
¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and foreigners,
but you are fellow citizens with the saints
and of the household of God,
²⁰ being built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets,
Christ Jesus Himself being the chief cornerstone;
²¹ in whom the whole building, fitted together,
grows into a holy temple in the Lord;
²² in whom you also are built together
for a habitation of God in the Spirit.

Ephesians 2:19-22 (WEB)

If you were asked “What are your earliest memories of church?”, how would you answer this? If someone was to ask you “What is ‘church’ all about?”, how would you respond? If someone is saying something along the lines “The church is a terrible thing. Look at all the bad things they have done in history!”, how does this make you feel, and what is your response?

When it comes to this thing called ‘church’, we all will respond in one way or another. But, as you know, this word ‘church’ has so many different meanings. It’s a bit like the word ‘love’ in the English language. You can love your husband or wife, children, country, football team, car, hobby, work, or even a particular flavour of pizza. The word ‘love’ can also have meaning in other contexts, such as the expression ‘making love’ (which, for some people, has been an experience of anything but experiencing ‘love’).

The word ‘church’ can have many different meanings. An illustration that highlights this (which has been used before) is the following story:

"Are you going to church this morning," Sheryl asked her brother Ken. "Uh huh," he mumbled, still half asleep. "Well, you'd better hurry up and get ready. We'll be leaving soon." The family was ready at last and they drove off. They had about 5 km to travel. "I hope we won't be late," said Mum, who was usually worried about them not being on time. "Oh, now we have the new church," Ken replied, "there's always plenty of room." Sheryl liked their new church. It had some beautiful stained-glass windows. One window pictured Jesus and the apostles. Another showed him with the saints in heaven. These windows made Sheryl think about all the people who had believed in Jesus down through the centuries. She knew that one day she would actually see Jesus in his glory with all other believers. Finally they arrived and parked near the big new sign: "ST. PAUL 'S LUTHERAN CHURCH, KINGSWOOD". They had a visiting preacher that day, who preached a mission sermon. After the service he spoke about the work their church was doing at home and overseas. As they drove back from church, Sheryl decided that one day she would like to work for the church as a parish worker, or teach in one of its mission schools.

How many different meanings of the word "church" can you find in this story?

When it comes to this word ‘church’, it has its origins in the Old English word *cyr(i)ce*. This is related to Dutch *kerk* and German *Kirche*, which is based on the medieval Greek word *kurikon*, which comes from the Greek *kuriakon* (*dōma*) ‘Lord’s (house)’, from *kurios* ‘master or lord’. It’s a long journey from one word to another, but that’s what happens to language over time. And this new transliterated word “church” was first found in the John Wycliffe Bible (1382; “chirche”), the Geneva Bible (1560; “Church”), the Bishop’s Bible (1568; “Churche”), and then the King James Version (1611; “church”). And amongst some people associated with ‘the church’ there is a debate about whether or not we should actually use the word ‘church’. (Are you confused yet...?)

When it comes to the word in the Bible where we often see the word ‘church’, the Greek word is *ekklēsia*. This literally means "called out" or "called forth" and was commonly used to indicate a group of individuals called to gather for some function. For example, in Acts 19:32–41, it is used to refer to a particular assembly of the citizens of a city. But this word ‘ecclesia’ is used in the New Testament term as referring to a Christian Church (either a particular local group, or the whole body of the faithful).

So, what does ‘church’ mean to you? How do you respond to this word? Given that earlier story (Sheryl, Ken, and family) we will probably have a variety of responses to ‘church’. Some may be very positive and happy memories. But others may have negative ones. How do you respond to this word ‘church’?

Now if you happen to have any ‘negative thoughts or feelings’ about ‘the church’, remember that you are actually in very good company. You see, the whole Bible is the account of how people ‘do bad things’. The New Testament letters are written to ‘churches’ (congregations, assemblies of people...) because there were often problems. One could say that whenever anyone says that “The church is full of hypocrites” we could suggest that they read one of the letters in the New Testament, and see how often those apostolic writers are calling people to account.

So how do you feel about this word ‘church’? Are you one of the more ‘positive people’, looking for ‘the good’? Are you one who perhaps sits somewhere in the middle, speaking of ‘the good things you see’, but also wishing to make judgments on certain things? Or maybe you are more negative about ‘the church’? By the way, sometimes there are really valid reasons and circumstances as to why people may feel this way.

In our Scripture Reading this day (Ephesians 2:19-22) we have been given a wonderful definition of what ‘church’ involves (remember, this is a not a full definition. The whole of the Bible is). But Ephesians 2:19-22 says this:

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but you are fellow citizens with the saints and of the household of God,
²⁰ being built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets,
Christ Jesus Himself being the chief cornerstone;

²¹ in whom the whole building, fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord;
²² in whom you also are built together for a habitation of God in the Spirit.

Just think about each of these phrases...

So then you are no longer strangers and foreigners... This reminds us of Paul's earlier reality check in which he exhorted we Gentiles to remember our former state before Christ's awesome intervention. He reminds us we were, at that time (Ephesians 2:12) "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." We who were formerly far off are now made to be God's people (see also 1 Peter 2:9-10).

But you are fellow citizens with the saints and of the household of God... We are reminded that we are 'members of the household of God'. We are adopted into the very family of God (1 John 3:1). We are counted as brothers in and brothers of Christ Jesus (Hebrews 2:11-12). We are made to be heirs and coheirs with Christ Jesus (Romans 8:16-17). This is what it means to be a believer in Christ Jesus and this is what the church of Christ is: the very household of God.

So then you [...] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In Him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit...

Paul begins by explaining that this new man (verse 15), the church, is a nation, a kingdom of believers, in whom Gentiles receive full citizenship. Paul then adds that this church is also like a family in which believers, Jew and Gentile alike, have access to the Father (verse 18). Now Paul moves to describe this 'new man', the church, as being like a kingdom, which is like a household, which is also like a temple. This structure, 'grows into a holy temple in the Lord'.

This is the great danger when we approach passages which deal with the church. This danger is thus amplified when Paul then draws an analogy between the church and a building. Our culture primarily thinks of church in geographical terms. We speak of going to church, meaning that we are travelling to a specific location.

When Paul talks of the church, which is like a holy temple, he is talking about us. We are the temple. And the focus is to be on Jesus. This is what 'church' is all about: who Jesus is, and what He has done for us. Jesus defines the church. Jesus Christ is the cornerstone. Jesus is the means by which the whole church holds together. And the Gospel is for you, and God dwells in you.

In Christ, God takes men and women lacking substance and stability, and unites us and builds us up that we might become a holy temple. The church of God is the holy temple of God grounded upon the Son of God. And now we find that the temple we are made to be is the dwelling place for God by the Spirit. Feel the magnitude of this: yes, if you are a believer, God dwells within you by His Spirit. You are filled with the Spirit who testifies that you are indeed a child of God (Romans 8:15).

This indeed is good news for us. Whilst that word 'church' may involve a 'location' (after all, it is the 'assembly' of people at given time, hence why we may often call 'worship' as 'going to church')... Whilst that word 'church' may involve a 'location', it is ultimately about being drawn into Christ in a most profound and mystical way. So, for example, if you are reading this sermon because you physically cannot get into a building, you are still part of 'the church'. Indeed, 'in Spirit' (and that's not just

about how you feel, we are actually talking about The Holy Spirit at work in you)... you are 'in Spirit' actually still part of that 'assembly' of Christians.

Furthermore, as the phrase in Ephesians 3:20: "being built" implies an on-going process, this also means that we are able to see ourselves in one way as the 'not already finished product'. God is still at work within us.

It is true that in Christ we are truly made holy and righteous (see also Ephesians 2:21 "in whom the whole building, fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord"). But again this implies an on-going work. Many cathedrals in Europe have been under construction for hundreds of years. In a continuing process, new rooms, alcoves, chapels, and so forth are built. That is the way with the church of Jesus Christ. It is in a continual state of construction as each new saint becomes a new stone. "You also, as living stones," Peter said, "are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 2:5).

Sometimes in life we don't 'get it right'. We know that we sin and doubt. That is our human nature. But God is at work in us – in you! – to bring to completion what He has already done in Christ Jesus. As Paul has already said (Ephesians 2:13): "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off are made near in the blood of Christ."

Through the blood, the suffering flesh, the cross, and the death of the Lord Jesus Christ, aliens become citizens, strangers become family, idolaters become the temple of the true God, the hopeless inherit the promises of God, those without Christ become one in Christ, those far off are brought near, and the godless are reconciled to God. Therein is the reconciliation of believers to God and of person to person. What a wonderful gift this is for us. What a wonderful gift this is for you!

We belong here, not as tourists, or strangers creeping into an awesome temple, but as children taking our places at the family table. Those who have come close to death remember an overwhelming sense of happiness within reach; they know they are coming home. The impact of this passage for Christians is, this is the strength of the house we live in! Whatever may happen to us on earth, as long as we stay in the household of God, we are secure. " But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel." (Hebrews 12:22-24).

It is God's intention that His glory, His manifold wisdom and glory, be displayed in the church. It is God's intention that His glory be seen in our lives when we are scattered and when we are gathered. This is why we pray as Paul prayed (Ephesians 3:20–21), "Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen."

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.