

Blessed Beyond Measure

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Date: 13 August 2023

Preacher: Colin Dow

[0 : 00] What is the church? Seems like a very basic question, but is it a basic question? Is the church a building to which we come? Is it an institution of which we're part?

Is it a cultural relic which reflects our upbringing and our background? Is it a social club which attracts like-minded people? Is it a ground for moral improvement?

What is the church? Well, to answer that question, we need to go back to basics and ask, what did the founders of the church understand it to be?

The letter of Ephesians is the charter and instruction manual of the church. Written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit by the Apostle Paul, it is the book of the church.

If we have questions about what the church is, we'll find many of them answered in the book of Ephesians. Over the course of the next number of weeks, Nate, Kirk, and I want to teach our way through this letter with a particular emphasis on what Ephesians teaches us about what the church is and how a healthy church operates.

[1 : 22] This morning, we turned to this passage in Ephesians 1 through 14 where the Apostle Paul teaches us that the church is nothing less than God's new society.

God's new society. This is how dramatic and countercultural a thing the church is. It is not part of the society in which we live. It is an altogether new society created by God, redeemed by Jesus Christ, and filled with the Holy Spirit.

Let me say that again so that we get the dramatic gist of Paul's teaching. The church is not part of the society in which we live. Far less is it to be a reflection of the society in which it's placed.

It is an altogether new society. And these verses form the charter of our new society, its creation story, as it were.

These foundations are not of human origin. They are from God. The church isn't a fishing club. It ain't a running club.

[2 : 38] Its foundation is God, and it's He who forms and fashions it according to His glorious wisdom and His infinite love. Our passage teaches us the following five things about God's new society, the church.

First, God's new society is according to the purpose of God's will. Second, God's new society is united to Christ.

Third, God's new society is by faith in the gospel. Fourth, God's new society is sealed by the Holy Spirit.

And last, God's new society is to the praise of His glory. First then, God's new society is according to the purpose of God's will.

Peppered throughout our passage are references to the will or to the purpose of God. In verse 1, the apostle Paul, the writer of this letter, says of himself that he was called to be an apostle by the will of God.

[3 : 55] In verse 5, His loving choice, God's loving choice of us to be His adopted children is according to the good purpose of His will. In verse 9, God makes known to us the mystery of His will according to the good purpose which He purposed.

In verse 11, the inheritance He has for us is according to the purpose of Him who in all things is working according to the counsel of His will.

All the active verbs in our passage are attributed to God's activity. It is God who forms and fashions the church according to the good purposes for us.

He has blessed us. He has chosen us. He has adopted us. He has redeemed us. He has loved us. He has guaranteed us an inheritance.

He has sealed us with His Spirit. The church didn't come about through accident or happenstance. It exists because in the glorious wisdom and in the infinite love of God, He purposed it into existence.

[5 : 07] From before the foundation of the world, God willed, purposed, and planned our existence. When people hear that we belong to the Free Church of Scotland, they often ask about our history.

We go back to 1843 and the disruption in the Church of Scotland. The Church of Scotland goes back to 1560 and the Scottish Reformation.

But the church itself, the universal church, was willed, purposed, and planned before the creation of the world. We can't put a date on its beginning.

The church was willed before the Himalayan mountain range reached its present heights. The church was purposed before the sun began to shine.

The church was purposed before time itself existed. Of nothing else can this be said. The church is utterly unique in this.

[6 : 15] Furthermore, in His infinite wisdom, God purposed the church to be the means by which His glorious grace would be made known. We might suppose, if we were God, that we could think of a better way of making His glory known.

But do we know more than God Himself? Are we wiser than He? The church is not a plaything. It's not a fashion or a passing fad or a cultural relic.

Rather, because it was purposed from eternity in the infinitely wise mind of God, we are to take the church very seriously indeed.

Seriously enough to commit ourselves to its mission and its fruitfulness. Listen to this. The church is God's plan A for making known His glory.

He has no plan B. The church is God's plan A for making known His glory. He has no plan B.

[7 : 33] To people who say, well, I'm a Christian, but I don't do church, we ask, well, where do you fit into Ephesians 1? Healthy Christians engage in and with the church.

They commit their time and resources to God's plan A for making known His glory. And no, the church isn't always an easy place to be, but that's a function of human sinfulness, not God's foolishness.

God has founded this new society according to the purpose of His will, which means today that as we have gathered together to worship Him.

We're all part of something which has been planned before the universe was created and is the ultimate demonstration of God's infinite wisdom for our good and for His glory.

Surely that should add some volume to our praise and add some steel to our commitment to the church, not least that we might get out of bed on a Sunday morning to come on time.

[8 : 44] God's new society is according to the purpose of His will. Second, God's new society is united to Christ.

United to Christ. As we go through our passage, we encounter a number of occasions where the apostle uses the phrase, in Christ. In verse 1, the Christians in Ephesus are in Christ Jesus.

The blessings God has for us are described in verse 3 as being in Christ. In verse 4, we were chosen in Him. In verse 7, we have redemption in Him.

His purposes in verse 9 are in Him. In verse 10, all things are brought together in Christ. In verse 11, our inheritance is in Him.

In verse 13, we believed and were sealed by the Holy Spirit in Him. In Him. In Him. God's new society, that which in His infinite wisdom He purposed before the foundation of the earth, is united to Christ.

[9 : 55] It exists in Him. The existence of the church outside of Christ is impossible.

For just as God purposed the creation of the church, He purposed it to exist in living union with His Son. Later in Ephesians 5, verses 23, in the context of marriage, Paul will say, Christ is the head of the church, His body, and is Himself its Savior.

I've never seen a body walking about without a head. Or a head walking about without a body. We are united to Christ. We can't exist without Him.

Again, in Ephesians 2, Paul talks of Christ being our peace. And says that the purpose of His death was that He might create in Himself one new man. The church exists in living connection with Jesus.

To Him we owe our existence. Because it was by His death and resurrection we were redeemed and made new. In Him we live and we thrive as a church.

[11 : 09] Jesus Christ is everything to us. And through Him, we can do everything. We sometimes mistakenly think that the church wouldn't survive without us.

That we're indispensable. The church is not our kingdom. It's God's kingdom. He doesn't need any of us here to make it a success.

Rather, He graciously gives us the privilege of giving each of us unique gifts which we're to use to build up His church. Now, if the church is united to Christ, and if the church exists in Christ, then every member of the church is to imitate and to become more like Christ.

The Christ we know, for example, was filled with love for others. David Parker often talks about how he was the Christ for the other. If we're united to Christ, then our character and behavior must increasingly imitate Him in this aspect.

We're for the other. We are not consumers. We're contributors. We're new masters. We're servants.

[12 : 31] We're not takers. We're givers. Our basic instinct isn't self-gratification or what I can get out of the church, how it makes me feel, but selflessness.

How can I serve others in this church? Christ has served us. We'll serve others. He humbled Himself and washed His disciples' feet, so we'll humble ourselves for Him, and we'll do the most menial of things.

We will be service-oriented, not self-oriented. Nothing will be beneath us if we're united to Christ, our servant King.

Here's a question we all have to answer, every one of us, from the youngest here to the oldest.

First, in what ways am I serving others in this church?

In what ways am I serving others in this church? And more than that, in what ways perhaps could I start serving others in this church?

[13 : 43] God's new society is united to Christ. Third, God's new society is by faith in the gospel.

By faith in the gospel. Well, by what means shall a man or woman become a member of God's new society, the church? You become a member of a golf club by playing and applying, by filling in some forms and paying your membership fees?

Is this the way it is with the church, that by coming along and paying one's membership fees, we're accepted? Or is there something deeper going on? Throughout our passage, Paul insists God is in ultimate control of all things, even this.

In verse 4 we read, He chose us. In verse 5 and 11, He predestined us. Ultimately, we're members of God's church because of a choice God made before the creation of the world.

Now, some Christians see this as a threat, but we don't, because as Paul will later show in Ephesians, if God hadn't first chosen us, by nature, none of us would ever have chosen Him.

[14 : 59] Putting to one side God's ultimate choice of us, which we cannot see and we cannot know and we must never use as an excuse, how is it that we have become members of God's new society?

Well, you'll notice, this letter is written in verse 1 to the faithful in Christ Jesus, to those who have faith in Him. In verse 12, Christians are described as those who have hope in Christ.

And then in verse 13, Paul expands upon this faith and hope and says, and you also, having heard the word of truth, the gospel of our salvation, in whom also having believed.

We have faith, hope, and believing. Having heard the word of the gospel, we believed it, and we set our hope on Christ.

That's how we became members of God's church, by faith in the gospel of God's love for us through His Son, Jesus Christ. The most basic contents of that gospel are contained in verse 7, in Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.

[16 : 19] So, we heard the message of Christ's death for us on the cross, how He sacrificed Himself for our sins and our guilt, and we believed.

We did not earn our inclusion in God's new society by our good works or by our religious efforts. It was given to us according to our faith in Jesus and what He's done for us on the cross by redeeming and forgiving us according to the riches of His grace.

And later, we're going to learn from Ephesians 2 that even the faith with which we believe is God's gift. But membership of the church is by faith in Christ and faith alone.

It's rather simple, isn't it? But it's deeply profound. We heard the word of the truth, the gospel of our salvation. We believed.

We heard. We believed. We may have heard it from a preacher or a Sunday school teacher or most ideally from our parents.

[17 : 39] We heard it and we believed in Jesus. It's not about social status. It's not about cultural background or even a common language.

language. It's not about a certain level of education or social class. It's about faith in Jesus Christ. Healthy churches keep the message simple. They don't hide it behind countless traditions and bylaws. In all our preaching, we must proclaim the sufficiency of faith and in our daily interactions with each other.

We treat each other as equals, recognizing that not one of us has been saved because of who we were or what we have done, but entirely due to the love of God and His grace in the gospel of His Son.

There are no superior or inferior Christians in the church. Only those who have faith in Jesus. At the end of the day, that's all that counts.

[18 : 51] Fourth, God's new society is sealed by His Holy Spirit. God's new society is sealed by His Holy Spirit.

There are so many amazing things going on behind the scenes in this passage and in every church. Things we kind of see. Paul tells us one such amazing thing in verses 13 and 14.

In Him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation and believed in Him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it to the praise of His glory.

The Holy Spirit of God is at work among us. He is sealing new believers and acting as the guarantee of their inheritance.

We're returning here to the imagery of marriage which Paul will use all the way through this letter. From time to time, it's our privilege to announce engagements in our congregation. We announced Ross and Rachel's engagement, for example.

[20 : 02] The most recent, of course, was Samuel's engagement to Lisa. As with all engagements, Lisa was given an engagement ring as a sign of their intention to marry.

And that ring is a seal of their love and commitment to one another. It represents the certainty, all things being well, of future marriage. And the Holy Spirit who's with us this morning is a kind of engagement ring given as a token of God's love to us, a sign that He has betrothed us to Himself in love and that He shall be faithful to us.

This is the function of a seal in this context. It seals God's love for us and ours to God. The Holy Spirit work among us is the seal of God's intention to fully redeem us.

For all that, all of us, we know this, we're imperfect as Christians and we all know this church is imperfect. There isn't no such thing as a perfect church. A day is coming when God will fully perfect us and grant us access to His glorious inheritance which He's got waiting for us right now in the new heavens and the new earth.

the Holy Spirit among us is God's engagement ring, His loving commitment to us. Every healthy church is to have a healthy focus on the past, on how Jesus Christ has died and risen for our salvation.

[21 : 45] Every healthy church is to have a focus on the present, on how we may serve Christ and we may serve Christ's people. But every healthy church is also to have a healthy focus on the future, on our glorious inheritance with God.

Without this future focus, we are tempted to despair and we are tempted to become materialistic Christians. but bearing in mind God's great purposes for our good, we joyfully hope in Him.

You'll know this. Some churches have the smell of death about them. Their members are perhaps dull and downbeat and despairing. They've lost hope. But no church, if it's united to Christ and sealed by His Spirit, however small, however large, needs be so dull, so downbeat, so despairing, for that church, be it only composed of two or three members, is the heir of a glorious inheritance, vast and immeasurable.

Its days on earth might be numbered and rightly so, but its days in heaven are eternal. It might seem weak on earth, but in heaven and its voice shall join with those of a million others as together we sing the praises of King Jesus.

Joy and hope in the Holy Spirit. This is our present reality as God's new society. So let's express that joy and hope in the vibrancy of our worship and our praise.

[23 : 33] God's new society is to the praise of God's glory.

God's new society is to the praise of God's glory. In verse 6, Paul tells us that our adoption as children of God is to the praise of His glory, the praise of the glory of His grace.

In verse 12, he tells us that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of His glory. In verse 14, God seals us with the Holy Spirit to the praise of His glory.

In His infinite wisdom, God created the church for the praise of His glory. The greatest possible exhibition of the glory of God is expressed in purposing a new society united to Christ, saved by faith, and sealed by His Spirit.

It is a greater exhibition of His glory than the creation of the universe, the mighty oceans, the high mountains. The church exists to the praise of His glory.

[24 : 50] In the world of Paul's day, Roman citizens would have said, behold the glory of the eternal city of Rome with all its palaces and all its legions and its mighty emperor.

But such glories are behind it now, only now being dug up in archaeological excavations. Or Jewish citizens of Paul's day would have said, behold the glory of Jerusalem with its temple and its priests and its gold.

But all such glories were destroyed in AD 70 when the Roman army burned Jerusalem to the ground. But the church, God's new society, its history predates history.

And its future postdates history. And the glory of it all is that it's all by grace. Many of us were brought up learning by memory the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

We still remember the first question and answer. What is man's chief end? Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. This is true not just for us as individual Christians.

[26 : 14] Christians, this is true for us as a church. We don't exist for our own benefit.

We shall only find our joy as a church in the glory of God. The glorious God sent His Son to die for us and to fashion a church which exists to the praise of His glory.

A healthy church isn't fixated on its own reputation or its own prosperity but on the praise and the glory of the God who before time began purposed in love and wisdom its existence.

We love Him because He first loved us. Of the many things this may mean for us as we close it means at least three. First we are gathered here together as a church to explicitly praise and worship God.

We are not here to be entertained. We are not here primarily for our own benefit for how it makes us feel but to serve God in praise and worship and that means we'll be serious about praise and worship.

[27 : 34] What we sing how we sing remembering that the God who redeemed us by the blood of His Son has placed us right here right now for this very reason to proclaim the praise of His glory.

Our praise will be spiritually rich and our worship will be spiritually powerful. Secondly because the focus of the church is on God and not ourselves we will actively look for more opportunities to serve others than to be served by others.

There is no greater way to serve God than to serve God's people. Are there ways in which I can serve someone else and so imitate the Christ who said I've not come to be served but to serve? Are there people to whom we can offer just a cup of cold water in the name of Christ? The healthy church is filled with servant hearted Christians.

That's God's new society in action. And thirdly even though earlier I said that God's new society the church is not a part of society yet it is our responsibility for the praise of the glory of God to penetrate our society with the message of the gospel.

[29 : 11] Even though we're not part of the society in which we're placed we are not to stand apart from it. We're for the sake of the glory of God to engage with the society for its good.

At every level for the glory of God we are to engage. in its science in its physics in its arts in its sociology in its politics in its sports.

This is to the praise of the glory of God for as we go through Ephesians we'll see that God's purposes are cosmic and universal. His ultimate purpose is to unite and fulfill all things in Christ whatever they may be.

we are God's new society we are privileged beyond measure and far beyond our imaginations. Enough of this saying do I really have to go to church today ma'am?

one last question do we want to be part of God's new society the society with an eternal past an enriching present and an exciting future God then as we hear this message of a crucified and risen Christ as we hear the gospel let's respond by ourselves believing and trusting in him as our Lord and Redeemer and Savior and then of us too it shall be said oh Colin oh Ross oh Mitchell oh Anna God has blessed you with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus