

THE NEW ECCLESIA

Most churches tell their members what to do, what to think, what to believe. It is always tempting, but we are not that kind of church. You can usually tell, I hope, what I think you should believe, and what I might hope you would want to do about that. I am the Pastor/Teacher here. I am supposed to set things before you. But always you are supposed to take it into prayer – take it to the Holy Spirit. In this church, the Holy Spirit outranks not only me but Scripture, creeds, what other churches are doing or saying, and even your children.

With that reminder, let us proceed. A brief moment for a very cursory orientation: What were the greatest cities of the Western World in Paul's time? The answer is Rome, Alexandria in Egypt, Antioch in Syria, and Ephesus in Asia Minor. Many of you have been to Ephesus. What was a disaster for the Ephesians turned out to be a great boon for the tourist industry. The harbor silted up, and over time most of the citizens moved north to Smyrna – leaving the ruins at Ephesus almost intact. So Ephesus became the best-preserved city for us to go see what life was really like in the first century A.D. The temple of Artemis there was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The huge, open-air theater has acoustics beyond surprising. When Mariana cut loose to see what it would sound like, every tourist in the area was spellbound. Many came hurrying over from all parts of the theater to see if they could persuade her to sing some more.

The letter to the Ephesians was probably written to all the Christian groups in the territory. You have heard of “the greater Los Angeles area”? Well, the letter to the Ephesians was written to the greater Ephesus area. Paul was under house arrest in Rome at the time, awaiting trial before the Emperor. It is one of the last letters we have from him (Philippians is perhaps the last).

Paul's active ministry (after the first ten or eleven years it took him to get reoriented after his conversion) was from approximately 46 to 65 A.D. – that is, nineteen or twenty years. Do we really imagine that Paul wrote only one letter every other year? We have only ten of his letters; actually eight to thirteen letters, depending on which school of scholars you trust. What do you think? Paul must have written at least five letters a year – at least one hundred letters – during his ministry; probably far more. If all of them had been saved,

it would take us forever to read the New Testament. On the other hand, can you imagine how many gaps would be filled in and how many questions would be answered if those who were receiving a letter from Paul had only known that they were receiving canon scripture?

I want to talk about *The New Ecclesia* – what I hope we are working together to build and form right here, right now. *Ecclesia* is the Greek word for “church.” It has nothing to do with bricks and mortar or with wood framing. There are no buildings being thought about as “churches” in New Testament times. The *ecclesia* is the people – the people gathered. In context, it is the people of Jesus gathered to honor Him, to worship God in His Name, to seek together the LIFE Jesus offers His followers. **You do not go to church – you are the church.** In short, the *ecclesia* is made up of those who earnestly want to follow Jesus on and into the WAY His Holy Spirit leads us into. With awkwardness, I overstress the words and definitions. That’s because with great regularity such concepts and purposes are ignored or overlooked in our time.

I want to talk about *The New Ecclesia*. But first I want to talk about Paul’s opening remarks in his letter to the Ephesians. You may suspect that in my mind there is a connection. As usual, Paul takes a moment to warm up to his subject. Clearly Paul does not imagine that God is shooting from the hip. God has plans carefully considered and set in place – all of them in process; some of them waiting for the proper and possible time for fulfillment. “*Before the foundation of the world,*” Paul says, “*God chose us in Christ to be his people.*” WOW! And God, in Christ, has given us every spiritual blessing there is; even if we went to the heavenly realms, we could not find or need any others. No waiting around – no excuses. Our lives in the coming realms will be wondrous indeed, but we are already in the game.

How does Paul know this? Not sure. His level of trust is awesome, of course. I suspect it is connected to his concept of love. If Jesus reconciles us to God and proclaims and reveals the great love that God has for us, what else do we need? Well, we need to hang on to that, but what *else* do we need? It has always been God’s plan to adopt us and to give us the full inheritance of God’s children. Paul knows we do not see the fullness here, but you cannot get richer or more blessed than that. If you really know that the Omnipotent God loves you, what do you do for encores?

“In Christ our release is secured and our sins forgiven through the shedding of his blood.” This is one of the classic places where the vast majority of Christians change what Paul is saying to match the formulas they have been taught – formulas which were invented long after Paul wrote this. To them, we are saved by the blood – meaning, by a magic potion of mysterious power. And we are saved from the fires of Hell that are waiting for us in the future – a Judgment Day – when everyone who does not believe and worship correctly will be thrown into a place of everlasting punishment.

Paul never speaks about any such constructs. *“In Christ our release is secured.”* It is not a release from some future terror. We are already in bondage – the bondage of a partial or incomplete or broken relationship with God. And Jesus comes to break that bondage – to reconcile us to God: to restore the relationship wherein we know we are loved by the Omnipotent, Omniscient ONE. Our sins (our alienation and our uncertainty of God’s love for us) are forgiven. What does forgiveness do? As mentioned last Sunday, *true forgiveness* restores and heals broken relationships. The shedding of Jesus’ blood is the sign and seal of how much Jesus trusts God’s love and believes it. Do we not know the difference between the sign – the emblem – and the thing itself? It is the love of God that saves us – not the blood. The blood reveals the depths to which the love will go. Jesus is the Christ of God, and He is the ONE whose mission it is to proclaim and reveal how real God’s love is for us. God does not force Jesus to fulfill this role. Jesus chooses it – in the wake of His baptism. But in the end, having accepted His role and purpose, Jesus can think of no other way to break through our denial, our fear, our mistrust. To face and accept the fullness of our anger and our alienation – our desperate aloneness – and not turn against us or destroy us in return is what the blood reveals. But “that for which a thing is such – the thing itself is more such.” (An old Quaker saying.) Do we not know the difference between the sign – the emblem – and the thing itself: the love-bond of a living relationship with *Abba*? We are not saved by the blood. We are saved by the living relationship with God.

Jesus is so clear, so gifted, so full of power, but it is a power He will not use to hurt us, no matter what we do to Him. When we see that – when we begin to understand it – it breaks our hearts. And the heart must be broken or the love cannot get through. That is what repentance means. When the heart breaks and the love gets through, it changes us.

Only, I cannot manage or pretend or choreograph any of it. By myself I would never have imagined such a thing. But once I start to comprehend it, I simply do not know how to protect myself from love like that! As with some of you, it starts with curiosity: A story with more questions than answers. A story that unfolds like no other story I have ever heard. Until one day, when my own life is not going at all well, I make the big mistake: I start to take the story personally. I watch Him die, and everything shifts. Suddenly it becomes personal and relational. It is no longer just words on a page. It has nothing to do with the outer church's creeds or formulas. It becomes personal, and I have not found any way to recover.

Everything I have ever wanted or cared about or hoped for in this world turns to ashes in my hands. I thought that if I was good enough, worked hard enough, did enough things right, I would become acceptable and my life would end up successful enough to be worth something. But I look at Jesus, and I see the difference between His goodness and my own. Then I see what this world did to Him – did, and does. How could I or would I ever again trust or put my hope in a world that crucifies my Lord?

So it turns to ashes in my hands. I did not try to make it do that; it just did. I repented of it – and for it – and none of it has been my god ever since. I have never tried to “win” ever again – not on the outside. So I try to serve dinky, little churches – that are full of genuine and wonderful people. A few of them are always sad that I don't do more with my life. They try to tell me how I could succeed, and what I need to do to move into more prominent and successful positions. But that is not for me. That only tries to take me back to where I came from.

Do not misunderstand. I am delighted and elated when the Spirit takes some of my friends into prominence and success in this world. The spiritual realm and the physical realm always run side by side, and the Holy Spirit is always playing in both realms at the same time. I know how important it is for all of us – all of us who are part of the *ecclesia* – to know and remember that Jesus died for us too. Everybody I have ever known who became aware of the truth of God's love for them has been dramatically empowered and changed. Is there anything I would be willing to trade for that awareness and for that gratitude?

So in Ephesians our RELEASE is now! Our broken relationship with God – and all its evidence and chaos and pathos – is FORGIVEN now! And whenever we need and are willing to receive more release or

forgiveness, they are waiting for us both now and in all the future before us. I do love the Gospel. And I hate it when anything or anyone tries to reduce it down to either the humanism of liberal churches or the fear and condemnation of most conservative churches.

But back to what Paul really wants to talk about. He has moved a long way since he wrote his letters to the Thessalonians. Nobody told Paul that the New Testament would be inerrant and that, since he was a contributing author, he was therefore forbidden to learn or grow or change his mind about anything for twenty years. So now, in one of his last letters, Paul believes he is seeing God's real purpose with even greater clarity. The plan is already at work, already in process, but it still has to unfold as the time is ripe. And the plan is this: "*that the whole universe, everything in heaven and on earth, might be brought into a unity in Christ*" – one big happy family; one harmonious Kingdom of Heaven. A bit too glib, perhaps, but along those lines.

This is ludicrous, of course, in the light of everything we know or have ever experienced here on earth. Yet clearly Paul believes it. "To dream the impossible dream." Yet here in this letter to the Ephesians – awaiting trial before the Roman Emperor, which will result in his execution – Paul writes about the true purpose of God. To unite all things – and all of us – into a unity in Christ. Not into a *sameness*, but into a unity, a harmony, a love-bond – because in some way all of us will know the love of God as revealed by Jesus the Christ of God.

If this really is God's purpose, I need to settle down, get quiet and calm, and consider it more prayerfully and carefully. Because, you see, if this really is God's purpose, then the *ecclesia* of Jesus – the people of the Holy Spirit, the followers of the Messiah – will be required to make some rather serious changes in what we believe, what we are trying to do, who we think we are.

What is Paul thinking? This conviction about God's true purpose is not coming out of Paul's sweet and easy life. His twenty active years as an apostle of the Risen One have not been uneventful. He has been beaten, stoned, left for dead. He has been in prison in Philippi, Ephesus, Caesarea, Rome. He has been shipwrecked at least twice. And never has he gone anywhere since his conversion where he did not run into animosity, anger, hatred, and opposition that would probably convince most of us that we were doing something terribly wrong. His body is a mass of scar tissue. He always thinks he has not

said enough or done enough for Jesus. He has amazing friends all over most of the known world, but there are increasing numbers of people everywhere who would cheerfully throttle him for good if they could find any chance to do so. This is bringing things into a unity in Christ? “To dream the impossible dream.”

A person with even a slight amount of jaundice might actually suggest that things were moving in the opposite direction, even back in Paul’s time, when most of us are convinced that life was simpler and it was easier to be faithful. Not sure who started that rumor, by the way, but I hear it frequently. So, what about us and our time? Do we believe that God’s purpose is to bring everything into a unity in Christ? Do we think such a purpose has anything to do with our experience and participation in the church? Paul is claiming to know the secret purpose and plan of God. But it flies in the face of everything I know and experience of life here on earth. And while I do experience moments when new and wonderful relationships are forming, they are minuscule if I am looking for evidence that God is working toward this purpose of a greater unity between all people and all the forces at work here.

In my tiny corner of Christendom, for instance, I think we need more focus, greater clarity, and greater commitment to who we are and what we are trying to become under Christ. But that always causes trouble, arguments, disagreements. It nearly always brings to the fore some advocates for compromise. Compromise never brings us to unity. Repentance and conversion bring us to unity. Compromise brings us to a truce – an agreement that we will not care as much anymore, or at least we will not let on that we do.

On the surface, at least, “unity” is against every church’s teachings and every church’s practice. To be sure, most churches would claim to believe in a unity – as long as everyone in the world would suddenly agree with everything they are saying and doing. But the reality behind that is a condemnation, or at least a rejection, of all who do not agree with everything they are saying and doing.

At the far end of the spectrum, some liberal churches would claim that they really do believe in unity and harmony between all peoples everywhere. But they do not mean “personal or relational.” And far more serious, they would edit and delete Paul’s comments and leave out the part about “in Christ” or “in Christ Jesus.” They claim that Jesus is far too divisive for any kind of unity, but that

maybe we could have more unity if we would just stop believing in or being loyal to Jesus. Of course, my problem with this is that a unity without Jesus the Christ is worth absolutely nothing, so far as I am concerned.

I have many questions about unity in Christ Jesus. They are not rhetorical questions. I suspect that I know more about what the answers are not than I do about what the answers are. But I deeply suspect that *The New Ecclesia* will be required to refashion and to discover – in ways we cannot yet fully fathom – what unity in Christ really means. What does it mean between male and female? What does it mean between Christian and Muslim and Jew? What does it mean between Christian and Hindu and Buddhist? What does it mean between gay and straight? What does it mean between black and white and every other color? What does it mean between you and me?

So I am left sniffing around the edges of an “impossible dream” I cannot imagine. But neither am I able to let it go. Is it possible that a Muslim who believes in Allah and Muhammad can have a unity with me, though I go on believing in Yahweh and Jesus? Is there a Muslim man somewhere wondering if there is a Christian man somewhere who might want to know him without any desire to convert him or condemn him or kill or reject or hurt him? Is there a Christian somewhere who would not rejoice if things got worse for that man? A Christian who might even pray for his wife or his children or his healing or his prosperity?

Even so, it seems clear to me that Jesus lived and died believing in a reconciliation with God for *all* people, despite the fact that everywhere He looked in this world, such a reconciliation was only true for a handful of people. And it seems clear to me that Paul lived and died believing that God’s true purpose was that everything in Heaven and on earth might be brought into a unity in Christ Jesus. He went on believing in this despite all the evidence around him that such a unity was very far from the truth or the reality of the world as he knew it.

I think it should no longer surprise us that we are called to live in HOPE. I think it should no longer surprise us that the Kingdom of Heaven is not something we can throw together in our spare time here. It is no longer surprising that we are called to heal whatever is healable and leave the rest for later.

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To be sure, I believe we are the *ecclesia* of Jesus the Christ. And I feel very certain that to the degree that this is true, we are going to find ourselves on a journey that requires us to be continually in transformation, continually in renewal – new and different from most of the churches around us. I hope you see that and want that too. Covenant time is upon us. If you have not done so already, I hope you will throw in with us. I hope you will help us to become what God in Christ Jesus is wanting and asking us to become.