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8 September 2019

The Church

Ephesians 4 v 1-16

Introduction

I grew up in a family with a mum, dad, brother and sister. We lived in a house together and sometimes we got on well, sometimes we didn't. I had a wider family, with uncles, aunts, cousins and grandparents. We didn't see them as much but there was a common bond between us. We were family and nothing would change that. Now I've grown older and have added to my family. I have a wife and a daughter, plus some in-laws and several nephews.

Families sometimes share common traits. They may look similar, with the same shape of nose or the same colour of hair. Some of my family have the Meiklejohn bladder: we can go for hours without a toilet stop. It's not as sought after as lovely hair or great intelligence, but does come in useful.

I have another family as well, a spiritual family. We all have the same father, so we're brothers and sisters. We've all been adopted into the family, so we don't all look alike, but we are related by blood even so. Sometimes we get along and sometimes we disagree about things. But we'll always be family, nothing can change that. As I said, we are all very different, but we do share common traits. As time goes on we all become a bit more like the eldest son. He's the one whose blood connects us all. We want to be more like him.

What is the Church?

In our series, Firm Foundations, we've been looking at the basic facts of Christianity. We've thought about creation, about sin, about the cross and all the things Jesus did for us there. But it's mostly been about salvation as it applies to individuals.

Today we're going to look at an amazing creation of God through Jesus: the Church. You see, God doesn't just save us as individuals, he brings us into this collective group of people. Don't forget that the church isn't a building, nor is it an organisation. It's a people. A people who have one thing in common: Christ is their saviour.

When we read the word "church" in the bible it's a translation of the Greek word Ecclesia, which means a gathering, an assembly of people. But it's much more than that. The Bible uses lots of names when talking about the church, and we're going to look at a few of them.

Children of God

The first is one we've already thought about. The church is a family. There is God the Father, and his only begotten son, Jesus. Then there are millions of adopted sons and daughters.

1 John 3:1-2 ESV

[1] See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. [2] Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. ...

John called himself the disciple who Jesus loved. And he emphasises that love in his letter. And the result of the love of God towards us is that those who are saved can call themselves the children of God. Not in the future but right now. John says there is a change that will happen when we will be made like Jesus, but we can call ourselves God's children here and now, if Jesus is our saviour.

Romans 8:15-16 ESV

[15] For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" [16] The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ...

You might wonder where the Spirit is in this picture. We have the Father and the Son, but what role does the Spirit play in the family of God? Paul says He is the Spirit of adoption. He is the one who binds us to God and who convinces our spirit that we are his children.

Remember the parable of the prodigal son. When he realised his mistake he decided to return as a servant in his father's household. But when he got back home his father ran to him, and received him as a son. So Paul says we don't receive the spirit of slavery, but the spirit of adoption. We are sons. He says sons rather than sons and daughters because he also wants to emphasise the inheritance we have as sons. At this point in Jewish society sons inherited wealth but daughters didn't. As children of God we have an amazing inheritance, both individually and together as a church.

And Paul reveals another amazing truth about our relationship with the Father. We don't just call him "father", in a respectful, formal manner, but we can call him "Abba". That's such a close, familiar word, like "dad" or "daddy".

Body of Christ

The next picture of the church is from our reading in Ephesians 4. Paul refers to the believers collectively as the body of Christ. The picture here is of many different parts fitted and working together to make something greater than they are individually, something that functions as a unit, under the control of the head, who is Christ.

Romans 12:5 ESV

[5] so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

Here Paul emphasises this connection that we have. We are individuals, but individuals who are members of one another. When we are functioning in Christ we function in harmony, working together.

1 Corinthians 12:12-13 ESV

[12] For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. [13] For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

Diversity is a big topic in work situations today. But it was important that the Corinthians heard about it back in the first century. If anyone could be saved then anyone could be part of the church. So rich people could be worshipping alongside poor, Jew alongside gentile, slave alongside free.

Paul then goes on to emphasise that these differences aren't just something to tolerate but to celebrate. He uses the body analogy to paint funny pictures. We shouldn't all want to be an eye. What if a body were made up just from eyes? What if it were just one big ear? So we should be happy with what he has made us, find our position within the church and not be envious of others who may seem to have a more important position. In fact Paul says the most humble position is actually the one that is most needed and most to be honoured.

Notice as well that Paul talks about being baptised into the body. Today we are going to witness three people being baptised in water, and as they do so we welcome them into Harper Church. But Paul isn't talking about water baptism. Every person who accepts Jesus as their saviour is baptised by the Spirit, and brought into the body of the church. What we will see today is an outward display of what has already happened in their hearts.

Bride of Christ

In Revelation we read about a future marriage feast that is to happen, and we are going to be part of it. In fact we, the church, are to be the bride.

Revelation 19:7-8 ESV

[7] Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; [8] it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure"- for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

Isn't that a beautiful picture? Jesus himself, the Lamb of God, is the bridegroom and his church is his bride.

It helps to understand a bit of what a Jewish wedding was like. It happened in three stages:

1. The parents would sign a contract, and the groom's father would pay a dowry. This would make them betrothed, or engaged, and would usually last for about a year.
2. The groom would lead a torchlight procession to the bride's house at midnight. She would be waiting with her bridesmaids, and they would join the procession back to the groom's house.
3. Then there would be the marriage supper. A great feast to celebrate the union.

We are in the first stage. The contract has been written, the price has been paid in Jesus blood. The second stage will be when Jesus comes and takes us to be with him. And then there will follow the wedding feast.

The fine dress the bride wears at the wedding is made of the righteous deeds of the saints. All we have done in faith for him.

Temple

Finally we read that the church is being built up into a temple:

Ephesians 2:19-22 ESV

[19] So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, [20] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, [21] in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. [22] In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

There are some amazing truths in there. We are being made into a temple, a place of worship, a dwelling place for God. He is fitting us together. Now that might not be an easy process. We might need to have a few edges knocked off us to help us fit into the next stone

along. Our temple is built on the foundations of the words of the apostles and prophets, and Jesus is the cornerstone on which it all rests.

Peter uses the same picture and calls us living stones:

1 Peter 2:5 ESV

[5] you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Centre of the Church

So we have these four pictures. They all emphasize togetherness: as a family, a body, a bride and a building. There is something common which runs through them.

I'm sure I saw a sign outside a church once and it said "what is the centre of church? UR". It's a great play on words, but it isn't true. There is one who is the centre of the church and that one is Christ. Without him we are nothing, either as individual believers or together: even with a common purpose we will fail if Jesus isn't the centre of all that we are.

Without Christ

- A child without a father or mother is an orphan. Without Jesus we cannot call ourselves God's family.
- A body without a head is a corpse. There is no life, no direction, no vision if Christ is not head of the church.
- A bride without the groom is just an actor. So a church without Christ may dress like a church, look like a church, act like a church. But it won't be there at the feast.
- A temple without a cornerstone will not last. So if we build on anything but Christ, when the storms come we will crumble and fall into ruin.

Local and Universal

Let's just take a minute to think about the scope of the church. In fact there are two types of church mentioned in the Bible. In many cases when the phrase "the church" is used it means all believers all around the world. We call this the "universal church". Another word for this is the "catholic" church. The word just means universal, and is totally different from the "Roman Catholic Church". Sometimes we read the Apostles' Creed and get a bit confused, but remember when we say we believe in "the holy catholic Church" we are just confirming that all believers around the world make up the Church.

But also in many passages we read about “the church at Antioch”, “the church in Jerusalem” and so on. We call this the “local church”. It’s the group of believers in one area, and there are plenty of instructions in the bible about how the local church should be organised and run.

You’ll notice there isn’t mention of the “Baptist church in Corinth”, or the “Methodist church in Ephesus”. It wasn’t intended for denominations to appear. But unfortunately sometimes a group of people stray from the truth and there needs to be a separation. And sometimes people disagree about something and split over a minor difference that shouldn’t separate us. As a church we should know what our foundation beliefs are. And we should discern whether neighbour churches are ones who believe much as we do, and so we can work together with; or are teaching heresy and we need to keep separate.

Purpose of the Church

The final question to ponder this morning is “what is our purpose?” As a family, a body, a bride, a temple, what does God want of us. Simply put he wants us to:

- Glorify his name
- Show his love
- Spread his gospel

Let’s go back to our text for this morning, Ephesians 4. In v1-2 we’re urged to live lives that shine out God’s love. In v3-6 Paul focuses on unity, working together in Christ. In v11-12 he explains that we all have our different gifts and contribute to the work of the church in different ways. And in v15-16 he says that this work should result in growth.

Do you see our church in this picture? Are we growing? Are we maturing? Are we working together? Are we all playing a part?

Or maybe you are on the outside in this picture, not part of the church. There is a door. His name is Jesus. If you:

- Acknowledge your sin
 - Believe that Jesus died to save you
 - Ask him to be your saviour and lord
- ...just like that, you’re part of the family.