

Christ Loved the Church

" . . . just as Christ also loved the church and gave himself up for her; that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present to himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless" (Ephesians 5:25 - 27)

One of the most important truths that has been emphasised repeatedly over the centuries is the personal nature of salvation. In other words, we cannot enter a right relationship with God by simply 'joining a church' or belonging to a special association. There needs to be spiritual rebirth – repentance and personal trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, followed by an ongoing personal involvement with the Creator on the basis of what the Lord Jesus has done for us in his life, death on the cross, burial, resurrection and ascension.

It is not just an acknowledgement of truth, nor is it only a succession of experiences, but a vital combination of the two: objective truth revealed and made real by the living Spirit of God; the progressive changing of our lives in our thinking, feeling and deciding; a growing appreciation of the will and purposes of God – there are many aspects, all based on the complete salvation which Jesus has provided for us.

Emphasising the personal aspect has tended to make us wary of 'the church' – perhaps we fear the controlling domination which the so-called 'church' held over much of the western world in earlier days, perhaps it is just that want to do our own thing. Along the way, we often lose sight of the fact that our Father has one burning priority – to head up everything in his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ! As it says in ***Ephesians 1:8-12***, this does not just mean spiritual things ("*things in the heavens*") but also the very practical things ("*things on the earth*").

Perhaps the most amazing thing in these verses is that those

who are joined to the Lord Jesus have become part of this grand design and that our Father has very specific purposes for us. In other words, **the Father's ultimate plan** for the spiritual and material creation, summing it all up in Christ, **includes us**, if we are joined to his Son.

But it soon becomes obvious as we read on in ***Ephesians*** that, although each of us has an individual relationship with the Father, his purpose is to form us together, ultimately to become a corporate partner with the Lord Jesus when he takes on his new role as visible head of the whole of creation. The picture is of a bride, being prepared for the great and long-awaited day when she will join her bridegroom in the start of a real working partnership. (As well as the verses in ***Ephesians 5***, the book of ***Revelation*** picks up the same theme when it talks about the Bride of Christ having made herself ready – see ***Revelation 19:7, 21:2***)

Mere individualism, then, is out! Yes, we have a personal relationship with our Father through the Lord Jesus, and we have every reason to believe that this will continue for eternity, but his purpose is to form us together into one body, the Church, ultimately to be seen as the glorious marriage partner of the eternal Son and to inherit the Kingdom of God with him! Staggering, isn't it?

A good read straight through ***Ephesians*** will help us to see more of the way his plan is designed to work out but here are some highlights:–

1) Personal faith in response to the good news of Jesus is clearly set as the foundation. See ***1:13-14*** and compare ***2:19-20*** and ***1 Peter 2:4-5***.

2) Having been reconciled to God, we have been brought into one body in the Church. See ***2:13-16, 4:4*** and the well-known passage in ***1 Corinthians 12***.

3) There is a process going on, by which we, in the one body, are intended to “grow up **in all aspects** into him, who is the head, even Christ”. See ***4:14-16*** especially, but the whole letter seems full of examples of how this is supposed to work out in practice. The plan is clearly **not** that we just carry on as we are, saved but unchanged, and wait for the whole process to happen 'in the

twinkling of an eye' when Jesus returns. Obviously there is likely to be some remaining transformation to take place when we see him, but it will be the completion of a process which has already been well under way. (**1 John 3:2-3** shows both the transformation and the personal responsibility.)

4) In the meanwhile, this 'bride in preparation' has a vital function to fulfil, both on the world-wide scale and the local scale – to be the dwelling place of God by the Spirit. See **2:19-22** – the whole building (i.e. the total body everywhere) is being made into one holy temple in the Lord and, there in Ephesus, they are being built together into a settled place for God to dwell.

5) The need for real functional unity seems to run through the whole epistle. Paul already knew at first hand that the danger of division was always there. He had dealt with desperate division at Corinth (apparently successfully) and was insistent that it was unacceptable in the body. The growth that he wrote about was impossible without it.

They already had the 'unity of the Spirit' – he exhorted them to preserve it with love and peace, but it was not to be just a sentimental, blind 'everything's OK' sort of unity – it had to be based on reality lived out. See **4:2-3, 15**. "*Speaking the truth in love*" is not just confined to words; a more accurate (but clumsier) translation would be "truthing in love". In other words, being real with each other, no deceit, no hiding, no trying to make a good impression. ('Walking in the light' was John's phrase.) He knew too that there would be the need for forgiveness when things went wrong, and that it could only take place on the basis of the forgiveness which they had each received through the grace of God in Christ (**4:32**).

Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus is probably the most 'concentrated' statement of God's purpose for the Church, especially in its local manifestation, but it is by no means alone as a presentation of his passionate desire for it – 'her', even, as it says in **Ephesians 5:25-27**. Try reading **John 17** in the light of what we have seen in **Ephesians**, and you will discover much of the same content, intense concern and eternal purpose expressed by the Lord Jesus as he lays his heart before his Father

about the Church for which he was about to 'give himself up'.

God's purpose has not changed. It is too easy to look at history and say in effect, "it has never worked" and therefore assume that it never can. If we do that, particularly if we protest that practical, functional unity of real Christians in a locality is impossible, we are saying that Paul asked the impossible from all the churches to whom he wrote and that Jesus' prayer in **John 17** will not be answered. Those who want excuses not to believe that Jesus came from God are given the best one available as they see rampant practical division between people who say that they are one in Christ.

A.W.Tozer once wrote that the chief responsibility of the Church in the twentieth century was not to preach the gospel but to be fit to preach the gospel. We will not achieve God's purposes by rushing ahead, doing all the right things and saying all the right words. We need first to begin to see the situation more from our heavenly Father's perspective, asking him to open our eyes to his purposes, not only for us individually but also for the church which is the body of Christ, globally and locally. Perhaps when we begin to see that he is committed to bringing to maturity the bride he has chosen for his Son, we will be less ready to cry "impossible!" and ask him to show us what we can do in obedience to his will and purpose. Action must certainly follow, but action in the light of the practical and spiritual reality of the revealed will of God in our lives.

Some ecologists have a slogan: "Think Globally – Act Locally". We need more than an earthbound global perspective, that the eyes of our heart may be enlightened, as Paul tells the Ephesians, so that we "*may know the hope of his calling, what are the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of his power toward us who believe*" (**Ephesians 1:18-19**)

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