

## Sunday@Seven

### SERIES 1: PICTURES OF THE CHURCH

#### INTRODUCTION

The words 'Church' and Christian are used in very loose ways in these days and mean all kinds of things. So, it is not inappropriate to consider:

- What is the church? And
- What is a Christian

And to think what it means to be each and either in the days in which we live.

In the current debate, people use several terms to indicate what they might mean by the word church. They speak of:

- an **existing** church derived from traditional beginnings and largely as it was when it was started or built in the location where it now stands; and there is the traditional church seeking to maintain that which has always been believed and practised;
- an **evolving** church, growing out of traditional roots and seeking to adapt to contemporary culture;
- an **emerging** church - a modern development based on contemporary ideas of what church should be judged from a sociological and human interest or preference perspective.

Each of these is further complicated by a tendency to think of the church as the physical building or as the institution.

Our study is concerned with thinking

- What does it mean to be a Christian; and
- What does it mean to be Church in our day.

#### **Ephesians: the church in three pictures**

The Book of Ephesians presents three pictures which may be helpful in this context

So, what did we learn? What does it mean to be a Christian and church?

What it clearly does not mean is that a Christian is merely a church attendee, and the church a gathering of people who sit passively through a routine prescribed performance while some keen ones do various jobs or play a key role in different aspects just as they would in a secular club or society.

No, being a Christian is to have experienced a transformation, described as being quickened, or made alive, by the deliberate adoption of God's grace through accepting Christ. So a Christian is someone who now possesses a life that is not theirs by nature, it is a gift from God and it makes a difference. It is spiritual and therefore un-natural.

That un-natural aspect is illustrated in the second picture used from Ephesians chapter 2. We are essentially outsiders, there is nothing natural in us that makes us God-like. But, again by His grace, through Christ and His work on the Cross, though unworthy, we have been fully accepted into His family.

If a Christian is someone who has - and is experiencing - this transformation with another life manifesting itself in our beings, being impregnated with God Himself, then the church is a composition made up of these impregnated components. It is a collection of "radioactive (= spiritual) individuals who together comprise the dwelling place of God.

Two things follow. The nature of His home in us depends on the amount of space and scope He is given in each life and on the evidence of His being alive in us as each one is an active member of that household. It has nothing to do with membership status, titles or jobs but with being alive and expressing that liveliness. Nor is it locationally static, dependent on being 'in church', but we carry the presence of God in its lively essence with us wherever we find ourselves, coming together to share its unique characteristics in praise and worship.

The Church, according to Paul in Ephesians, is a "dwelling place of God by the Spirit" What a wonderful privilege - and responsibility.

This aspect is developed in Study 1.

## STUDY 1

### Pictures of the Church from Ephesians

The epistle to the Ephesians presents a number of pictures which help us to understand what the church is and what part we should play in it. The first is that of the church as a building, or habitation of God in Chapter 2:1-10. -

#### THE CHURCH AS A BUILDING

To fully understand this picture, we need to trace back human history from the beginning of the Bible.

Since the Fall (the original act of sin by humanity - recorded in Genesis 3 - which has marred human history ever since) God has effectively been excluded from the world He made. Evidence of His existence remains in Creation and nature, but that only represents His power, not His 'divinity'.

His prerogative, however, is to be the object and subject of people's lives and their way of living. He is concerned that mankind recognises His divinity.

Subsequently, God has been seeking a 'dwelling place', a 'lodging' where He can be accommodated, allowed to live, to make His presence felt; and to influence what people do and say.

The OT records that happening in individuals. It also portrays the story of a special people and their behaviour, a role that is best expressed in the statement: *I will be to them a God and they will be to me a people.*

Embracing and accommodating Him would transform the way they lived and convey a message to those outside His realm. But, His presence depended on the extent to which they gave Him room and scope in how they lived and what they did. So often He was crowded out; ignored; or even despised, because they were preoccupied with other aspects not deriving from Him nor related to their calling..

In the OT that presence was often represented by symbols and artefacts. For Moses it was the burning bush. Abraham focused on an altar. Later, the Tabernacle was established. It, in fact, was a temporary, movable dwelling place in among His people complemented by their distinctive conduct according to the law and the sacrifices associated with it.

Later still, it was replaced by the Temple which became a more permanent expression of this concept of the dwelling place of God among His people. (Ironically, it also became a snare as a tangible alternative to spiritual presence.)

It reached its climax in Jesus Christ with the Incarnation: God was manifest in the flesh: He 'tabernacled' among men.

All the while the concern is with accommodation, providing a dwelling place for God in and among the people of the world.

In the New Testament we learn that that task was bequeathed to the Christians as individuals and corporately to the early church, so that much of what we understand of this concept comes from the writings that passed between them.

The letter of Paul to the Ephesians is a classic example of this; that is why we are looking at it, beginning with the reference to the church as the BUILDING, the dwelling place of God.

There are several references.

Ephesians talks about a 'habitation - or dwelling place - of God by the spirit. 'The OT has the picture of stones being brought together to form the dwelling place.

How does that come about? In Ephesians 2 Paul gives two pictures.

In the one, dead things are made alive. That is the natural state of humanity but God in His mercy 'quickens' us, makes us alive, breathes into us a new life so that we become alive. That life is the presences of God in us.

The second picture is of foreigners with none of the characteristics of the native indigenous breed, yet, with naturalisation, can become full citizens, even though they don't look it, sound it, or act it.

Transformed human beings become stones - living stones - in the building: they comprise the building. But, how does that work out in practice for believers?

Stories vary as to circumstances and even the process but the essential elements are the same.

For example, some have a sudden conversion. Living a godless life, (That could be a decadent life or even a superficially 'respectable' one) the moment comes when, confronted with the Gospel and the demands of God, they repent and allow Christ to come into their hearts to live. They become living stones. God's presence occupies a part of their being.

Others have a religious heritage. Some, as in the Church of Scotland, have been baptised as infants. That means that parents, act on their behalf by claiming the promise of God, in anticipation and had them baptised in hope and confidence. Each individual subsequently has to confirm that dedication through clear commitment, either affirmed through constant practice what was done on their behalf or come to a definite realisation and act of commitment for themselves in their own experience. It does not happen unless nurtured and deliberately accepted. That may take seconds or years but the definite and conscious adoption and espousal of regeneration must be there and consequently manifest itself in spiritual behaviour, affirming that they are indeed 'living stones'.

Whatever the process, each stone, having received Christ, is effectively impregnated with the presence and life of God in Christ applied by the Holy Spirit. That impregnation is of all that Christ is as the embodiment of God but its extent, or potential realisation, may be to a greater or lesser degree, depending on acceptance and submission.

There then should follow in the ordinary things of life, clear evidence of spiritual life (fruits of the Spirit) For example, there is a response to God; there is a desire to worship, to pray, to obey His law, read His word, follow His ways.

This affects how we live. Lives should now revolve - albeit only partially in many cases - around Him and His demands. (Someone has described it as being like having a baby in the family.) Life now is governed by the Incomer. It is an accommodation of a different Presence, a spiritual life colours, and inevitably begins to colour the way we live. For example, because of it there are things we now do not do, some because it is clearly wrong and incompatible, others because it is futile. Having been 'born again' we know more and know better and so values are different. Paul says: *If it is in this life only we have hope, let us eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die*. But that is not the case. There is a broader and wider scenario that puts everything in a different perspective - a spiritual, heavenly one. It puts a totally different gloss on things.

The key is accommodation. How much scope and room is given to the new life? And to what extent He is free *to permeate my being through so that for no part of day or night may my life from sacredness be free?*

How much presence He has in our lives and in that of the church is the sum total of the presence He is being given in each unit. The church is God's dwelling place, the Building where He resides in each individual heart who together form that corporate accommodation known as the dwelling place of God, or "*the habitation of God by the Spirit*".

This is an important aspect and is developed further in Study 4 below.

But, before then, here are a number of features, by way of summary:

The church as a building:

- is made up of individual 'living stones. Each is transformed from what it used to be
  - Dead things have become alive
  - Alien things have been 'naturalised'
- is all by God's grace, so
  - There's no reason to boast
  - There is every reason to be grateful
- is all by God's power
  - The same power as raised Jesus from the dead
  - It is applied by the Holy Spirit
- is both a privilege and a responsibility
- is only through and by the 'new', un- or super- natural that we are stones and constitute the dwelling place.
- The extent of the presence is determined by:
  - the degree of permeation in us as individuals.
  - The space and scope He has in our lives

So, the presence of *God*, the actual 'dwelling place' of *God* depends on what each individual constitutes and contributes. It is a 'private matter' but it also belongs together. It is shared out among many.

What it isn't, as previously stated, is a place to which we go. The church building is only a shell. Dedicated it might be, considered a sanctuary it might also well be. But, without the *God*-filled 'living stones' it is nothing other than a container. And we need look no farther than the Sandgate in Ayr to see a lovely old building used for another purpose. Buildings and places help; they are conducive to presence, but they do not contain that presence. Only living stones can do that.

So, what value in coming together? It is best described by value -added. The presence is the sum total of individual possession and the scope it is given. But, together there is a glow, a cumulative accretion, as it were and the NT exhorts us to assemble ourselves together. It is important. It becomes a colony of heaven.

## Study 2

### The Church as a Body

We now come to the picture Ephesians presents of the church as a body.

The term has been used previously at the end of chapter 1. There it is really referring to the church as a building, a container; and specifically, a container of life comprising individual believers as 'living stones'. That was expanded with the elaboration of the church as the 'dwelling place of God by the Spirit' - a spiritual house. Thinking of the Church as a building, that Building is made up of component parts each of which accommodates - to a greater or lesser extent - the life of Christ.

The church as the Body is also a building: it contains life and comprises 'living stones' which together constitute the presence of God. But, it is more than just a container. It is the building in action; it is dynamic and expressive.

The presence of God is dynamic. Christ was never any place without making that presence felt. It was creative, disturbing, catalytic, 'radio-active' as it were. If the presence of God in an individual believer makes itself felt, as the hymn says:

*What a wonderful change*

*In my life has been wrought*

*Since Jesus came into my heart"*

how much more in the corporate life of the church. It is dynamic (there is a sense of life being felt, the existence of a God who speaks, prompts, blesses, etc) and it is phenomenal (it shows itself in actions and attitudes). Jacob's words at Bethel echo this, when he said: "*Surely God was in this place, and I knew it not*".

But, for us, that presence is not centred in the place, but in the people gathered in a place. God's presence should be felt and its effects in positive behaviour and action seen. If that is not so, then perhaps the components are not carrying as much of the presence as they should.

No church can be perceived as a body (i.e. more than a container) unless each member is permeated with God's presence.

A body expresses the life that it contains. In a remarkable way, the members together combine to enable the body to be active for different purposes. We speak of 'body language'. We talk of expressive arts. Smiles and frowns, pains and pleasures, movements, gestures, voluntary and involuntary actions are all part of what makes personality and communicates with others.

When the life is good and strong, the actions are pleasing. . When the body is not in good condition then the expressions are less pleasing, sometimes harmful.

Within the church as the body each component relates to the other, is different from all the rest. Components are different shapes or sizes but share the same essence, the same life. (e.g. quiet and loud, personalities but same

spiritual life). There are also differences according to specific functions. Distinct members enable the body to express itself and life in very specific ways.

It is interesting to catalogue some of these distinctive features of the church as the body: For example: Now. Let's look at the church as a Body.

1. The body is a building
  - It contains life
  - The form of that container is a solid - not hollow - composite of separate parts or components
  - Each of these separate parts contains the life that the body holds.
  - The extent of the life relates to the comprehensive possession by each part.
  - A body where some parts have atrophied is a disabled body. It has appearance but it contains life only to a limited degree.
2. The body has distinctives that are different - or more sophisticated - than those of a building.
  - Each part is different.
  - Each part is special
  - Each is seen as a gift (from God) i.e. it is the life of God in my shape for the functioning of His purpose.
3. The body expresses the life through:
  - how it speaks
  - how it acts
  - how it shows
4. The body is one and coordinated
5. Each member relates to the others but is answerable to the Head.
  - There is coordination: an administrative system: the nervous system
  - There is a nourishment and cleansing department: Life is fed into. Waste is taken from.
6. It all works corporately, *compact* by that which each joint supplies.

All of these should be true of the church functioning as the body. And, when it is, there is a beauty that is the feature of our next study: the church as a bride.

Study 3:

### The Church as the Bride

So far we have seen that the two pictures presented in Ephesians - Building and Body - represent a progression in the nature and function of the church. As a building, it is a container with each stone permeated through with the presence of God. Then, as a living, active, coordinated medium, the Body is the vehicle of expression of the life of God here on earth, and in our locality.

We now come to the third picture - that of the Bride and look at several aspects.

The Church as the Bride is presented as one which is characterised by distinctive behaviour that speaks of a different way of living. Ephesians lists a number of characteristics and features that distinguish the bride and her pattern of behaviour and conduct. Her whole demeanour reflects the fact that she is a bride.

For example, this entails both the doing and the not-doing of certain behaviours For **example**:

**Comment [G H1]:** Fill out examples from Ephesians

Then there is another implication arising from the outlining of this behaviour and its outworking. The church as Bride is a new being. There has been a departure from old allegiances, a separation from the natural life and its familial ties and cultural moulding - the old life of sin is finished with and she is now embarking on a new life. Where before the life style belonged to the world and all its associated activities, the new life is 'from above'. Having been raised with Christ she now is seeking those things which are (from) above". She is a citizen of heaven, not earth. And, what is more, in the new life they become one flesh, emphasising the unity, the abiding of John 15, and the dynamic permeation we have already seen in the church as a building and its expression through the Body.

Then, thirdly, her obligation is to please the husband. Not only is the life qualitatively good in and of itself but it is determined by a higher set of values and a more noble purpose - providing the pleasure of God.

Secondly, the bride is concerned with pleasing her husband. That means the fostering of distinctive patterns of behaviour and manifestation of graces that reflect His character and glory. It means producing those qualities, displaying those behaviours, manifesting those fruits that reflect well on God and bring Him satisfaction.

This takes us back to God's original purpose in creation in forming mankind as His creatures, to enjoy communion with Him and to enjoy His life. That is the only true fulfilment. It is not subservience but realisation of purpose and destiny. It is what we are made for.

For us, the criteria for such behaviour come from Scripture just as the understanding of all that is happening is recorded there.

One aspect of that is our inability of ourselves to fulfil God's pleasure in any way. The old hymn says:

Vile and full of sin I am;

Thou art full of truth and grace.

Therefore it is only through His enabling, through His living in us, and being filled with the Spirit that we can really be the helpmeet for God and to be in a position and condition to worship Him in Spirit and in truth.

The bride is seen as someone who leaves one (familiar, natural) context to be become devoted to another in a totally different context with different values and practices. And form that union to develop a new life.

For us, this means breaking away from the world, and our natural attachments. Ephesians 2 speaks of that natural environment of which we were normal members, governed by its thinking, mores, customs, and worldview. But, by accepting Christ there is a transformation, a translation, the beginning of a new life, a different life with different values, ethos, principles., when, as another hymn pus it:

When he will take us to His side

To be with Him His holy Bride

Even the familiar wedding Scripture confirms this fact that "*a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to hi wife; and the two will become one flesh*". And elsewhere in the New Testament comes the command to "*come ye out from among them and be separate*" Or another which says "*Be ye holy for I am holy*".

The church is a new institution governed by different principles and methods. The church represents a different way of living and operating. And the church radiates a beauty that pleases her husband.

## Study 4

### BECOMING MORE LIVING AS "LIVING STONES"

Becoming more like living stones is a challenge. We could be asking questions like:

- What strategies in terms of practical activities would help address your own needs and aspirations to be a dwelling place for God and a living stone?
- What strategies should the church be engaging in to fulfil its purpose so the "habitation of God by the Spirit"?

The answers to these and similar questions, linked as they are with the extent to which we can say that there is clear evidence of God 'tabernacling' among us, point to ways of encouraging the growth of what should be.

It means that, in practice, within us there are two life forces operating, each claiming a place: the old life and the new.

In our earlier study we compared it with the arrival of a baby in the house, the welcome introduction of a new life which, once there, becomes the focus of all that happens. Again the NT emphasises the fact that a Christian is a "new creature," with "old things having passed away and all things becoming new." Later it says that "they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves but unto Him who died for them and rose again. The new life becomes the priority focus.

That requires discipline and deliberate choosing. The old ways come naturally, but we have to learn and practise the new. Its motive and inspiration comes from above.

With the privilege of hosting the new life there is also an obligation, a responsibility to be more 'living' as 'Living stones'.

This study looked at that by examining three scriptures: one from Ephesians, one from Colossians and one from 1 Peter.

**Comment [G H2]:** Insert exact references

They state clearly what Christians should and should not do or be involved in: For example, in terms of actions living living stones should:

- *be self-controlled;*
- *live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.*

What does that mean in practical terms? Well, on the negative side, it is:

- *Not to conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance.*
- *To put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.*
- *To rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips, because you used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived.*

- *To rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind.*
- *Not to lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self,*

And, on the positive side, it is:

- *To, prepare your minds for action; to set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed; and to love one another deeply, from the heart.*
- *Like newborn babies, to crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.*
- *To clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; to bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another.*
- *To "Be holy, because I am holy"; to forgive as the Lord forgave you; to put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.*
- *To set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God; to set your minds on things above, not on earthly things; to let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,*

Not only is it a matter of actions. It is essential to adopt attitudes that help in that process. For example, remember that

- *it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.*
- *you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.*
- *He is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever!*
- *Through wisdom and revelation you may know the hope to which he has called you, and the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.*

That is to be done in practical ways in fellowship as you

- *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.*

It is not only a challenge, and these specific and practical exhortations from Paul and Peter simply reinforce that. It is part of a divine calling and human commitment to be more effective as a home for God in our day and situation.

**Comment [G H3]:** Insert exact references

The picture presented of a Christian is: a living stone. That means that she / he is indwelt by Another Life, received through faith in God's offer of His Son, who

died to take away our sin and enters that cleansed heart with new life. John's Gospel says: *to as many as received Him, to them he gave the right to be called the children of God*". The New Testament letters describe it in helpful ways. For example, Colossians says: *Christ in you, the hope of glory*. Loosely paraphrasing Romans 5:10, it says: *Jesus died instead of us, and Jesus will live instead of us*. And in Galatians, Paul puts it very clearly when he says: *I live, yet not I but Christ lives in me. And the life that I now live I live by faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me*.

## STUDY 5: some practical exercises

Sunday at Seven gatherings included a number of group activities centred around some key questions based on preparation for and development of some of the topics considered.

Here are some of those questions and practical tasks:

If the church is a building comprising individual members each of whom contains the presence of God

1. What is the responsibility on me as an individual to make sure there is a presence of God in my life and that that presence is as much as is possible to be. Each of us is a key member of the church, not because of any formal arrangement but because we are, because Christ is in us and present. We constitute the church made up of living stones arbitrarily sectioned according to location, circumstances, time or occasion. Thus where two or three are gathered, there am I. Equally He is present in the multitude of saints.

The picture given in Ephesians is of a wonderful privilege to be part of God's people: blessed with every spiritual blessing, chosen, and predestined to be to the praise of His glory. That happens when we trust in Christ and experience redemption through His blood / His work on the Cross.

Being a Christian is having received new life through Christ by the grace of God.

It shows itself as new life in two ways.

Our normal state is one of being dead, as far as spiritual life is concerned. The things of God mean virtually nothing. But conversion means that we are quickened, made alive through God's grace. There is now a life and a sensitivity to spiritual things that was not there before. There is behaviour that is due to the presence of God's life in our hearts. "By their fruits you shall know them".

2. How evident is that new spiritual life in my behaviour?

Though by nature outside these good things that belong to the people of God yet, because of His grace, we have been included among His people and share full citizenship. "Jesus and all in Him is mine".

3. Question: How comfortable am I in this 'foreign', un-natural environment? For example, do I feel comfortable in prayer, reading His word, worshipping, speaking of Him and to Him?

It's a privilege to be a stone in the dwelling place of God. Here are some more questions that help us appreciate that:

4. How far have I been conscious of the privilege and responsibility of being a Christian and component part of His church?

5. What evidence is there in my being alive? Of doing and saying things that emanate from my spiritual experience (like, towards God and towards other people that can only be attributed to the life of God in me?)
6. How comfortable am I with spiritual things that are not 'natural' to me? Like, being with God's people, engaging - actively, not merely passively - in spiritual activity like worship, prayer, reading and studying the Bible, witnessing, etc.
7. As a stone impregnated with the life of God, how much of Him is evident in my life? How much room is he given? For example, in what areas of my life am I conscious of Him being given room? For example, is it only in 'church' activities? Or in my work, my home, my ambitions and aspirations, my values?
8. How much of that presence do I contribute with others in ensuring optimum presence of God in our activities?

The Church, according to Paul in Ephesians, is a "dwelling place of God by the Spirit" What a wonderful privilege - and responsibility.

If that is not so, then that may be due to several factors. On the one hand, despite assumptions, Christ has not actually been given a home. He has not been allowed in. He is not present and there is no difference it and the operation of any ordinary club. [the rules of operation are based on secular lines, not spiritual principles.] Secondly, He may be present - there has been a definite invitation and superficial expectation] but dormant, overshadowed by other priorities and considerations, given no scope and so the potential is not realised. Though present he is not exactly encouraged to be at home and to be Himself and to make himself at home. There is no evidence of this or of Him making his presence felt: he is almost frozen out.

9. In what ways does the life of Christ (God in me through Christ by the Holy Spirit - what I received as a Christian) express itself in what I do, think/say, and in my attitudes. (feelings, thoughts, actions; do say feel; cognitive, motor, affective.)
10. What is my understanding of contributing to the body? e.g in giving. Mission support.
11. What does it mean to provoke one another? Pro = before, in advance, initiative; voce = to call forth, out.