

GOD'S BLUEPRINT FOR HIS CHURCH

Revealed in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians

Coloured Spectacles

All of us, when we read the Bible, tend to do so wearing coloured spectacles. The colour of these glasses depends on our church affiliation, or on our doctrinal stance. The spectacles serve to blind us to those things in Scripture which do not line up with our way of thinking, and to emphasise what accords with our own particular denominational or theological background. I am personally aware that this has been true in my own life, and I have changed the colour of my glasses a number of times, finding, each time, truths which had been hidden before, and fresh meaning in things which I had previously thought, mistakenly, that I had fully understood. No doubt I am still seeing through spectacles which are not totally clear and free of colour, but, having laid aside all church system associations, and coming to the Epistle to the Ephesians afresh, it has again been my joyous experience to see some of the truth of this wonderful Epistle of the Church in new and exciting ways, and I find myself saying, "Why didn't I see that before?" And I realise that it was because it had been obscured by those very spectacles I have been referring to.

God's Glorious Eternal Plan

In chapter one Paul sets out the revelation he had been given of God's plan for the fullness of time, "To gather up into one all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth." God is going to do this by choosing and calling a people to Himself, who will live "To the praise of His glory." These called-out "saints" hear the Gospel of salvation, believe and receive the seal of the Holy Spirit. Paul then prays for them, and asks that they be given, "A spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge (the full personal knowledge) of Christ", and "That they may know what the hope is to which they have been called; what are the riches of God's glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of His power at work in those who believe.". This power is the link between heaven and earth. It is demonstrated in Christ, raised from the dead and made to sit at God's right hand in the heavenly places. This risen and exalted Christ is totally supreme and far above all other rule and authority, power or dominion, and His name is above every name which can ever be named. It is He who has been made, by Divine appointment, Head over all things for the Church, and the Church is His Body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

So, the revelation is of the saints on earth, united with the Head in

heaven, fulfilling that eternal plan of God set forth in Christ. The Church is the Head in heaven united with His saints on earth. The awe-inspiring statements concerning the Head, Christ Jesus in verses 20-23 should overwhelm us with their glory and wonder. The Church, revealed in this Epistle, knows no earthly headquarters, or human suprema. Her Head and headquarters are in heaven, and her Head is the one bearing the ultimate supremacy of power and authority in the whole universe of God. And we on earth are united with Him! We are His Body, through which He acts on the earth.

Amazing Grace

Chapter 2 relates first how we, who are dead in trespasses and sin are made alive with Christ, raised with Him and made to sit with Him in the heavenly places, and all this by the mercy, grace and infinite love of God.

One New Man

From verse 11 of chapter 2 further amazing facts about the nature of the Church emerge. In the Church, Jew and Gentile, previously at enmity and wholly irreconcilable, have now been joined into one in Christ. Race and cultural barriers have been broken down by the Cross. Note well the fourfold recurrence of "one".

*"He is our peace, who has made us both **one**." (2:14)*

*"That He might create in Himself **one** new man" (2:15)*

*"That He might reconcile us both to God in **one** body through the cross" (2:16)*

*"Through Him we both have access in **one** Spirit to the Father."
(2:18)*

So, we see that the Church in God's eyes is ONE. He created it so. Race, gender, social standing and previous religious identity are all set aside in Christ and in His Church. The division of His Church is an abomination in the sight of God. How far are our present "churches" from the clearly revealed will of the Father!

Our Privileges

Verse 19-22 are very concentrated and packed with truth about the Church. First note who we are; "Fellow citizens with the saints", and "Members of the household of God." To obtain this status there is only one condition, and that is that we should be "In Christ." We do not have to join some organisation called a church or fellowship, or to affiliate with some denomination. Just being 'in Christ' qualifies us for these privileges of being "Fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God." If we are in Christ we are in His Church.

Church building

There are three building verbs in chapter 2:20-22:

- 1) *“Built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets.”*
- 2) *“The whole structure is joined together”*
- 3) *“You also are built into it.”*

Each of these building verbs is in the passive mood. The clear and unmistakable inference from this is that it is not the saints who build the Church. They are simply being built into it by the Lord. We are citizens of the “City whose architect and builder is God.” (Hebrews 11:10) The Church to which we belong is that of which Jesus Christ said “I will build My Church.”

Summarising then, we see the Church and its nature revealed as,

- **A City** of which we are citizens.
- **A Household** of which we are members.
- **A Holy temple** of which we are the living components.
- **A Body** of which we are members.

This Church is one. Such a thing as denominational divisions never entered the mind of Paul, nor was it ever in the plan of God. Paul would be utterly mystified were he to come back and observe the mish-mash we have today. He knew only The Church of which Jesus Christ is the sole Head and Builder. Paul had never been in the business of church building. That was the Lord’s work. The Apostle was in the business of proclaiming Christ, and as people responded to the Gospel, Jesus Himself built them into His Church, made the citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem, members of God’s family, living stones in His temple and functioning units in His Body.

Paul’s Revelation and Ministry

In chapter 3 Paul first of all discloses the source of these truths concerning the plan of God for the Church. He had not perceived them by natural intellect or reasoning, but by direct revelation from God. He was called to a double ministry arising out of this revelation. The first element of this ministry was to proclaim “the unsearchable riches of Christ”, and then, secondly, “To make all men see” the glorious facts concerning the role of God’s Church in His universe. All true believers are “Members of the same Body and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.” That Body’s calling is to demonstrate to all the principalities and powers both angelic and Satanic the “manifold wisdom of God.” How lost is this magnificent vision of the nature and purpose of the Church! Maybe an end-time work of God will be that of restoring to us this revelation of the nature and purpose of the Church, along with people sharing Paul’s burning desire to make all men see it in its glory.

The Beating Heart of the Church

Right at the central core of this Church-revealing Epistle is the prayer in chapter 3:14-21. Here we touch the beating heart of the Church as God desires it to be. It is built of those who have been made strong in the inner man by the Spirit of God, who know in reality the indwelling of Christ in their hearts, whose roots and foundations are deep in Love, and who are discovering more and more of the infinite dimensions of the love of Christ. Such believers, corporately bound together, are a vessel to contain the fullness of God. Thus is revealed the lifespring. It is love, God's love in Christ increasingly perceived, received and shared in the Body. Is that an idealistic dream? No! It can come about by "the power at work within us", and the experience of it can far exceed our asking or thinking. In such a Church, God, and only God gets the glory, because it is a Church wholly in harmony with the Head.

Love Lost

It would seem that the Ephesian Church, in its early history, tapped into this central lifespring of love, and experienced in rich measure the fullness of God for which Paul prayed. But, some years later, the character of that church had changed. Although correct in doctrine, zealous and patient in good works, something was missing. That central, living fountain of love had dried up and the Spirit of God was grieved. Not all its orthodoxy or unwearied patience could make up for that which had been lost. The living waters were no longer flowing, and the call of the Spirit was, "Repent." (Revelation 2:2-7)

Love -The Hub

It is significant that the two great prayers of this Epistle in chapter 1:15-23 and here in chapter 3:14-21 should both be concerned with "knowing." In the former the prayer is for "a spirit of wisdom and spiritual understanding in the knowledge of Him that you may know." Here it is "to know the love of Christ." This knowing is not intellectual, but experiential and relational. It is intimacy, deep in the spirit with the living Lord. It is being "rooted and grounded in love." This is the power source and pulsing heart of the Church and that is why this prayer is embedded here, as the hub around which the rest of the Epistle revolves.

If, in these days, the Church is again to emerge from out of the confusion of mens' churches, it will be because God is stirring the spirits of men, as described in Ezra 1:5, to flee from the Babylon of the ecclesiastical systems to the Jerusalem of the Church of the Living God. The cry in the hearts of such will best be expressed in these

Pauline prayers. They will be a people whose burning desire and sole passion is to know the Beloved. With such love-intoxicated saints will Jesus build that “Holy temple for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit?”

The Unity, Gifts and Ministries of the Church

Chapter 4 deals with maintaining the unity of the Church, and with the gifts and ministries within it. It is a chapter which has been the focus of much attention in Pentecostal and charismatic circles in recent years. Here again ecclesiastical and preconceived doctrinal views have acted as coloured spectacles to cause the interpretation of this chapter to suit the interpreter and his prejudices. It is so important to see this Epistle whole, and not to lift out any particular text, divorcing it from its context. Verses 11 & 12 of this chapter have suffered most from this kind of treatment.

Paul first issues an urgent appeal for believers to lead a life worthy of their calling as members of Christ’s body, and highlights five characteristic features of such a life.

1) Lowliness or humility

2) Meekness

3) Patience

4) Forbearance

5) Eagerness to maintain the unity of the Spirit.

It is interesting that we do not hear nearly as much about these fivefold character qualities as we do about the fivefold ministries of verse 11-12. But, when the chapter is looked at whole, it is evident that these ministries will only be released in such Christ-like people. Christian character is of primary importance.

Following this, comes the supreme statement of the unity which is theirs who are “in Christ”. In relation to the Church, note how the apostle states with stark and uncompromising simplicity, “There is **ONE BODY.**” Now perhaps you begin to see what I mean in emphasising the importance of context in regard to the fivefold ministries. These ministries are spoken of in the context of ONE Body, and not of the motley collection of denominations and “streams” which are the feature of the scene today. Look at the church scene in any town or city of New Zealand today. Who would ever guess from what they observe that there is “One Body”? And where is the evidence of eagerness “to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”? And who is majoring on the five marks of Christian character Paul insists on? So, if we are eager for the manifestation of the fivefold ministries let us first put them in the right context, for only so will they come forth in the way of God’s appointing.

“Grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.” So states Paul in 4:7. He is speaking therefore of a Body in which every member has a function accorded to him by the Head. That

function is not simply the exercise of some natural ability, but the employment of a grace-gift of the Lord. Among these gifts of grace from the heavenly Head are, apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, whose function it is “to equip the saints for the work of ministry.” And the goal and ultimate aim of all this is the building up, or edifying of the Body towards the time when “we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”

Unity of faith, intimate personal knowledge of the Lord Jesus, maturity and Christlikeness. These are the characteristic of a Church where every saint is functioning in his gifts of grace, and where the ministries of verses 11-12 are being exercised in the context which God ordained.

Put the above picture alongside what can be observed in the towns and cities of our land, where different denominations compete with one another to plant churches, and where the religious smorgasbord becomes ever more confusing to onlooking unbelievers. Oh! How far have we strayed from God’s blueprint set forth here?

Immature Christians

In verse 14 Paul shows the characteristic of immature Christians. They are, “Tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine.” How true is that statement of what we see in churches today. There is always some new thing, some “In” teaching. These things have their brief day and then some other emphasis replaces them.

Christ Jesus Central

Instead of this experience of being carried away first by one doctrine and then another, Paul exhorts us to a growing up into Christ. The preventative against immaturity and being tossed to and fro is to concentrate on Christ, to have Christ central, to have as our aim an ever-deepening knowledge of Him. As we do this, so we enter into an experience of the fully functioning Body of Christ, described so beautifully in the words of verse 16, “The whole Body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love.” May the Lord hasten the day when these truths in this great passage on the unity of the Church are heard and heeded, and men are willing to lay aside their divided and fragmented churches for the ONE Body with ONE Head. Then shall we see again the gifts of the risen Lord fully manifested as each receives from Him grace according to the measure of His gift.

How then Should We Live?

From verse 17 of chapter 4. through to verse 20 of chapter 5. Paul comes to the nitty-gritty of Christian behaviour and character, how those who are members of this Body of Christ should live. The keys to this section are, to me at least, 4:20-21 and 5:18-20. In the former passage he speaks of “learning Christ”. Not, be it noted, learning about Christ. It is an unusual phrase, but he explains what he means in the next verse where he continues, “assuming you have heard Him and been taught by (or ‘in’) Him, as the truth is in Jesus.” The secret of behaviour which is worthy of “the calling with which you have been called” is to hear from Jesus, to be taught by Him, and to recognise that ultimate truth is not abstractions or even doctrinal statements, but that truth is a person, even the Lord Jesus Christ. So Christian character comes from a relationship with Jesus, and from the inner teaching of His Holy Spirit.

The other key passage is that in which we are exhorted to “go on being filled with the Spirit” and to have our hearts full of praise and thankfulness. The Holy Spirit is the inner life of the “new nature” which we are exhorted to put on in 4:24. He is the life of the new creation planted within us, which is “created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”

The Husband and the Bride

From chapter 5:21 to chapter 6:9 Paul deals with marriage, family and work relationships, and embedded in the teaching about marriage, are some of the richest and most profound truths concerning the Church in all of Scripture, truths holding within them revolutionary dynamic, if and when they are received and applied today.

Here are the clear declarations of this amazing passage 5:21-23.

- Christ is the Head of the Church, His body, and is Himself her Saviour.
- The Church is subject to Christ.
- Christ 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 her to Himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.
- Christ nourished and cherishes the Church, because we are members of His body.

- Christ and His Church are joined in unity.

Could there be any more comprehensive revelation of the utterly complete provision which Christ has made for His Church? These glorious facts lay the axe at the roots of all institutionalism, of all human headship and control, and call us into a relationship of simple faith-dependence on Christ our Head, secure in His love, His constant care and provision, and looking to Him to fulfil His word to present to Himself a Church resplendent in beauty and holiness. Where are those who are willing to come out of the ecclesiastical organisations and institutions, putting away dependence on men and casting themselves in self-abandonment into the arms of the wholly-sufficient Husband of the Church, His body of which, by grace, we are members? Only those who have the courage so to do will be in a place to prove the truths of this altogether blessed revelation. Are you ready to say, "I will" to this Husband?

The Church in Conflict

The conflict of the Church and the provision of God for that conflict are the subjects of 6:10-20. The intensity of this conflict will be most acute for those determined to enter into the revelation of Church that this epistle has set forth. But, praise God, the resources are provided in the full armour of God to enable us to stand unvanquished by the hosts of darkness.

A Final Word

The final word of the letter is fragrant with the graciousness and goodness of God. Peace, love with faith and grace are the blessings invoked on "all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love undying." And so we return to what we said was the living heart of the Epistle, love, the love which surpasses knowledge, yet which can be known, and which can fill us with all the fullness of God.

Truly we cry, "To Him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus to all generations for ever and ever."

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