

'Being the Church' – Part 12

'The Dwelling Place of God'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

What is the Church? How can believers 'be' the Church instead of just 'go' to Church? Such are the questions we have been wrestling with throughout this teaching series. They are simple questions, but the answers are not always simple and there is no single answer. There are many things we should do (and stop doing), believe (and stop believing) in order to truly be the Church Jesus birthed and promised to build.

The problem with many Christians is that they have a low 'ecclesiology,' that is a low understanding of what the Church is and their role in it. For many of us, being the Church simply means that we call ourselves Christians and attend Church activities on a regular or semi-regular basis. But outside of that we may have no real commitment to or investment in the Church of Jesus Christ.

If we don't fully understand the purpose of something then it is destined for misuse or neglect. I believe that is exactly what has been happening in the modern Church. This is not new - there was something of this happening in the early Church and Paul addresses it in his letter to the Ephesians.

Ephesians 2:19-22 *"Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."*

In the preceding verses (11-18), Paul calls for the Gentiles to remember their past when they were hated by the Jews, called "the uncircumcision," without citizenship in Israel, without covenants, without hope, without Christ and without God. The Jews were called to be a holy nation that drew the other nations to God. However they became prideful in their lofty position as God's people and instead of ministering to the Gentiles - they hated them. There was tremendous animosity between the two groups. But through His life, death and resurrection, Jesus Christ brought these two hostile groups together before God. He made them one people - one body. He made them His Church.

It seems that Paul addressed this because there was still division in the early Church. Though they were saved and part of Christ's body, they weren't really *being* the Church. In Romans 14, Paul writes of division over eating meat offered to idols, practicing the Sabbath day and other things that divided Jew and Gentile Christians. Even the apostle Peter would not eat with Gentiles when certain Jews were around (Galatians 2). No doubt, they started to form separate Jewish and Gentile congregations. Many in the early Church did not fully understand what Christ had done for them and therefore they were not being the Church Jesus promised to build.

The same is true today. Many Christians don't understand the Church and therefore are not really living as the Church. Church is often something simply attended - with few ramifications other than that. As we conclude this series in which we have been exploring what it means to truly be the Church I want us to examine the three metaphors Paul gives us in this Ephesians passage. In many ways these three pictures Paul gives us of the Church are a fitting summary of this entire teaching series and a good place to finish.

1. Heavenly Citizens

Ephesians 2:19 *“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household.”*

The first metaphor Paul uses is that of citizens in the kingdom of heaven (or kingdom of God). He says, *“you are no longer foreigners and aliens.”* Foreigners and aliens were often looked at with suspicion and discriminated against and this is how the Gentiles were treated before Christ established the Church. They were like second-class citizens as far as worshiping God. They could not enter the temple; they could not be priests and, in most cases, were despised by Israel. However, in Christ, Gentile Christians were now full citizens of the kingdom of heaven. Among Christians there is some disagreement over what the kingdom of heaven is. John the Baptist preached the kingdom of heaven and so did Christ and His apostles (cf. Matt 3:2, 10:7). However in studying texts on the kingdom of heaven, it clearly has both a present and a future reality. For example this one from Luke:

Luke 17:20-21 *“Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, “The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is within you.”*

Christ says the kingdom of God is within you, or it can be translated “in your midst.” The kingdom of heaven is present, and yet, we still wait for its complete fulfilment. In the Lord’s Prayer, we pray, *“Your kingdom come. Your will be done in earth, as it is in heaven”* (Matthew 6:10). Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is wherever people proclaim submission to God. It is in our hearts, and yet it is also a coming reality. One day, at Christ’s coming, He will literally rule on this earth as in heaven and as the Church, we should currently live as citizens of this kingdom. How does that look?

a) *Heavenly citizens will have different cultural norms than those of the earth.*

These different cultural norms include different speech, dress, values, etc. Ephesians 4:29 says, *“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”* Citizens of heaven will only let words come out of their mouths that will be helpful and build others up. They will not be known for sexual jokes, cursing, or other language that defiles.

1 Timothy 2:9 says, *“I also want women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes.”* Though Paul speaks to women in this text, the principles apply to all Christians. In the world clothes are often used to show one’s wealth and to draw attention and glory to the wearer. But the Christian will want all glory to go to God and therefore avoid lavish, sexually alluring, or ragged clothing (often another way of seeking attention).

Not only will Christians be different in their talk and their appearance, but also in the way they think. Romans 12:2 says, *“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”* The world culture trains people how to think about beauty, success, life, and death. However, citizens of heaven will think very differently about these things, because their views are based on Scripture. Citizens of heaven will be continually transforming their minds through the Word of God.

b) *Heavenly citizens will continually walk in righteousness.*

Romans 14:17 says, *“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”* These are all present realities that should be growing in our lives.

We are meant to be manifesting the righteousness of Christ in our lives more and more and helping others to do so as well. We will be living in the reality of our peace with God which leads to peace with others. We will also be growing in joy regardless of our circumstances because our joy is in God. Philippians 4:4 says, *“Rejoice in the Lord, again I say, ‘Rejoice!’”*

c) *Heavenly citizens will continually proclaim the kingdom to others.*

Acts 28:31 says this about Paul: *“Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.”* Paul continually proclaimed the kingdom of God - preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. This should be true for us as well. As citizens of heaven, we should continually proclaim the gospel to all who will hear. The good news is that this present world is not the best there is - there is more. The sin, discord, death, and decay of this world are not God's plan for us. God has more. Jesus Christ ushered in a whole new world – a new kingdom – into which He calls each of us.

d) *Heavenly citizens will long for the kingdom of heaven.*

Hebrews 11:16 says this about Abraham and the other patriarchs of the faith: *“Instead, they were longing for a better country - a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.”*

Though living on the earth, Abraham and the patriarchs longed for their heavenly home - and God is not ashamed to be called their God. God is pleased with those who long for the coming kingdom. One of the ways we long for this coming kingdom is by praying for it. Again, the Lord's Prayer gives us those mighty words, *“Your kingdom come. Your will be done.”* We should long for it especially as we see the sin and destruction happening daily in our world.

Another way we long for the kingdom is by longing for our King - our Saviour - to come.

Philippians 3:20-21 *“But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.”*

If we are truly being the Church then we will be living as citizens of the kingdom of heaven. Our language, our behaviour, our priorities and our hopes will be different to the world around us.

2. The Family of God

The next way that Christians can be the Church is by living as family members.

Ephesians 2:19 *“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household.”*

Not only has Christ made us heavenly citizens, but also members of the same family. There is greater unity and intimacy between family members than between citizens. This should be something that characterizes Christians. Christ says this about His followers:

Matthew 12:48-50 *“Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”*

Christ regarded His disciples as family members and God as their Father. He taught the disciples to pray, *“Our Father, who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name ...”* (Matthew 6:9). When we began following Christ, we became family. This family includes people from different socio-economic backgrounds, races, ethnic groups and it includes believers both in heaven and on earth. Ephesians 3:14-15 says, *“For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name.”*

In 1 Timothy 5:1-2, Paul says this about how believers should treat one another: *“Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.”* We should treat one another as family. Christ said, *“They will know you are my disciples by the way you love one another.”* (John 13:35). We are to be known by this intimate familial love.

a) *As family, believers often use familial terms.*

Paul calls Timothy his “son in the faith” (1 Timothy 1:2). He refers to himself as a “father” to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 4:15), and calls the Romans “brothers and sisters” (Romans 12:1). We should feel comfortable using these familial terms as well.

b) *As family, believers place a high priority on being the Church.*

Galatians 6:10 says, *“Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”* Yes, we should do good to all, but especially to believers. They should be our priority. When something is your priority, you invest your time, money, and energy in it, and you give up other things to focus on it. This should be true of our investment in the Body of Christ.

Sadly, for too many people, job, schooling and housing are the main priorities instead of the Church. Believers often uproot their families from a great Church community where God is using them and move for career and other opportunities. This often leads to spiritual struggles. They find a new Church fellowship, but often struggle to get involved - and it never feels like home. Their spiritual life suffers because they didn't prioritize their kingdom ministry - their Christian family. Where has God planted you? How is God calling you to make Church and the mission of Christ your priority?

c) *As family, believers must develop intimate relationships with one another.*

Family is a place where we share intimate secrets and struggles, and this should be true of the Church as well. James 5:16 says, *“Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.”* Sadly, many have no transparency in their Church relationships. People in the Church are too often kept at arm's length, if not an entire body's length. We need to develop intimate relationships within the body of Christ. We should learn to confess our sins and share our successes with one another and also to seek the prayers of the saints. These are practical aspects of being family.

d) *As family, believers must encourage one another in their spiritual growth.*

In families, parents invest their lives, money, and time in helping their children grow as individuals. Church members should help one another grow as well, especially in their relationship with Christ. This is the priority of people who are “being” the church. As the writer of Hebrews says, *“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.”* (Hebrews 10:24).

3. God's Temple

Ephesians 2:20-22 *"... built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."*

Paul also teaches that the Gentiles are being built into a holy temple where God dwells. No doubt this conjured up images of the Jewish temple, which Gentiles could never fully enter. However, they were now God's temple.

a) *As God's temple, we will constantly worship God.*

That was the primary purpose of the physical temple. There, people gathered to worship and offer sacrifices pleasing to God. Hebrews 13:15-16 says: *"Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise - the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased."* Here the author says praise, good works, and giving are sacrifices that please God. This will be our continual endeavour as God's temple. We will ask ourselves daily, *"How can I worship and bless God today both individually and with other believers?"* Paul also says in 1 Corinthians 10:31, *"So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."* Everything we do can and should be worship.

b) *As God's temple, we will live carefully - in a God-honouring manner.*

In one of Watchman Nee's books he says that if you have a little bit of change in your pocket, you can walk around carefree. However, if you have a large sum of money in your pocket, you will walk very carefully lest you lose it. Not that we can lose God, but he who dwells in us is so valuable that His indwelling should drastically change how we walk. We should be different. So let us walk carefully so we might always honour God with our mouths and our meditations. Let us always remember that our individual bodies, and also we as the Church, are his temple – the dwelling place of God.

c) *As God's temple, we will live as God's holy people*

The priests and Levites made sure that God's temple never became defiled. There were ceremonial washings and cleansings even for the plates in the temple. In the same way, as the temple of God, we will keep ourselves from anything that might defile. 1 Thessalonians 5:22 says, *"Avoid every kind of evil."* When Jesus went into the temple, He made a whip and turned over tables because God's house was being defiled. We must have that same type of zeal for God's temple - our bodies and the Church. We must get rid of all sin and anything that does not honour God. Paul further expands on this idea of God's temple by considering three critical elements.

> **The apostles and prophets are the foundation of the temple**

Ephesians 2:20 says the temple is built on the *"foundation of the apostles and prophets."* There is some controversy over this. Is Paul referring to the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles? Or is he referring to New Testament apostles and prophets? Most likely he is referring only to those who ministered in the New Testament. The primary support for this view is the order in which he lists the two groups. If he is referring to the Old Testament prophets, then it would make sense that the prophets would be listed first. Instead, he is probably referring to those who ministered with the apostles in building the foundation of the Church.

Ephesians 3:4-5 *"In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets."*

The apostles were specifically a small group whom Jesus chose, called and authorized to teach in His name and who were eyewitnesses of His resurrection, consisting of the Twelve plus Paul and James and perhaps one or two others. How are the apostles and prophets the foundation of the Church, especially since Scripture says Christ is the foundation of the Church (1 Cor. 3:11)? The primary way the apostles and the prophets are the foundation of the church is through their teaching. They wrote the New Testament Scripture on which the Church is built and they founded local churches based on these truths. Paul confirms here:

1 Corinthians 3:10-11 *“By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.”*

The apostles and prophets laid the foundation of the Church through their teachings, and their emphasis on the resurrected Christ. There are several principles that we can learn from this about being the Church.

Since the Church is built on apostolic teaching, we, as committed members of the Church, will be devoted to apostolic teaching. As we saw early in this teaching series, the early Church *“devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer”* (Acts 2:42). We must be devoted to daily studying God’s Word, memorizing it, teaching it, and sharing it with others. Since the Church is built on apostolic teaching, when seeking a Church fellowship, we should look for one that faithfully preaches the Word of God. Many Church communities no longer preach from the Bible. They say it is too antiquated, full of errors, and irrelevant to the needs of the people. Instead, they preach psychology, history, stories, and anecdotal socio-political diatribe. Paul warned Timothy of such times:

2 Timothy 4:3-4 *“For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.”*

Because Satan knows that the Word of God is the foundation of the Church, he always attacks it in his attempts to bring the Church down. Even at the beginning of time, Satan attacked the Word of God. He asked Eve, *“Is that really what God said?”* Tragically, that same question is being asked by a growing number of modern ‘Christians’ about some of the foundational truths of our whole faith.

> **Christ is the cornerstone of the temple**

Ephesians 2:20-21 says the Church is: *“built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.”* The cornerstone was a messianic picture of Christ in the Old Testament. Isaiah 28:16 says, *“So this is what the Sovereign LORD says: ‘See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed.’”*

A cornerstone was important for two reasons. It was part of the foundation, and it also fixed the angle of the building and became the standard from which the architect traced the walls and arches throughout. Since Christ is the cornerstone of the Church, it is on Him, His Word and His finished work that the Church is built. When Jesus asked Peter who he was, Peter replied, *“You are the Christ, the Son of God.”* And Jesus replied, *“On this rock, I will build my church”* (Matthew 16:16-18). Christ is this rock. He is the cornerstone on which the Church is built. Only those who accept Christ and his teachings are part of the Church. Is your life built on Christ - His life, death, resurrection, and teaching? Any other foundation will fail.

Since Christ is the cornerstone of the Church, it is through Him that the Church is unified. Paul says this in Ephesians 2:21, *"In Him the whole building is joined together."* Then in Ephesians 2:14, *"For He Himself is our peace, Who has made the two one."* He is the one Who joins the Jews and Gentiles together, abolishing that ancient hostility. He is also the one who brings the Church together today. We can be unified because of Him, whether we are Jew, Gentile, rich, poor, male, or female. We can only have this kind of unity based on Christ. If our unity is based on culture, affinity, gender, socio-economic status, hobbies or anything else, it will not stand. Only Christ can unify the Church and keep it unified. Are you walking in unity with the rest of the Church? Yes, certain people's personalities may get on your nerves; they may think differently than you; they may even hurt you. However, you can seek unity because of Christ - He is the unifier. Let that commonality trump any and all other differences. Christ is our cornerstone.

Since Christ is the cornerstone of the Church, it is through Him that we grow. Ephesians 2:21 says, *"In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord."* It was upon the foundation, the cornerstone, that the rest of the building was built. In the same way, both our individual and our corporate spiritual growth come through Christ. Christ says, *"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing"* (John 15:5). It is only by abiding in Christ, our cornerstone, that we can we grow and ultimately fulfill our purpose. We abide in Christ and therefore grow spiritually through studying Scripture, prayer, fellowship with other believers, and serving. Many are not growing because they are not abiding in Christ - they are not staying connected to the cornerstone.

> The people of God are bricks in the temple

Now the third aspect of the temple that Paul refers to is us. Ephesians 2:22 says, *"And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."* Though Paul does not actually say so, the implication is that he is referring to individual believers as bricks or stones in the temple of God. Peter uses this same analogy in 1 Peter 2:5 when he says, *"you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."* Yes, Scripture teaches that individual believers are the temple of God. 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 says, *"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body."*

Scripture also teaches that when believers gather together, God is with us. 1 Corinthians 3:16 says, *"Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?"* The word *you* in this passage is plural, referring to the Church. Similarly, Christ says in Matthew 18:20, *"For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."* When believers are present together there is a special way in which God meets with them. In fact, there are some things God does in a corporate gathering that He does not do when we are alone.

Now as 'bricks' in the 'temple of God' we obviously need one another. A brick is not good for much by itself. But when it is bound together with other bricks, can become part of a beautiful building. In the same way, apart from the body of Christ, we may miss God's best. As bricks in the temple of God, the Lord is constantly adding other bricks until the temple is complete, and we must aid in that process. One day God will add the final Jews and Gentiles to the Church and the temple will be finished. He has called us to aid in that process by faithfully sharing the gospel with others. In Matthew 28:19 we are called and commissioned to, *"go throughout the earth and make disciples of all nations."* Those disciples are the bricks Jesus uses to build His Church and that Church which Jesus promised to build is the only Church God recognises, empowers and trusts to fulfil His Kingdom plan and purpose.

Conclusion

As I draw this teaching series to a close, I don't believe for a moment that I have said all that could be said about what it means to truly be the Church. I could probably preach for years on this topic as I continue to explore the depth and breadth of this wonderful faith community into which God has called us. However, I do sincerely believe that if you understand, embrace and apply the teaching in just these twelve sermons, Jesus will fulfill His promise to build His Church in you, through you and around you. You will marvel at what is possible as you fully embrace the Church that God sees and longs for, which may not be the Church humans have tried to build in Jesus' name. I want to finish now where I started by repeating what I said at the end of my very first sermon in this series:

You will be amazed at what God can achieve through you and the believers around you when you decide you want to stop just going to Church and start being the Church! But we need to work with God here and go looking for His hand at work and listen for His voice to us. These sermons need to be studied and prayed through - not just read once and discarded. I would strongly suggest when you have made your way to the end of this series that you go back and work through the sermons again one by one, in prayer, asking God to reveal His word to you today. Download the PDF's and print them off and grab your pen and highlighter and go to work! If you choose to spend that time and let God really drive His truths home in your heart, then I can guarantee that 'being the Church' will not be a chore or an expectation or a religious activity - it will be a spontaneous reality as the life of Christ explodes within you.

Then, before we know it, the book of Acts will no longer be a dusty historical account of where this all began, it will once again be a commentary on where we are now, and who we are becoming as we give the Church back to God and watch Him do today and tomorrow, what He did back then. That is my only agenda. That is the reason I preach - to lead people to the God Who still speaks, still heals, still transforms lives and whole communities. Everything I do, say, preach and pray is directed towards that end. I truly believe God is always ready to redeem what we've lost and give us the only thing we ever truly needed: Jesus - the living, present, Lord of the Church and the One Who promised to build His Church, right here, right now, if we let go the reigns and trust Him.