

## The Church.

Ephesians 1: 2.

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We have in these chapters three distinct points, viz., first, the purpose of God; secondly, the development of that purpose; and, thirdly, the result of that purpose.

It is a thought full of blessedness and comfort to the heart, that it is with God and His deep purposes of grace we have to do, and not with human circumstances. Faith apprehends this; it looks away from what the professing Church has made of herself, and only contemplates what the Church is as the body of Christ — beloved of God, washed in the blood, indwelt by the Holy Ghost. Faith travels backward to eternity, reposes upon the purpose of God, and thus gives the soul power to act amid the most depressing and humiliating circumstances. It was this truth that sustained the spirit of the apostle Paul, while he lay a prisoner at Rome, deserted and despised. He knew that nothing could shake the reality of the purpose of God. Hence he writes: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: according as He hath chosen us in Him *before the foundation of the world*, that we should be *holy* and *without blame* before Him in love." Here was faith's resting-place. "All spiritual blessings *in the heavenlies*." There was nothing here — all was above. Looking at earth, all might present an aspect of hopeless ruin; but faith ever occupies itself with God's reality; it looks at the Church according to God's predestination, and acts accordingly. If this be not the habit of our souls, we shall have no power at all to get on. If we look at things around us, unbelief at once enters in, with all its reasonings, and renders us powerless; or it may lead us, with uninstructed zeal, to build up the Church after a human model, or to lend our aid to such attempts, which must issue in thorough confusion.

Now, the ever blessed God purposed to have the Church "holy and without blame before Him in love." This was His purpose; and it is just as we are able to get up to God's point of view that we see the Church to be that holy, blameless, lovely thing which God has made her to be in Christ. One of old, who looked at Israel "*in the vision of the Almighty*," was constrained to say, "He hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath He seen perverseness in Israel." This is truly precious for the soul. It is not that "iniquity and perverseness" are not there. No; but God does not see them, because He has set the cleansing efficacy of the blood of His own dear Son between Him and all the blots and stains that might trouble the conscience. In the vision of man, who looks only at the outward appearance, the camp of old, or the Church now, might exhibit but a poor spectacle; but in "the vision of the Almighty" it is totally different. The Church *is "all fair"* in the eye of God; and surely, this is enough.

"Beholders many faults may find,  
But they can guess at Jesus' mind,  
Content if written in His book."

Yes, truly, content if written in His book; and are we not so? Yea, are we not engraved on His hands, and borne upon His heart continually? Thank God, it is even so. God views the Church as He views Jesus. She is "accepted in the Beloved." "As He is, so are we." "We are in Him that is true." "We ere members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones." "Thou hast loved them as Thou hast loved me." And all this was arranged in the infinite mind of God, before the foundation of the world, before the entrance of sin, before a single member of the Church had breathed the breath of life. "In Thy book

(as perhaps we may be allowed to apply a well-known Scripture) were all my members written, which in continuance were fashioned when as yet there was none of them" (Ps. 139). Thus should we view the Church — thus should we think of and act toward her. We must rise to the everlasting counsel of God concerning her, in order to receive power to serve her perseveringly. If we get off this high ground we must fail altogether. It is impossible for any one to serve the Church, who is not walking in communion with God's thoughts about her. We may make efforts after personal holiness; we may progress in grace and knowledge; but if these things are not connected with the Church, they are merely selfish efforts. We should increase in holiness of character; we should make progress in grace and knowledge; but these things should ever be connected with the true interests of the Church of Christ; they would then be in harmony with the mind of Him who could say, "The zeal of Thine house hath eaten me up."

Now, this purpose of God was developed in Christ, who is the risen Head of the Church: in Him, too, it finds its accomplishment. All that God purposed concerning the Church was actualized in Christ when He was raised from the dead, and set at the right hand of the majesty in the heavens, and the Holy Ghost was sent down to actualize it in reference to all the members, as it had already been in reference to the Head, to make that true of *them* which was already true of *Him*. This was the object of the mission of the Holy Ghost. The Son was the standard, the model to which the Church *was* to be, in process of time, conformed by the operation of the Spirit. "For whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren" (Rom. 8: 29). We have therefore, first, the purpose of God — His own deep and precious thoughts about the Church. We have then the accomplishment of that which was to clear away every obstacle to the full application of that purpose to the Church, viz., the death of Christ, who having taken the Church's place, and made Himself fully answerable for *all* her sins, paid the penalty for *her*, went down into the deepest depths of sorrow for her, cleared away every cloud from the prospect; and then, being raised from the dead, He took His seat at the right hand of God, and sent down the Holy Ghost to form the Church, to bring it into the unity which belonged to it as the body of Christ.

Now, seeing, that all that was needed for the application of the purpose of God to the Church, was accomplished in the death and resurrection of Christ, it is impossible that anything can finally prevent its being actualized in reference to all the foreknown and predestined members of the Church. Neither Satan, nor the world, nor sin, nor death, nor aught else, can by any means countervail the purpose of God. Hence the apostle prays for the Ephesians, "That ye may know what is the hope of His calling, and what the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and *what is the exceeding greatness of His power to usward who believe, according to the working of His mighty power* which he wrought in Christ when He raised Him from the dead, and set Him at His own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come; 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 fulness of Him that filleth all in all."

To have this prayer answered in our experience, is to be raised above the influence of every doubtful thought. It seems as if the Holy Ghost would provide a powerful remedy for any hesitating thought that might assault us, while viewing the wondrous counsel of God's will about the Church, and the high and holy destinies marked out for her in the ages to come.

The very position which the prayer occupies is remarkable. The apostle had been dealing with the question of what the Church is in the purpose of God, and he was about to treat of the Church's condition by nature; and the distance between these two points was so vast, that we need to have the eyes of our understanding enlightened in order to know "the exceeding greatness of the power" which could raise us from one to the other. For what is our condition by nature? "Dead in trespasses and sins"

— "walking according to the course of this world" — "children of wrath." Such is our state by nature, and not of us Gentiles only, but of the favoured Jews too; and when we look from this state up to the wondrous height of glory which the counsel of God has fixed as the future portion of the Church, we may well pray to have the eyes of our understanding enlightened, that we may know the greatness of God's power to usward. Now, this power "to usward" is the very same power that was brought to bear on Christ when He lay in the grave. Christ took the place of greatest distance from God, inasmuch as He was "*made sin*." He had a weight, of sin upon Him which no mortal could bear. Hence, when we behold Him raised to the right hand of God, "far above all principality and power, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come," we see, at once, the measure of the Church's acceptance. The Church is the body of Christ, His fulness, and, therefore, can never be viewed apart from Him. Hence, if it be asked, How was Jesus raised up from the dead? The answer is, By the working of *God's mighty power*.

What an expression! The mighty power of God! Who or what could resist it? There was nothing to resist it; it was exercised in most perfect harmony with wisdom, prudence, justice, and truth. The law of God had been magnified and made honourable by the spotless life of the Lord Jesus; all the claims of justice had been satisfied by His death as the spotless Lamb of God; hence, "the working of God's mighty power" (*energeian tou kratous tes hischuos*) was brought to bear, and Christ was raised from the dead and set far above all the power of the enemy; and now He can set His foot upon everything that could stand in the way of the Church's full blessedness. He entered into the strong man's house, and took from him his armour wherein he trusted, and spoiled his house and all this, be it observed, as Head of the Church and on her behalf.

Now, all this truth about Christ and the Church was shadowed forth in Adam and Eve. In Genesis 1: 26, we have the counsel of God respecting man, in the following words: "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let *them* have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth," etc. Again: "God blessed *them*, and God said unto *them*," etc.

It is important, in connection with our subject to see that, in these verses, we have the counsel of God about Adam and Eve rather than the actual accomplishment of facts. This will appear from the following chapter, where we find the Lord God saying, "It is not good that the man should be *alone*." The purpose of God had not been actualized in reference to Eve when the Divine benediction was pronounced on her in the person of Adam; she was blessed in him — in him too, she got dominion; she had nothing of, in, nor through herself; ALL WAS IN THE MAN. This is a sublime and glorious truth. The Church is *bound up* in the same "bundle of life" with the Lord Jesus; yea, and in the same bundle of glory likewise. The hand that would wrest from her her portion of life and glory, must wrest it from Him first, for she holds ALL IN HIM.

Here is faith's Divine resting-place; here, too, the standard by which it estimates the Church's place and character. Why should not the Church be pronounced "very good," when looked at in the Person of Christ? Why should not she be blessed, when blessed in Him? When the Church shall shine in all the brightness of the glory of Christ, and share in the honours of His throne, what will it be but the accomplishment of God's blessed purpose about her? Eve was thought of and spoken of before she had been called into being; it was "*them*" (Gen. 1), while none but the man existed. And so surely as Eve was thought of, so surely would she be called into being — but how? "The Lord God caused a *deep sleep* to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and He took *one of his ribs*, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; and the rib which the Lord God had taken from man, made (margin *builded*) He a woman, and brought her unto the man" (Gen. 2: 21, 22).\*

{\*It is interesting to observe that the word used by the LXX. in verse 22, is substantially the same as that which occurs with a preposition referring to the union of Jewish and Gentile believers in Ephesians 2: 22. In the former it is *ochodomesen*, and in the latter it is *sunoicodomeisthe*. Indeed, the analogy between Genesis 1 and 2 and Ephesians 1 and 2, as bearing upon our immediate subject, can hardly fail to arrest the spiritual mind. Adam and Eve point to Christ and the Church; Adam's sleep, to Christ's death, and the building of the woman, to the building of the Church by the present operation of the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven. Other more minute analogies might easily be added.}

Thus it was that the purpose of God was applied to Eve. Adam had to sleep, and lose a rib, ere the woman could be formed according to the Divine counsel. Just so is it as regards the antitype of all this. The second man, the Lord from heaven, had to descend into the lower parts of the earth, according to the eternal purpose of the Father, ere the Church could enter into the actual enjoyment of the glory and dominion of which we have been constituted joint-heirs with Christ; and it is the aim of the Holy Ghost, in His present work in the Church, to lead every foreknown and predestinated member of the body into the realization of the purpose of God concerning the whole. This attaches special importance to the preaching of the Gospel in all its completeness "the mystery of the Gospel," as it is called in Ephesians 6; it being the great instrument by which souls are brought into the Church. The intelligent evangelist will ever keep Christ and the Church in view; he does not preach to swell the ranks of a party, but to gather souls to Christ in the unity of the body on earth. His object is not only the salvation of sinners, but to have realized and expressed here in the believers what is already true and real above — that for which Christ died (John 10: 11) and the Spirit came down (Acts 1: 2, and 1 Cor. 6: 12). Faith has to do with God's realities.

And now, as to the result of the purposes of God about the Church, what is it? The object which God had in view — simply that. The result *must* correspond with the Divine purpose, for God cannot be frustrated. And what was that object? "That in the dispensation of the fulness of times, He might gather together *in one* all things in Christ." This is the purpose, and this, too, will be the result.\* But there is a present result, of which we read in Ephesians 2: 22, viz., "In whom *ye also are builded together* for an habitation of God through the Spirit." God dwells in the Church, not only in the Church (or the assembly of God) as a whole, but in each local assembly *which owns the name of Jesus as the only centre of union, and the Holy Ghost as the only source and power of ministry in the unity of the Church, Christ's body, on earth*. Where these truths are held in power, there is a distinct expression of the present result of God's purpose about the Church.

{\*"It is worthy of note that in Ephesians, which contemplates us as already seated in heavenly places in Christ, there is no direct reference to the Lord's coming. So in the kindred epistle to the Colossians; it is not His coming from heaven to them who were on earth (which would involve the thought of distance and separateness, instead of the Head and His body); it is not His coming for us, but our appearing with Him in glory. This is, to my mind, a singularly beautiful sample of the harmony of truth that pervades the Scriptures."}

I pray the reader to pause here, and see if he understands this. It is of real moment that every Christian should prayerfully and solemnly consider the question of what the Church really is; and in doing so, the word of God must be our only guide. We cannot commit ourselves to man on this great question. The Lord alone can teach us to profit. Neither can we view it in the light of circumstances. What power of action can be had by looking at men or things? None whatever. We need what God has given us, a spirit of love and of power and of a sound mind. Led of the Holy Ghost and subject to Scripture, we shall not long want a clear, calm, and settled conviction of what the Church is, as presented in the New Testament, and learnt in the secret of the Lord's own presence. When, through

grace, my reader has gotten this, he will be no more "tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; but, speaking the truth in love, he will grow up into Him in all things, which is the Head, even Christ." Let us learn from the Lord what His Church is, and then we shall be able, *as we shall feel ourselves bound*, to turn away from everything which is not like it; for conduct should ever be according to conviction. So also we shall seek grace from day to day, to carry out in our respective spheres, and according to our measure of faith, understanding, and power, the Divine purpose about the Church. Let us take up, for instance, the epistle to the Ephesians, and study it with a teachable and impartial mind, and we shall soon see what the Church is: mark, not merely what the Church *is to be*, but what *the Church is now*.

Could one who was divinely taught the doctrine of the Church — could one who knew and valued the place of the Bride, the Lamb's wife, have a happy heart and a peaceful conscience in sanctioning the harlot which commits fornication with the kings of the earth, or with any human imitation of the Church, whereby the Holy Ghost is hindered, dishonoured, and grieved? A religious institution is not necessarily the Church of God; on the contrary, it may be hostile to the Church — a positive barrier to the expression of the unity of the Spirit. Hence, if we will be the upholders of Babylon, we must abandon the idea of holily serving the Church of God, for the two are incompatible. The reader would therefore do well to ponder the fearful consequences of occupying a position hostile to the true interests of Christ's body on earth. True, it will ever be difficult to flesh and blood to live for Christ and the Church, but then it is well worth encountering all the difficulty. The Lord has special joy and complacency in those who sacrifice themselves for the sake of the Church. It was what He did Himself, and all who are filled with His Spirit will follow His example. One who, perhaps, came nearer than any to his Master, could say, "I would that ye knew what great conflict I have for you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh." And again: "Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for His body's sake, which is the Church." Indeed, it was for the purpose of furthering the interests of the Church that Paul desired to remain on earth. "To abide in the flesh," he writes, "is more needful for you. And having this confidence, I know that I shall abide and continue with you all for your furtherance and joy of faith." To him the world presented one vast desert — the scene of his trial and conflict; but when he thought of the beloved Church, he could willingly sacrifice his own feelings to further its joy. Blessed servant! Would that we had more of his spirit. Wherever Paul went, the Church was his object; when he preached, he preached for the Church; when he made tents, it was for the Church likewise. *He lived for Christ and the Church*; and, oh! my reader, if you and I love the name of Jesus, ought we not to live for the same object? Do not say, What can I do for the Church? You can do much, very much for it; you can, by precept, and, above all, by example, promote its unity; you can bear testimony against everything that would hinder that unity. First, ascertain what the Church is, so that you may not be calling that, the Church which is nothing more than a human arrangement, set up for the professed purpose of providing for the religious wants of men, whether Christians or not. Could such a thing be the Church? And if it be not the Church, it must be opposed to it, and subversive of its blessing and testimony on earth. For if we gather not with Christ, we can but scatter. Again, you should beware of upholding anything which practically denies the unity of the Church, by setting up any other centre of union than the name of Jesus.

The body of Christ on earth consists of all who, savingly believing in His name, are indwelt by the Holy Ghost. As such, they will endeavour to "walk worthy of the vocation wherewith they are called," and "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

It may be well just to add a word here as to the strict meaning of the term "the Church," Christ's body, as used in the epistle to the Ephesians, etc. And be it noted well, that the apostle here is not treating of an invisible unity in heaven, but of the Church on earth. Let any spiritual person read Ephesians 4, and answer if the body, the members, the gifts there treated, are in heaven or on earth. (Compare also 1 Cor. 12 and Rom. 12) Are these apostles, prophets, teachers, healings, for the Church in heaven? And, if not in heaven, where, if not in the Church here below? Unquestionably the Church will still enjoy a special place of nearness to the Lord as His body in heaven. But the Scriptures say little of a truth so obvious and almost self-evident, while they speak much and frequently of the Church as one body on earth. We learn from these and other portions of the Word of God, that the Church of God did not begin to be formed here below until the ascension of Christ to the right hand of God, and the consequent descent of the Holy Ghost. After these things had become accomplished facts, believers began to be brought into a position different from, and higher than, anything that had yet been known. Believers, previously, did not form a part of this body, for it was *when the second Adam slept* that His Eve was formed. God in His manifold wisdom, has various spheres of blessing, various departments of service and worship for His people. There are the heavenlies and the earthlies. The Spirit speaks of "every family" (*pasa patria*) in heaven and on earth. These things are not to be confounded. "The glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another."

Is it, therefore, asked, what is the precise period to which the formation of the Church is confined? The answer is very simple, viz.: From the time that Christ took His seat at the right hand of God, and sent the Holy Ghost from on high to baptize believers into one body, until the time when He shall leave it to meet His Church in the air. (Compare Ps. 110: 1, and 1 Thess. 4: 14-17.) This, be it long or short, is, properly speaking, the Church period. It must be confined to this; for, before its commencement, and after its expiration, *the earthly family*, the seed of Abraham, must be regarded as the special object of the Divine dealings on earth. This, then, makes the matter very simple. It requires no effort to understand the peculiarly unique and heavenly character of the Church of Christ. The time during which the Church of God is being formed is just while Christ, the risen and glorified Head, is hidden in the heavens, and while the earth ceases to be the scene of God's manifested operations. Neither the earth nor any particular land is publicly owned of God now; it was once, before the Church period commenced, and it will be again after that period has ceased. But *now*, God is gathering out of the earth the heavenly family to be the body of Christ, His Bride — to be conformed to Him in everything, to be as separated from the world as He is, to have nothing on earth, either in the way of standing, hope, or calling.

But, it may be asked, Were not Abel, Abraham, Moses, and David, members of the Church? The answer to this is fully involved in what has been already advanced. If the formation of the Church must be confined to the precise period above named (and is it not?) then those who lived a thousand years, more or less, before that period commenced, cannot be regarded as part of it. They belonged to some of the families referred to in Ephesians 3: 15 (Which does not merge all in one family, but is rightly rendered, "*every family* in heaven and on earth is named"), but they do not belong to the Church, properly so called. They were saved by faith in Christ, no doubt, and they will occupy, in the ages to come, a place suited to them in the manifold wisdom of God; but we must not unduly limit nor extend the actings of the blessed God; He will order the various departments of His happy house according to His own grace and wisdom, and not according to our foolish thoughts. Scripture applies the term, the Church of God, of the first-born, etc., to the saints between Pentecost and the Lord's coming again, and to none others. If it do, nothing can be more easy of proof. Let a single text be produced which speaks of the saints before and after those termini as the Church of God, or body of Christ. But there is none. And the only safe course is to give up our own thoughts and to follow the unerring Word. Nor is it

merely the name which is peculiar, but there are special privileges and a special walk, which are connected, so far as Scripture speaks, with the believers who are found in the Church period, and with none else. And to me it is clear, that if you make the Church to be the aggregate of all saints from the beginning to the end of all things, you lose entirely the power of the truth of its union as a proper living body on earth, indwelt of the Holy Ghost, and made one spirit with the Lord in heaven.

The Lord give us to know more and more of His own mind concerning us, that we may serve Him more intelligently and devotedly!