to us freely, so we came and took it!

For most of us, it was probably forgiveness that we knew we needed, or perhaps a sense of direction and fulfilment. Either way, we were adrift and needed what Jesus was offering. We soon found that this was just the beginning - God wasn't simply running a rescue operation, there was a **purpose** to it all and he wanted to change us. We discovered the amazing paradox, that he loves us just as we are and yet is committed to our total transformation!

At about this stage, many (most?) of us will have got into trying to live a life to please God, perhaps as a sort of repayment for his love to us, perhaps to try to 'help' him in the transformation work. Some of us may be doing that still, and it is usually hard work!

But perhaps we then discover that great key to spiritual growth, the wonderful fact that we have been 'joined to Jesus' or, as the New Testament so often says, that we are 'in Christ'. We begin to discover (or rather find that the Holy Spirit reveals to us) more and more of the great gifts and inheritance that have already been given to us by our loving Father, and that we can learn to take hold of them as gifts from him, rather than try to achieve them ourselves.

As Peter writes: *"His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and excellence. For by these he has granted to us his precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust."* (**2 Peter 1:3-4**).

We have already touched on enough to keep us long occupied in very rewarding, exciting and transforming study, revelation and experience, but let us just look forward a little more. . .

Right from the beginning of our Christian experience we will usually have noticed that there are other people around! When we realise that we have been rescued from the mess our life was in, we find that there are others who are in the same position - we discover fellowship, sharing similar experiences with other people who may otherwise be completely

different from us in all sorts of ways, having one outstanding thing in common - our experience of God's love to us in the Lord Jesus Christ, through his death, resurrection and ascension, made real to us by the Holy Spirit.

After a bit, though, we may see that this is more than a sort of 'club' for God's rescued ones, a sort of 'Sinners Anonymous'. We may keep finding bits in the Bible that point to our Father having a **purpose** for this group of people, the church.

Some examples in **Ephesians**:- In **1:18**, Paul writes about us knowing '*the hope of his calling*' and '*what are the riches of his inheritance in the saints*'. This is not our inheritance in Christ, but rather his inheritance in us. Do we find this surprising? In **1:22-23**, he refers to '*the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*' This is no casual group of individuals! In **2:19-22**, we begin to see even more - God is building, both on a global scale and in the locality. In **3:8-10**, Paul sees his part in the church's role to demonstrate God's wisdom to spiritual powers! In **4:11-16**, a very clear statement of how the church is intended to function and, in **5:25-27**, a declaration of the church as the bride of Christ and the reason why he went to the cross. For me - yes. For you - yes again. But ultimately for the church, his bride. (This is echoed in **Hebrews 2:10**)

Although **Ephesians** does 'major' on the church, there are many other passages which confirm the same fact, that God has a priority interest in the church. Large parts of the letters to the **Corinthians** are taken up with how the church is intended to function. **John 17** shows Jesus preoccupied with the church as he approaches his arrest and crucifixion. How can we make it a minor concern? It is the human embodiment of his purpose, the body of Christ, not just some sort of 'holding operation', to keep us ticking over spiritually until we die!

We may be ready to protest that we do regard the church as a major priority. After all, we go to meetings regularly, don't we? Especially those who are leaders will quote the array of activities and meetings which are arranged specifically to encourage spiritual growth and development, and their efforts to try to get as many as possible to make use of them.

But are we sure that what we think of as the church is the same as God's intention? An even more pertinent question is: If we find that our

plans are not in line with God's, are we prepared to change direction, or would we rather 'fudge' the issue in some way?

Only those who are in Christ are in the church. Is it possible for someone to be a member of 'our church' who is not born again? In **1 Corinthians 3:10-17**, Paul is talking about the whole process of seeing the church built. He compares himself and Apollos to builders. Paul has 'laid the foundation' by seeing the Corinthians come to Christ in the first place and Apollos is 'building' on it by helping with their growth and development. He makes it abundantly clear in **v. 11** that there is only one possible foundation - the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

Maybe even more difficult to cope with is the expectation in the Bible that the church is local. God has placed each one of the members of the body just as he has desired (**1 Corinthians 12:18**). The Ephesian church were being built together into a local 'dwelling house' of the Spirit of God, as well as being fitted together into the whole 'temple' of the global church (**Ephesians 2:19-22**).

Sadly, and for all sorts of very understandable reasons, we think little of travelling some distance to 'go to church' with people we like, rather than concentrating on learning to live as members of the Body of Christ in the communities where we live. Many members of the Body, not finding what they want locally, will leave their home and travel past one or more gatherings of believers to get to the one of their choice. One of the effects of this is that there is even less likelihood of any effective gathering of believers in their home community.

Just these two examples will help us to see that we are certainly not on track, but the purpose is not to accuse or condemn anyone, but rather to help us see what our true situation is. The common opinion is that these are perfectly normal situations and that there is nothing that we can (or indeed should!) do about them.

If we think like that, it is very unlikely that we will do anything at all to change. Even if we do see that things are not right, we will still find it incredibly hard to persuade ourselves (let alone anyone else) that there is any point in trying to make any alterations - the 'machinery' of 'church life' does not easily adapt to change, especially radical change!

Maybe we are prepared to look seriously at these questions, to accept that we are not where we need to be. Let us ask the Lord to show us how he sees it all, and how we can start to move from where we are at

the moment to where he wants us to be, so that he can build us together with the other believers in our locality.

Another question we would do well to ask ourselves is whether we have as much real meaningful fellowship with another local believer who is not a member of 'our church' as we do with someone who is a member, even if they live miles away?

The almost inevitable answer is 'no', and it reveals that we are usually functioning on an organisational, 'club' type basis. As far as I can see, that is not how the Lord builds his church. Please don't just take my word for it, but have the courage to check it out in the New Testament!

So, how can we possibly move forward? If our Father is committed to the church, we can hardly disregard it, but the situation seems impossible.

There are at least two things we can do. First of all, we can all ask the Lord to help us to learn to function on the basis of the Body of Christ rather than on our own organisational loyalties. This means a whole lot more than going along to lots of 'inter-church' functions, but could start as simply as getting to know a believer from another denomination who lives locally.

Secondly, we can look and see what it is we are building and being built into. This is especially relevant for leaders, but for us all as well. In **1 Corinthians 3:10-17**, Paul doesn't only say that the church needs to be built on the foundation of the Lord Jesus. He also says that the building materials need to be right. Some will last for ever, others will not. On a simple level, some are God-made, others are man-made. We may have lots of good ideas about how we can experience good church life, but we need to see how our Father has planned it. If Jesus said that he only did what he saw the Father doing (**John 5:19, 8:28**), we can hardly afford to just go bashing on with our own plans!

Alternatively, we can simply ignore all this and carry on as we always have, but I suspect that, if we would listen, we should hear in our own ears Jesus' lament over Jerusalem:-

**“How often I wanted to gather your children together,
just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings,
and you would not” (Luke 13:34)**

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