

More Communion with God

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[0 : 00] Just over 30 years ago, the General Synod of the Church of England commissioned a report into the state of their denomination.

They were concerned about falling attendances at their services, and the main question they asked their members was, what do you want from your church?

In reporting back, the chairman, Sir John Lawrence, said that the members wanted four things above all others. They wanted churches, buildings that looked like a church, clergy who dressed in a manner of which they approve, services of the kind they've always been used to, and to be left alone.

Now, whatever we may think of those answers, and we have to leave the people questioned to their own consciences and to God.

There's one big problem there. The wrong question was asked. We shouldn't be asking, what do we want from the church?

[1 : 13] We should be asking, what does God want from his church? And in those verses we read from the end of Ephesians 2, the apostle Paul tells us.

It's reasonably clear, and it's understandable. Paul says in the beginning of Ephesians, as we've heard in detail, he said, look, we have to praise and thank the living God because you folk have put your faith in him, you've had your sins forgiven, you've passed from death to life, you were dead, you're now alive, you were strangers, now you're not strangers anymore, you're the children of God, you're not enemies of God.

There's been that great change, and you must keep in communion with God who's done this for you, with his Son Jesus, your Savior, and by the help of the Holy Spirit.

He said, you've also got a responsibility. You don't go to heaven on your own, you don't fly solo. There are other Christians, there are other people who have been changed the way you have, and you've got to get with them, and you've got to work with them for God's glory.

And Paul explains this, in essence he's saying what the church should be like. He's answering the question that they didn't ask back then.

[2 : 50] And he's saying, look, there are particular people, the people who are in the church are of a particular kind. And then he said, God has a plan for the church, and they have to follow that plan.

And people outside will see a pattern. You know, they'll see churches in different ways, but they'll all follow the same pattern. And we've got to be like that.

And finally he said, look, it's all for a reason. There's a purpose behind it all. God, Jesus established the church for a particular purpose.

And Paul makes it very clear what that is. So first of all, in verse 19, he talks about the people. So then, you're no longer strangers and aliens, but you're fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.

I think maybe the AV has it better when it says you're no longer strangers and foreigners. Because what Paul is picturing there, well, he has two pictures.

- [4 : 01] It's a picture of a Greek city state, and he's a picture of a family. Now, in the Roman Empire, the old Greek city state was hugely valued.
- It was a big deal to be a member of one of these city states. You had great rights and privileges and blessings if you belonged.
- And if you didn't belong, well, you weren't really just such a valuable person at all. And what he's saying is, look, you have been transformed from being foreigners, strangers, no rights, no privileges, no blessings into fellow citizens with these people.
- And you've got all the rights and blessings that that brings with it. And of course, Paul, you remember when he was in Jerusalem and been giving a hard time and there were false witnesses against them, and they were going to hand them over to one of these Jewish kangaroo courts that the religious leaders, and he would have had a really hard time there.
- But he says, I appeal to Caesar. I'm a citizen of Tarsus. So being a citizen was a big deal, and it meant a big change.
- [5 : 23] And the same with the picture of a family, and personally, I can't think of many things worse than a child who is suddenly orphaned, losing both parents right away.
- But then how wonderful to be brought into another family and treat it just as a child of that family. And this is what Paul is saying.
- Look, that's a similar kind of transformation. You're not enemies of God anymore. You're God's children with all the blessings and all the privileges that follow from that.
- And we oughtn't underestimate the change that takes place in the hearts and lives of men and women when they move from being not Christians to being Christians.
- There's a story, I like to read it because I think it pictures that very well in Luke 13. Jesus is in the synagogue, maybe for the very last time, and he sees a woman.
- [6 : 36] She hasn't come to him looking for a healing. There's no suggestion of that, but she's bent over, has been bent over for 18 years. You know, on a no beauty in her frame at all.
- And it says Jesus sees her, Jesus calls her, Jesus touches her, and instantly she straightens up, she totally changed and transformed, and she goes on her way rejoicing.
- That's the kind of change that the people of God have in their souls when they come to faith in Jesus Christ.
- And they are the kind of people who make up the church, and they can say with John Wesley, you know, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ and Christ alone for salvation.
- So God wants His church to be peopled by men and women who have been changed, they've been transformed. The center of gravity of their lives has moved from self to Jesus.
- [7 : 49] They are alive by the power of Jesus Christ and His Holy Spirit to live original, varied, expanding lives with God.
- Those are the kind of people who are to make up the church. Paul then moves on in verse 20 to talk about the plan that God has.
- He said, these people, just these people, not others, just these people who have been changed, they are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.
- Now Paul moves from the image of a city state and a family to the image of the church as a building. We know what happens with buildings.

You know, you're very wealthy so you buy a plot of land and you want a house. So you tell an architect what you want, how many rooms and all that, and he draws a plan and then you give it to a builder and the builder builds it.

[8 : 58] And that's the image that Paul has here. The plan here is, he says, the foundation of the apostles and the prophets.

And as Derek explained to us this morning, that is the Word of God because the prophets didn't come bringing their own ideas or whatever.

We read again and again the Word of the Lord came to Ezekiel, the Word of the Lord came to Joel, the Word of the Lord came to Jeremiah.

What did they do? They went to the people and said, thus saith the Lord. What God told them, they told the people.

And it was the same with the apostles. Do you remember Paul? Paul said, look, I didn't come with the words of men's wisdom. I delivered to you what was delivered to me.

[9 : 57] God told me, God shared this with me and I'm delivering it to you. And of course, we have that in the Scriptures. The Reverend Sinkler Ferguson in one of his books puts it, I just think brilliantly.

He says, the words it is written or a similar phrase appear around 90 times in the New Testament. These three words, settled matters for Jesus and the apostles.

If Scripture said it, then God said it. They regarded the Bible as God's own word. Through it, he speaks. To it, Christians listen.

Its teachings, Christians believe. Its commands, Christians obey. Its pages, Christians love.

The great missionary to China, Hudson Taylor said one time that he'd observed that three kind of approaches, the building churches.

[11 : 05] And he said, the first was, we can make our best plans and try to carry them through in our own strength. Or we can make our best plans and ask God to bless them.

Or finally, we can begin with God, ask His plans and offer ourselves to carry out His purposes. Now, you only have to say those three to know that the first two are nonsense.

Of course, we must go to the Word of God. Jesus himself told us as individuals and as a people, at the end of the sermon on the Mount, he's covered so much ground, so many areas of life.

And he says at the end, everyone who hears these words of mine and obeys them is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

So we turn to Scripture, we turn to the Word of God always to build our church. There's a very sad story, some years ago in a suburb of New York, there was a church, a congregation that dwindled so much that they closed.

[12 : 25] And on the very last day, when they turned the key in the door, there were only a couple of members there, they asked the caretaker who looked after a thing, and they said, look, get a notice and put it up, let people know there aren't services here anymore, we're not operating anymore.

And the caretaker went away and the only notice he could get was a notice that said, out of business. So we put it up on the door. And very shortly afterwards, someone had graffitied because they forgot what their business was.

Now, as we turn to the Word of God day by day by day, we will not forget what our business is.

And just in case turning to the Word of God and it alone, we become legalistic. Paul has a little bit tacked on at the end.

It's not really tacked on at the end of this first, but he says, Jesus Christ himself being the cornerstone. And of course, we all know what a cornerstone is.

[13 : 37] I mean, it's such an important part of any building. It's there at the corner. If you've ever watched a bricklayer, they take endless bother making sure that the corner is right because then they build walls by keeping in line with it.

And we're meant to do that in the church. Yes, we're meant to build on the Word, but we're meant to keep in line, always watching Jesus, always looking to Him.

So there's the plan. But what will it look like? This church that's built of changed people who read the Word and who look to Jesus constantly.

Well, in verse 21, Paul talks about the pattern that God wants His church to exhibit in Jesus, in whom he says, the whole structure being joined together grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

Now, again, I think the authorized version has a better translation of this. Then it says the whole structure being fitly framed together, everything just coming together.

[15 : 02] So Paul stays with the image of a church as a building. If you ever go to County Antrim, that area of outstanding natural beauty, you'll see around the countryside at building sites, people building houses and bungalows, and there'll be piles of sand and stones and cement and bricks and roof tiles and timber, all kinds of things.

But you didn't see that sort of thing in Edinburgh because they put hoardings around building sites here. I think there are bad people here who would steal. But you'll see all this stuff let out around the building site.

And then the builder comes. And the builder, of course, mixes the cement and he builds the bricks and he puts in a door and then a window and then roof trusses and then tiles for the roof.

It all comes together. And Paul is anticipating here what he'll go on to talk about later and the gifts of the Spirit.

You see, when God changes us, when he brings us from spiritual death to spiritual life, it's not to be unemployed.

[16 : 19] There shouldn't be anybody unemployed in the Church of Jesus Christ. He changes our hearts and he gives us gifts, spiritual gifts, talents, abilities, attributes.

They start off in the embryo, but they are to be developed because he wants us to be the people who build the Church of Jesus Christ under his guidance and under his leadership.

The Reverend John Stott in one of his books has a great illustration for the Church. He said, we should think of the Church like a theatre. You know, you have the stalls where the audience sit.

You have an actor or actors on the stage and hidden from the audience, but the actors can see there's a prompter, you know, who's prompting them if they forget their lines.

And I said, the trouble is most people think the congregation is the audience, the minister is the actor, and God, the Holy Spirit, is the prompter.

[17 : 25] He said, that's all wrong. He says, God is the audience, the congregation are the actors, and it is the minister who reminds them, teaches them their lines.

A building needs all different kinds of things, walls and doors and windows, and it needs all, a church needs all kinds of people.

We're all different. You know, each one of us is unique. And even folk who have the same gifts of the Spirit have them in slightly different ways and varieties.

So what we're being challenged here in this is that do we know what our spiritual gifts are? I think Scottish folk are a bit like Ulster folk.

We tend to be inherently modest. We've been brought up, you know, not to push ourselves forward. So we do maybe need a little bit of help.

[18 : 32] So if you're a young Christian this evening and you maybe don't know what your spiritual gift is, well, go and talk to Derek, go and talk to Katrina, talk to your elder, talk to somebody in your city group who's experienced whatever and say to them, look, what do you think?

And of course, above all, ask God. And if he's putting a thought in your head day after day, week after week, you know, that's a fair old indication that you need to consider that sort of thing very seriously.

And when you do know what your gift is, use it in the church. It's not given to you for your own personal good, although it will do you good when you're serving in the church of Jesus Christ.

Derek said this morning he was the only minister. Now what he meant by that was he was the only teaching elder.

But of course, we're all ministers here. We all have a role to play because we all have a spiritual gift.

[19 : 44] And then Paul finishes in verse 22 with the purpose of the church, what it's all for. And him and Jesus, you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

What's it all for? Why does God change people? Why does he reveal himself in his word to us? Why does he give different people different gifts to build up the church?

Because what at the end of the day is it all for? Well again, Paul stays with this image of a building. And of course, a building is somewhere to live.

It's meant to be a dwelling place for God by his Holy Spirit. And when the people of God has changed, build upon his word and look constantly to Jesus when they develop and devote their spiritual gifts for the good of the church, the congregation, maybe even the wider church in the world, then God comes.

It's a dwelling place that's fit for purpose to use the modern phrase. It's a place where God can come and can dwell.

[21 : 14] And if you'll forgive a personal reminiscence, I suppose it is, after I retired at Mary, I moved back to live in Northern Ireland.

I got asked to preach in a lot of places, not because I was any good, but there were a lot of vacancies. And I once went to a church just to let you know.

I don't know how they got in contact with me, they rang me up and I was free. And so I went, I did the service. And I said to them, how did you know about me? How did you get my name? And that voice is, I don't know, he said, but we were stuck.

We were desperate. We would have taken anybody. And the sad thing was a good number of those congregations that I went to, I hadn't been before, I haven't been since, they were dead.

You could sense it once you went in the door. There obviously hadn't been prayer. There hadn't been a faithful Bible ministry. There hadn't been, no one was really concerned.

[22 : 22] People were just going because it was part of the social round. But there were other congregations. We came to St. Columbus and it was certainly one of them, where as soon as you came, you knew the spirit of God is here.

And that is how we bring glory to God because people come and they watch and they listen and they say, you know, see those people up there in that church.

They have the same problems as we have, but you don't hear them complaining. They don't have any more money than we have. And yet they're giving it away, they're sharing.

They have the same time pressures, but they seem to be able to find time to help people who are needy. The same family worries, but they don't get anxious.

They live in the same world, but they're not fearful. And whenever you ask them, all they say is, oh, well, Jesus is my Savior and my Heavenly Father looks after me.

[23 : 27] And when people hear that, they say, well, you know, their God must be a great God. And of course, so He is. And that is how we bring glory to Him.

Not that it's easy. There's one very famous Christian magazine that was called The Sword in the Trial. And it's an image that comes from the book of Nehemiah when the children of Israel returned to Jerusalem and were building up the walls.

Their enemies were trying to stop them, and so they were building with a trial in one hand, but a sword in the other, their enemies.

It isn't easy. Oh, but the blessings that come are just unbelievable. Let me finish with a story that I think puts it well.

Toni Morrison is an American novelist. She was very anxious to explain that although she was receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature, she'd come from an ordinary background and that, but she hadn't allowed circumstances.

[24 : 42] In other words, she'd taken personal responsibility for her life. And as she was accepting that prize, she began her acceptance speech with a story about a very old black woman who lived in a shack on the outskirts of a town in the southern states of the USA.

She was the daughter of a slave, and she had a reputation for wisdom and sagacity. And one day, a group of college students came out and part in the clearing in front of where she lived and called her.

And when she came onto the porch, they took out a bird cage from the car, and there was a little songbird in it, and one of the men grabbed it and put it behind his back, and he said, old woman, tell us this, is the bird dead or alive?

And of course, she knew that if she said it was alive, he would crush it to death and show that she was wrong. But if she said it was dead, he would open his hand, let it fly away, and show that she was wrong again.

And she said, well, I don't know whether the bird is alive or dead. All I know is, it's in your hands.

[26 : 08] It's in your hands. And in a way Paul is saying this, yes, God has done great things for us, and He has given us so much.

But the building up of His Son's church is in our hands, and we have to obey His command.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank You again for Your Word and for all that it teaches us, and we just pray that You would put within each of us the desire, the longing to bring glory to You by faithful and obedient living.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.