

Dear Friends,

When we read Paul's letter to the Ephesian Church, we struggle to grasp the utter selfless glory and worship with which Paul "Infects" the Ephesians and us. And every speck of energy invested in His praise and glory is wisely spent. However, even the most devoted of churches consists of flawed, broken humans. We can be devoted to the praise and glory of Jesus today, and chase the dreams of our own ego tomorrow.

How could it be that such a healthy and blessed church could slip into that pattern in a few brief years? In the Lord's message to the church's "angel," I believe her pastor, in Revelation 2:1-7, the Lord warns. This church, likely including her pastor, has slipped away from her/their "first love," not merely the first spiritual love they experienced, but their chief love, their most important love, love for Jesus, manifested by their focus on Him and their devotion to His glory in all that they say and do, personally and as a church body.

From breathing the heavenly invigorating air of selfless praise to Jesus and His glory, they fell prey to the suffocating stagnant air of "I want my way." And the Lord warned this church that she was in danger of losing her blessing. That church doesn't exist today. Sometime after her moment of glory when Paul wrote to her, she slipped away from that preeminent love for Jesus and His glory into a glory that was no glory at all. How did this happen? How can it happen with a healthy thriving church today? It happens when the members of that church, one or two at a time, compromise their passion for Jesus and His glory. Like a contagious virus, that failure spreads to others, and soon those who were charged to be faithful to death have forsaken their first love. Neglect and abandonment of Jesus alone as the church's purpose for her existence diminishes the light and the power.

Spend a few moments reflecting on your "Home church." How is your heart and conduct toward her and her members? More importantly, how is it toward her Lord? Does His glory consume your heart and your conduct? Or have you abandoned Him to chase other heroes and other passions? Political? Career? Hobbies? Financial gain and success? Churches typically die from neglect. Will we be part of that pattern for our church? Or will we be that faithful passionate light that insists on shining on Him alone in every thought, word, and deed? Our joy--our church's future--depends on our answer.

Lord help us,
Joe Holder

Ephesians

Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen. (Ephesians 3:20-21 KJV 1900)

The "Church" letters of the New Testament are sometimes referred to as "Occasional" letters. Some problem "Occasioned" the writing of the letter to address and to correct the problem. However, there is no obvious problem in the content of Ephesians. It may well be the most positive of the New Testament church letters. The letter begins with a rock-solid foundation of praise to the Lord that rests on the eternal purpose of God, enabled effectually by the successful work of God Incarnate, the Lord Jesus Christ, and effectually implemented by the work of the Holy Spirit. In Ephesians 1 and Romans 8, Paul writes the clearest explanation of God's electing love and grace, and His predestinating purpose to secure all whom He loved from eternity in His saving grace to be found in Scripture.

The first three chapters keep our focus more on God and His purpose and work for His chosen people, "*all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.*" (Ephesians 1:3 KJV) From this premise, Paul immediately leads us to God's election of His people in Christ, His determination to ensure that purpose shall be successfully accomplished (Predestination, specific regarding our final eternal "Destiny," not the minutiae of daily life), and His redeeming work in Jesus to eradicate the sin problem for all those whom He chose in Jesus. It is wholly fitting that a section of Scripture which emphasizes God and His gracious work for His people should begin with a "Doxology," words of praise to God, and end with a more detailed Doxology. (Ephesians 3:14-21 KJV)

"Praise God from Whom all Blessings Flow"

Consider the initial foundation of "*spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ*" that Paul teaches us.

1. Verse 4. God chose us in the Lord Jesus Christ "... **before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love** ." He chose a specific people, "us," not a means or method by which man may choose to save himself.
2. Verses 5-6. He also "... **predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved** ." He predestinated "**us**," those same people. "**Us**," a personal pronoun, also limits God's predestination in this lesson to people. The personal pronoun excludes events and emphasizes that God eternally purposed and determined to accomplish His electing objective for the people so chosen, "**holy and without blame before him in love** ."
3. This work rests on "... **the good pleasure of his will** , " not the will of those people whom He so chose, or the will of the people who supposedly choose Him.
4. And God's glorious objective is further stated, "**To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved** ." The objective of God's saving purpose is not for the saved to parade through heaven for eternity exhibiting their crowns and their glory. It is wholly to the praise of His glory. What was the theme of the hymn sang by the redeemed in heaven in Revelation 5:9? It was praise to the Lord who redeemed them. Not a word of praise or boasting of self-accomplishments.
5. And why should it be so? God's effectual gracious purpose and work accomplishes one glorious end. By all of His eternal purpose and His careful unfolding that purpose in His work, in the end, He "... **made us accepted in the beloved** ."

This glorious and successful work of salvation Paul will "Unpack" through three chapters of grace and love.

"Walk worthy of the vocation"

Once Paul has anchored our minds in God and His gracious work for His people, he devotes the final three chapters of the letter to the ethical obligation we have toward the Lord because of His saving

grace. Thus, Ephesians teaches us both the saving grace of God and our ethical responsibility in great detail and clarity. From walking worthy of our calling (Ephesians 4:1-3; the remainder of the chapter expands on this thought) to being a faithful—and skilled—soldier of Jesus (Ephesians 6:10-20), Paul covers our Christian responsibility as clearly and thoroughly as he covered the Lord's work for us in the first three chapters.

Paul also writes more in Ephesians than in any other New Testament letter regarding the "Church." Once Paul has exposed this firm foundation of God's loving grace, he teaches the Ephesians and us how to live our lives all to the glory and service of our gracious Savior and God.

Our culture and age among Christians may manifest less understanding than any since the first century regarding the Biblical teaching on "Church." Populist Christianity strives to avoid the word and the New Testament idea altogether. You can't read Ephesians and accept this willful ignorance.

What is "Church"? What does the New Testament teach about it? The Greek word translated "Church" was used in the Greek culture to refer to the citizens of a city-state being "Called out" to a public assembly for the purpose of doing the city-state's business. How do New Testament writers apply this word to "Church"? Historically, studious believers held to a two-fold use of the word. 1) Some passages teach and describe the final gathering of all the elect in glory for eternity with the Lord, and 2) others teach about local church bodies gathered regularly to cultivate their faith, to worship their Lord, and to serve Him by serving each other. Whether believers gather in a local church assembly or the whole redeemed family of God gathered in resurrection glory, Paul identifies the "Church's" primary business, regardless the two concepts, as giving glory and praise to the Lord for His loving and redeeming grace.

At times, these historical views have likely been clouded by those who emphasized one or the other of these ideas to the confusion, if not outright denial of the other. Excessive emphasis on the "Universal church," all the elect gathered in eternal glory with the Lord, has paved the way for the reactive trend of our day, abandonment of this idea and the teaching of the church in glory (Or as it is sometimes termed, "The Church triumphant"), in favor of the idea that every appearance of "Church" in the New Testament refers to a local church body. I reject both views as failing a balanced view of New Testament teaching. I could offer no New Testament context that more clarifies this teaching than Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

My ministerial friends occasionally tease me for my emphasis on interpreting a passage by its context. I gladly plead guilty. In studying the appearances of "Church" in Ephesians, the specific details of the verse, as well as the context, should govern our interpretation. When I weigh the populist view that all appearances of the word in the New Testament refer to a local church body, I cannot comfortably find contextual support for the idea in several appearances of the word, especially in Ephesians. Another basic rule of Biblical interpretation which I try to follow rises to the forefront here. When I read both the verse in question and its context, does it accurately describe the idea or concept which I have in mind? If it does, I likely am close to the Holy Spirit's intended meaning. However, if the passage and its context say either too much or too little to match the idea I have in mind, I need to abandon that idea and search for meaning from the text itself. The "too much" or "too little" filter often refines and corrects my thinking. That principle of interpretation should refine our understanding of "Church," especially in Ephesians.

A couple examples will exemplify my point.

And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, Which is his body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all. (Ephesians 1:22-23 KJV)

I've known some really good faithful churches over the years. Most of the time a healthy church is a unified church whose members work together, respect each other, and strive to follow Scripture and to learn its teachings from their pastor and from habitual personal study of Scripture. However, I have yet to know a church that faithfully and consistently manifest in their faith and in their conduct all that these verses describe. Think. You can't work to manipulate members to agree with your ideas, however good you think those ideas to be, and truly regard Jesus as "... **head over all things to the church.**" If you regard Him as " *head over all things*" to your church, why do you think it necessary to play games to get others to agree with you? Is your opinion head over all things to the church, or is Jesus that head?

However, when we think of that final gathering of all the Lord's redeemed in glory, as well as the beginning of that gathering in glory now, we can't imagine any setting other than His being "... *head over all things.*" In Revelation 5:9, John was blessed to look for a moment into that world of glory. He saw all the redeemed who had died prior to that time in heaven. Not a one of them was parading heaven's streets strutting his crown and boasting his stars. Not one. With one voice, they all sang the praises of Jesus for

His redeeming love and grace. It requires no stretch of our minds to grasp that, in that world of glory, every redeemed person worshipped and praised Jesus as "... **head over all things**," and the object of their praise.

In Ephesians 4:4, Paul sets before us the ideal that should serve as our model in every decision and thought of our present service.

There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling. (Ephesians 4:4 KJV; emphasis added)

The Center for the Study of Global Christianity estimates some 34,200 various Christian denominations in the world as of 2000. Various other statistics estimate the number as low as 9,000. The variation likely relates to how one defines "Denomination." Whether we accept the high or the low number, there is no logical and reasonable way to describe Worldwide Christian culture as "One body," especially by the "One" set of measures that Paul lists following this verse. Ah, but we can rejoice in the reality of God's grace. When we get to glory with the Lord, there will be no Baptists, Methodists, or other "Denominations." All God's children will be consumed with the reality of their Savior and Redeemer, rejoicing together in His praise.

In this lesson, Paul holds before us that ultimate unity and teaches us to respect it and strive for it more in the here and now. Given that Scripture uses the same word, "Church," for both gatherings, every local church should pray and passionately devote its energy to the praise of their Lord and Savior. Anything they—or we—may do that fails that objective is unworthy and should be eliminated immediately. Are we so flooded with our Savior's love, with our understanding that He truly has "*blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ*," that we are willing and ready—right this moment—to abandon anything that falls short of that true and Biblical description of a healthy, godly church's one objective? Ready and willing to pour our hearts and souls into His worthy praise? There is only one way a church can rise to this task—when every member engages wholly in such praise. Are we ready? Let the praise begin!

Litt