

## “UNDER CONSTRUCTION”

*Studies in Ephesians – Living Worthy of Who We Are – 4*

Ephesians 2:11-22 (p. 1134)

As we will see all throughout this series on Ephesians, God loves his church. In fact, his church is central to his plan for the world. Therefore, I believe his church should be central to our lives. A couple weeks ago I talked about how God has a plan for my life. But a greater theme in the Bible is that God has a plan for our life together. Paul put it this way in chapter 1, verse 22: *“God has placed all things under his (Jesus’) feet, and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.”* Paul is promoting here a very high view of the church.

In chapter 2 he goes on to explain what he means by the church. Supremely, the church is the “new people” of God. As Chris pointed out last week, throughout the first half of chapter 2 the pronouns are all plural – not singular. Paul uses the words “us” and “we” and “you all.” And he sums it up in verse 10 by saying: *“We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”*

In the second half of chapter 2 he talks about the joining together of Jew and Gentile into a new people. Not only have we been brought back to God, but Jew and Gentile have been brought together. On the cross, two great barriers have been broken down: first, the barrier of sin that lay between us and God, and second, the barrier of hostility between Jew and Gentile. Just as we have been drawn into a new relationship with God through what Jesus did on the cross, so Jew and Gentile have been drawn together into one new people. To Paul, as a Jew, that was a remarkable thing.

Now, this “new people” is seen in two ways in the New Testament. First, it is seen as the universal church. That view will be made clear when we look at the church as the radiant, holy and blameless bride of Christ in chapter 5. Second, God’s “new people” is seen as the local church. Those are really the only two views of the church that most of the New Testament knows about. There’s no mention of denominations. The fundamental reality of the church described here in Ephesians is experienced at the local level. So let’s talk about the local church.

We get a glimpse of what God intends the church to be in the last four verses of chapter 2. Paul writes: *“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.”*

Paul paints two pictures of the local church. The first picture is of a building project. God is in the middle of building something, and our text make it very clear that God is the architect and his Word is the foundation. That means that, for the time being, the local church is a building site. It's a work in progress. It follows, therefore, that the local church is not perfect. God isn't finished with us yet.

Now, any couple that has survived building their home (or even a remodel) knows how much you need to exercise patience. And in fact, when Paul begins to apply his teaching to the life of the local church in chapter 4, among the first things he will call for are understanding and humility and forbearance. Do you know why? It's because those things are absolutely essential to surviving together while the church is still under construction.

One implication is that if you're looking for a church, don't bother looking for the perfect one. Look for one that may be messy because it is under construction, but one that is also clearly being built on the right foundation and according to the architect's plans. Paul makes it clear that the true church is being built on and built together. It's being built on "*the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.*" The kind of local church that God is building is both Christ-centered and Bible-based.

So, how do we measure up to that as a church? I think rather well. This has long been a tradition in this church. Westminster is very much a Jesus-centered, Bible-based church. And so, despite everything we have been through, I am convinced that, more than anything else, that is why God has blessed us. We are being built on the right foundation.

And what about building together? Paul says at verse 21, "*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.*" The process is not only building upwards on the right foundation, but also joining together. It is both/and – building on the right foundation and building together.

There's a dangers here. If we operate with an individualistic view, we can become so concerned about building our personal lives on Jesus and on scripture that we risk forgetting that God also intends us to be built together into the church. It could also happen at a ministry level, where individual ministries are built on Jesus and on the foundation of scripture, but they're not joined together in the way they might be, and should be, with common purpose and vision. The business world refers to it as a silo mentality – different departments operating as if they are not connected to one another. In any larger church, that is always going to be a

potential problem. God clearly wants to build us together as well as build us up. The first picture, then, is of the church as a building project. God is in the midst of building on and building together.

Now to Paul's second word picture of the church. Let me get at it by posing two questions: what is God building, and for whom is God building it? As to the question, what is God building, Paul answers in verse 22: "*in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*" God is in the process of constructing a dwelling place. That may be obvious. But what I find amazing is the last part of that verse. Although the dwelling is still under construction, God has already moved in! Notice what Paul says in verse 22: "*...a dwelling place in which God lives (present tense) by his Spirit.*"

When you're building a home, the normal sequence is to wait until the structure is completed, the contractor hands you the keys, and then you move in. People usually don't prefer to live in a house with electric wires dangling from the walls and roughed-in plumbing. But Paul says that God has evidently chosen to move into the dwelling he's building before it is finished. God has moved in among his people even though we are still under construction and still a building site.

God's presence among his people is a major biblical theme. In Exodus, chapter 33 Moses says to God, "*If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?*"

God's people were the people of his presence. What marked Israel as a nation was that God was with them. Different peoples have peculiar characteristics. The English keep a stiff upper lip. The French eat snails and truffles and make really good wine. The characteristic of Israel as the people of God is that God was with them. "*What else,*" asks Moses, "*will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth,*" if it isn't your presence among us? That's why God ordered the Ark of the Covenant and then the temple to be built. When God's people were herded off to Babylon, they grieved not just that they were taken away from their homeland; they were taken away from the temple, the symbol of God's presence among his people.

So the prophets had visions of the time when God would once again dwell among his people. And Ezekiel had that glorious vision of the new temple fulfilled in the person of Jesus and supremely in heaven. But for now, according to scripture, that vision is fulfilled in part in the local church as a work in progress. God chooses to make his dwelling place in the building site of the church.

And not only is the church the dwelling place of God, it is the dwelling place of his glory. The word translated as "temple" in verse 21 is not the general word

for the temple in Jerusalem. There is one word for the whole building, including the outer court of the Gentiles and all the other courts that is translated “temple.” But there’s another word that is used for the Holy of Holies, the place where the high priest was allowed to go just once a year, the place where God’s glory was to reside. And that is the word Paul uses of the church. The church isn’t just the place where God dwells. It is the place where he reveals his glory. Does that mean that I can’t see God’s glory on my own in prayer or in worship, in reading the scriptures, or out in creation? Of course I can see God’s glory on my own. What it means is that there is a special sense in which God makes his glory known among his people.

That raises a rather pointed question: What do you expect when you come to worship? When you walk through the doors, what are you hoping for? *“I hope I’ll see so and so – I haven’t seen them for a while. I hope we’ll sing some of my favorite hymns. I hope the sermon won’t be too boring.”* Or do you think: *“I hope I catch a glimpse God’s glory today.”* Right here we come to the heart of worship. Forget different styles for a moment – those are secondary. At the heart of worship is the desire to catch a glimpse of the glory of God. Is that at your heart?

I believe we are living in a time when we are rediscovering the importance of God’s glory in the life of the church. Some see church as a way to perform a religious duty. Now, there is nothing wrong with getting out of bed and coming to church because you feel it’s your duty. Church attendance is a good spiritual discipline. Some people come to church to hear God’s word. That’s another good reason for coming to church. But my dearest hope is that we come because we long to catch a glimpse of the glory of God.

We live in the time between the revelation of God’s glory in the person of Jesus Christ and the second coming of Jesus when everybody is going to see his glory. And in this in-between time, for reasons I don’t understand, God has chosen to make his glory known right now among his people, despite the fact that we are still a work in progress. I want us to be realistic about the fact that the church is a construction site with a lot of unfinished work. (I know God is still working on me.) I also want us to catch God’s vision for what we will be one day. But most of all, I want us to see the church as God sees it right now.

Too often, I fear, people see the messy side of the church and they get discouraged. That sends some off on a perpetual search for the perfect church. If that’s what you’re after, get ready to be disappointed, because the perfect church doesn’t yet exist. This church is a building site just like every other church. Granted, it can be a messy at times. God sees all of that. But he also sees what he is building – both what he is building on and what he is building together. And my prayer is that you will be committed to help build it.