

The essence of the Church of Christ

Ephesians 2:1-22

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So here we are, meeting together. We sing, we pray, we read from the Bible, we celebrate Holy Communion. We are individuals and families who have left our homes this morning for being together for an hour or so.

And we call this 'the church'. Some like to see the church as just that: a gathering of believers. Individuals who have accepted the Christian faith, and who meet once a week or a bit more often, to make sure that this individual faith is strengthened.

In his letter to the church in Ephesus St Paul uses interesting imagery for describing the church, and I think this shows that we are *not just a meeting of likeminded people*. The church of God is much more than this.

1. Once dead in trespasses and sins, now a dwelling place for God

Paul begins chapter two with pointing to our original state: Ephesians 2:1: 'You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked.' We were dead in regard to God. This is not just an individual moral issue – it is, if you read Paul's letters carefully, also an ethnic issue.

He describes how the nations were far from God, not only because people lived sinful lives, but also because they were not part of God's covenant people, Israel. Read Ephesians 2:12:

Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

But now, Paul says, all things are different. We, who were once sinners and who were once far away from God's covenantal promises, have come near. He begins chapter two by speaking of us being dead for God, and he ends with an opposite statement. Read Ephesians 2:19-22.

You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundations of the apostles and prophets Christ himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you are also being built together into a dwelling place for God in the Spirit.

We began by being dead for God, but now we are being built together into a dwelling place for God. A complete reversal of our situation, from being dead for God, to God being alive in us! This brings us immediately to the issue of what

the church is. Together we are a dwelling place for God.

That is so much more than an accidental meeting of people with a similar faith. Together we are a temple for God, the place where he lives. That is God's goal with our lives – for us together as a church. And in as far as we participate in this life of the church, God is also alive in us.

2 What happened to make this possible?

From people who were dead for God we have, together, been made into a temple where God lives. How did this happen? In Ephesians 2:4-5 Paul summarizes this:

God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved.

The initiative for our salvation comes from God. He made dead people alive and he made them individually and as a community, the place where He resides.

God's mercy is the greatest expression of his love because it shows liberality of God's love towards the sinner, whereby instead of punishing him he forgives him and gives him life.

The words "God, who is rich in mercy" have great theological and spiritual depth: they are a kind of summary of all St Paul's teaching about God's approach to people who are under the rule of sin, who are "by nature children of wrath".

The Redemption has already been accomplished, and man has available to him all the grace he needs for salvation: the gates of heaven are open wide; it is now the responsibility of every individual to make room for grace in his soul, to avail of grace to respond to our Lord's call.

By faith man freely commits his entire self to God [...]; before this faith can be exercised, man must have the grace of God to move and assist him; he must have the interior help of the Holy Spirit, who moves the heart and converts it to God, who opens the eyes of the mind and 'makes it easy for all to accept and believe the truth'. (Vaticanum II)

Now you would think that people whom once were sinners, but who have been made alive by God, embrace each other a lucky people, blessed tremendously. What a reason to celebrate together! But in Ephesus, as in all of the Roman Empire in those days, there where major ethnic

tensions in the churches. These were the result of the fact that Jewish and Greek followers of Jesus had very different lifestyles and opinions.

How do you live in a community with different lifestyles, different views, and different personalities? How can you live in peace together when the differences are large?

Paul underlines that Jesus came to bring peace between people and peace between those people and God. Ephesians 2:14-15:

He himself is our peace, who has made us both (Jews and others, people with very great differences) one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace.

Jesus created us into one new man, of which he is the head. One new man: that is another way of looking at the church. The church is his body. Now you would think that people who are made into one body with our Lord, who is the head of that body, are able to live together in love and peace – but that was a problem in Ephesus and that is still a problem for us.

By speaking of the abolishing of commandments and laws, Paul is very concretely referring to the problem that believers in God from the nations could not come close to the God of Israel. Israel used its laws as a wall to keep the world outside. Jews lived, both in Israel and throughout the Roman Empire, in the midst of the pagan nations.

By drawing the walls high up, they tried to keep the world outside, but they also kept people away from God. Instead of attracting them to God with their good Word of God and a holy lifestyle, they kept others outside.

In the temple in Jerusalem this attitude was very graphically shown; non-Jews had their own restricted area where they were allowed to be. In 1871 a stone was found that was used on one of the pillars in that court of the gentiles. An inscription on the stone said this:

NO MAN OF ANOTHER NATION TO ENTER
WITHIN THE FENCE AND ENCLOSURE
ROUND THE TEMPLE, AND WHOEVER IS
CAUGHT WILL HAVE HIMSELF TO BLAME
THAT HIS DEATH FOLLOWS.

And when many Jews became followers of Jesus, many continued to use their laws as markers. 'We are different'. And this created big problems with the people from the nations who joined the church. Were they second-rate citizens in the Kingdom of God? Not really part of the body of Christ?

Just as we are also very good at keep people away with our moralism. Our moralism that is often not based on Gods commandment to love all people, but on our subcultural rules and habits. We can make such big issues of little things and drive people away from us, and from community with God. Do people who are different from us, feel free and happy in our midst?

"If you are different from us, you are not welcome. If you want to know God and follow Christ, you have to become just like we are." Paul attacks this attitude by focussing on what the church really is: it is the body of Christ where he unites all people in himself.

In [Christ] all men find that solidarity they yearned for. [...] Adam [...] had been the cause of human strife and division. Christ, the Word made flesh, the prince of peace, reconciled all men to God by the cross, and, restoring the unity of all in one people and one body, he abolished hatred in his own flesh and, having been lifted up through his resurrection, he poured forth the Spirit of love into the hearts of men" (Vatican II, *Gaudium Et Spes*, 78).

3. Once aliens, now fellow citizens

Once we were 'alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise', but as we read in Ephesians 2:18, through Jesus 'we both (Jews, gentiles, all people with all there differences) have access in One Spirit to the Father.

Here we see the part played by the Holy Spirit in the work of salvation. That salvation was initiated by the Father and carried out by the Son. The words "in one Spirit", identify the access route to the Father. These words also imply some other facts. For instance, that the mysterious union which binds Christians together is caused by the action of the Holy Spirit who works in them.

And also, that this same Holy Spirit, inseparable from the Father and the Son, is always present and continually active in the Church, the mystical body of Christ. Of this, St Cyprian says in *De Oratione Dominica*, 23:

Hence the universal Church is seen to be 'a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit'.

The unity of the church is the desire of God, as he wants the church to reflect his eternal unity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

And the church *can* be one, Paul says. Among Christians, no one is better, or closer to God, than the other. If you are different from the rest, know that 'you are no longer strangers and aliens'. If brothers or sisters do not conform to

you and your norms, do not treat them as 'others'.

'We are all fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.' (Ephesians 2:19). Here the church is compared with a city, or a nation – that is why we can speak of all Christians to be fellow citizens. We are the city, or a people of God. And the church is compared to a household, that is, a family.

Sometimes, when at night you walk through the streets in my country, you can watch into the homes of people. They usually do not close the curtains of their windows and the windows are close to the street. You can see people sitting around the table, having fun, or watching TV together. For lonely people, this is a painful sight, especially if then the curtains are closed.

This cannot happen in the family of God. Through Jesus Christ there is a place for all people around the table. God never creates barriers. He offers peace and he invites us to offer peace to all people, even if they are very different from us. We are the experts in walls and separations, God is the one who breaks through all that.

The comparison with citizens in the one city of God, or the one nation of God, also focuses on this togetherness. In every Greek city in the time of Paul there were foreigners, *xenoi*, and their life was not easy. They were treated as doormats, always regarded with suspicion and dislike. No one in our community should be treated like this! Not in our country, not in our church. Who do you consider as 'different'? How do you treat that person?

Finally, Paul speaks of the church as a building, and more concretely, as a temple. This temple has one foundation, that of the apostles and prophets, and Jesus Christ is the cornerstone.

The cornerstone in a building was the stone that ensured that the whole building would be erected in a straight manner. It is the criterion for all construction. That is who Jesus Christ is in the Church. All we do must be based on him and his prescriptions.

But the church is also based on the apostles and prophets. That is why we say in our creeds that we believe the 'holy catholic and apostolic church'. Apostolic means: based on the teaching of the apostles. People who say that they love Jesus but they do not like Paul or Peter make a

fatal mistake. The Church is based on the apostles, their mission and their teaching.

And we call the church catholic. This means, general. It is for all people at all places in all times. We are one church, united and together. We do not exclude anyone from our church. All are welcome and people do not have to be like us.

They have to become like the cornerstone, Jesus. Not being like me, but following Jesus makes people holy. If we all do this, we act in accordance with God's desire that we are holy church. The church is holy, because it is created by God, it belongs to Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit works in us.

Conclusion

And this is how Paul concludes: the church is growing to be a holy temple. See Ephesians 2:22. 'In Jesus you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.' Do you hear the Trinitarian language again?

The Church is the dwelling place for God. And each Christian is a stone that is added to the walls of that temple. Many cathedrals in Europe took centuries to be finished, and this is how God today builds his church. Stone by stone. And you are one of those. This is how God builds his dwelling place.

His dwelling place: He is among us! This is a fact, but it also contains a command for us. Paul says that we 'are being built together' into a dwelling place for God. The command is to allow us to be built together. We exist for praising God in his temple and for allowing the world to also worship God, and that is absolutely not individualistic. We are built together to be a house for God. This is personal, yes. We need to allow God to use us. But serving God in his temple is never individualistic. It is with all the saints together.

And that is why we need to be reminded of this focus of St Paul on our togetherness. Jesus Christ created us with all believers into one body; he made us all into one family; he made us all into one nation; he wants to use every believers in the construction of this great temple of God. Let us offer him our souls and our bodies; and let us embrace all believers, even if they are very different from us, to love them and to work together for the glory of God in his temple.

Amen

