

I Believe ... in the Church

Text: Ephesians 2:19–22; 4:11–16; 5:21–33¹

Introduction

The Church is the center of God's activity in the world. In Ephesians we find the Bible's most extensive teaching on the nature of the Church. We will look at this teaching from three aspects: the building (Ephesians 2:19–22), the Body (Ephesians 4:11–16), and the Bride (Ephesians 5:21–33).

Message

1. The building (Ephesians 2:19–22).

In Ephesians 2:11–18 Paul explained how Jesus Christ through His death on the cross has united the Jews and Gentiles into one new people in Him.

The Gentiles also are now citizens of God's kingdom and entitled to all the privileges of living there. They are members of God's own household, treated with the love reserved only for sons and daughters.

Paul then spoke of the Church as the house of God in the sense of a building. The foundation of the building consists of the apostles and prophets; the cornerstone is Jesus Christ; and every Christian is a brick in the building. This building grows into a temple of the Lord, a process energized by the Spirit of God.

In this passage we see four indispensable characteristics of the Church:

- a. Jesus Christ must be central. Christ is the cornerstone—the stone that holds it all together. If Jesus Christ is not central in the life of a group of people, then it cannot properly be called the Church.
- b. The Church is based on the divine revelation of the apostles and secondarily on the ministry of the prophets. The Church must conform itself to the witness of the apostles who were commissioned as organs of revelation by Jesus Christ himself. The prophetic ministry applies the message of the apostles to the Church's circumstances.
- c. The Church is to grow. It “rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.” The verb rendered “to rise” refers to an increase of every kind—in size, number, age, maturity, glory, and power. The Church should be going through a continuous revitalization of every facet of its existence. Further, it is to grow into a holy temple. Holiness (sanctification) is at the heart of the growth.
- d. There must be strong unity. The materials of the building were “built together,” a term used to describe the unity between believers and between Christ and the Church.

2. The body (Ephesians 4:11–16).

After stressing the unity of the Church and the fact Christ gave gifts to her, Paul listed the gifts in verse 11: apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers.

When these fulfill their calling, the result is that the Christians are equipped to do the work of the ministry, so the body of Christ is built up, harmonious, matured, and united to Christ, the Head of the Body.

From this passage we learn that:

- a. The offices of the Church are to equip the laity for the work of the ministry. In a real sense there is no laity or priesthood in the church of Jesus Christ. The ministers are really equippers to help the laity be ministers.
- b. The work of the ministry results in the building up of the body of Christ. Each activity of the ministry is to be judged by this criterion—does it build the Body? It is truly a proper function of the ministry only when it does.
- c. The goals of the ministry are unity in and the maturing of Christ's body. According to Ephesians 1:10, God's plan is to unite all things in Christ. The Church as the prototype of God's will for the universe must also be united in Christ. Thus as God's masterpiece (Ephesians 2:10), the Church demonstrates tangibly that God is interested in breaking down barriers between men. The Church is also to get beyond the immaturity shown in factions and to reflect the image of Jesus Christ.
- d. This maturity takes place in a life-style characterized by truth and love. Truth (the objective aspect) and love (the subjective aspect) are to characterize the members of Christ's body. The verb “speak the truth” means more than just uttering correct words. It means dealing truthfully or being truthful. Thus, it encompasses one's entire life-style. The edification of the Body takes place only when love is present.
- e. Jesus Christ is central to the growth of the Body. He is the Head of the Body, without whom the Body is dead and meaningless. It is to Christ's full stature that the Body is growing, and through Him that bodily growth takes place.

3. The Bride (Ephesians 5:21–33).

Here Paul interwove his theology of the relationship between Christ and the Church and that of a husband and wife. He gave us these insights into Christ's relationship with the Church:

- a. Christ and the Church are united in a deep relationship of submission and love. Just as a wife is to be in submission to her husband, so the Church is to be subjected to Christ. Just as a husband is to love his wife, so Christ loves the Church. There should be a perfect balance of the two elements.
- b. Christ's sacrifice on the cross was to create a sanctified, clean, glorious, and whole Church. Just as Christ's love for the Church was demonstrated in His sacrifice on the cross, so the Church's submission to Christ is demonstrated in her progress of sanctification. The Church is to be holy as a grateful response to Christ's love.
- c. Christ continually feeds and takes care of the Church. The verbs "feed" and "care for" are in the present tense, denoting continual or repeated action. Christ's concern for and sustaining of the Church did not cease with His sacrifice on the cross, but is a present reality.

Conclusion

The Church is a united, growing, maturing community of people in which Christ is central and members minister to one another as they speak the truth in love.

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Endnote

1. Scripture references are from Holy Bible, New International Version®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House.