

WHY THE CHURCH EXISTS

by Ray C. Stedman

We have been considering the defense of the Christian in the midst of a highly confused and darkened world. Now it is important that we take up the equally valid matter of the place of the church, i.e., the corporate body of Christians, in the world and the specific character of its ministry and its power.

You will recognize instantly that this whole matter of the place of the church in the world today is a very confused issue. On one hand we are being told that the job of the church is to forget doctrinal preaching and desire for individual salvation and involve itself in the problems of human suffering and injustice. The church, they say, belongs in the vanguard of the struggle for social justice and the reason Christianity is shunned by the world is because Christians will not dirty their hands or risk their reputations. We are being told that Christians can only show their faith as Christians if they are willing to carry a placard in Alabama, risk jail in some picket line, join the fight for land reform, or the abolition of laws against homosexuality and adultery. We are told that the church should be speaking to all the issues of life today and should be concerned about problems of metropolitan government, mass transportation, suburban segregation, equal representation in legislatures, and other problems that confront our modern world.

On the other side there is an equally vocal group which says the job of the church is to thunder against evil from the pulpit, to denounce Communism, and anti-Americanism, and, thus preserve, if possible, the blessings of bourgeois materialism for Christians to enjoy to the full. They say we must attack with scorching language anyone who dares to raise questions about the Bible, or threaten the special privileges of Christians in modern society. The theme of this group seems to be, "Come weal or come woe, the status is quo."

Now this polarity of view as to what the church should be, and how it should work, is a perfect example of the ability of the devil to drive people to extremes and thus weaken the faith of many and cast a cloud of obscurity over the truth. In the midst of this kind of confusion the letter to the Ephesians calls us back to reality.

In this letter we have a declaration of the intention of God in forming the church, and a clarifying of its purpose and its ministry -- not only in the 1st century but in the 20th as well. As always, when we come to the Scriptures we are returning to the fundamental issue of any matter, to basic, essential, underlying truth from which we can work our way out again to the application of these things in every area of life. It is so necessary that we get our direction from the revelation of God in Scripture. Let us turn now to the first three verses of Chapter 4:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. {Eph 4:1-3 RSV}

We are now primarily concerned with the first verse, which constitutes a highly significant exhortation to Christians. This whole passage is a greatly condensed summary of the reason why the church exists and a statement of what its function should be. But before we consider this more closely, we must see how the apostle describes himself in presenting this whole matter:

He calls himself "a prisoner for the Lord," or a prisoner of the Lord.

Remember that this letter to the Ephesians was written from the city of Rome where Paul was awaiting trial before the emperor on charges of inciting riots, with the implication even of treason against the emperor himself. These charges had been preferred against him by the Jews in Jerusalem at the time of the seizure of Paul in that dramatic encounter he had with the Jewish leaders in the city of Jerusalem. After languishing for two years as a prisoner in Caesarea, he had been sent at last on a very perilous sea voyage which ended in

shipwreck, but, at last, he arrived at Rome. There he lived in a home, chained to a Roman guard day and night. He was the personal prisoner of Nero, but he never refers to himself as the prisoner of Caesar. He saw beyond the chains, and the guard, and the imperial processes of justice, to the controlling hand of Jesus Christ behind all things.

He did not fret about being in prison, being chained, being limited. Read his letter to the Philippians, written in this prison relationship, and you will find it is filled with joy and triumph and the assurance that all is well, for the apostle looked behind the visible things to the invisible things. He says in his letter to the Corinthians, "we look not at the things which are seen but at the things which are unseen," {2 Cor 4:18 RSV}. Why? Because that is where ultimate answers lie, that is where truth is found, there is the explanation behind all visible things. So he does not say, I am the prisoner of Caesar. To say "the prisoner of Caesar" would be a superficial explanation, and Paul is never superficial. Behind Caesar is Christ.

The Lord Jesus himself reflected this same attitude when he stood before Pilate. Pilate said to him, "Do you not know that I have the power to crucify you?" And Jesus said, "You could have no power except it be given you from above," {cf, John 19:11}.

This has a direct bearing upon the issue Paul is discussing in this passage, the purpose of the church. The whole explanation for the confusion about the church that exists so widely today is that Christians have been looking at the things that are seen instead of the things that are unseen. Here is our human race, with suffering and need obvious everywhere. Hate and bigotry abounds in our world. Injustice prevails and misery exists everywhere you turn. And over here is a group of people, the church, who talk about love, compassion, sympathy and help.

The obvious answer to human need is to let this group of people that are so concerned in this area get to work and do something about it. Let them meet the need, directly and positively. It sounds so logical, so consistent, so practical. But that is because we are so superficial. We only see the things that are visible. In our shallow concern for externals we treat symptoms and not causes, and, therefore, we apply superficial remedies that work only for the moment -- if they work at all -- and then the situation is as bad again.

Well, what is the answer of the apostle to this? What does he say the church should do in the face of the desperate demands of human need? His answer is, "lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called."

Now, what does he mean? He means, obey your orders!

Take your direction from the head of the church. Follow the divine strategy, not the obvious shallow counsel of men. The church is not expected to devise its own strategy or to set its own goal. The church is not an independent organization existing by means of its own strength, as human organizations do. One can never understand this body that exists in human society unless you view it as more than an organization.

Think of the figures the apostle uses for the church in this very letter:

- The church, he says, is an army under the command of a king, and an army that will not obey its leader is useless as a fighting force.
- The church is a body under the control of the head, and what a tragedy it is when the human body refuses to respond to the direction of the head.
- The church, he says, is a temple for the exclusive habitation and use of a Person who dwells within, who has the right to do with that habitation as he wills.

So this is the word of the apostle to us: "Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called." Follow the goal that has been set before you by your leader. Obey the directions of the Head. Obey your orders!

We are not left in doubt as to what that calling is. It is here in the first three chapters of this letter and scattered in many other places in the New Testament. The first three chapters of this letter are devoted to the task of describing what Christians have in Christ as compared with their former condition in darkness and defeat in the kingdom of Satan, and to what end and purpose this is all designed. This is always the structure of a Pauline letter. He begins with telling people the truth (the truth is nothing but what we call doctrine); but is that which forms underlying foundations. How foolish it is to start with anything but truth. There are those today who tell us that we should start with anything but truth. There are those today who tell us that we should start with some kind of dream, an idea, whether it be true or not; and, building on that illusion, we are to work out practical solutions to our problems. The apostle never does this, he starts with the truth, the truth as it is, things as they really are. He calls us back to reality.

That is the glory of Christianity: It is a setting forth of things as they actually exist. In these first three chapters you have a marvelous statement of reality. Read these chapters through. It simply exhausts human language to set forth the great realities that the Christian and the church, as a body of Christians, possess in Jesus Christ. In these three chapters there are several very clear statements of the purpose of the church, not merely its purpose in eternity, some day, but its purpose in time, right now. If we want to know what that purpose is let us observe these statements. Let me quickly run through these first three chapters and point out some of these statements.

In Chapter 1, the apostle says,

Even as he [Christ] chose us in him before the foundation of the world [this is no afterthought with God. The church was planned long before the world was made], that we should be holy and blameless before him. {Eph 1:4 RSV}

The moral character of God's people is a primary essential in understanding the nature of the church. We are to be a moral example to the world, reflecting the character of Jesus Christ.

Just recently I read of two American men who were riding on a train in Britain. As you know, the English trains have compartments where six or seven people can be seated. In the compartment with these two men was a very distinguished looking gentleman. The two Americans were quietly discussing this gentleman among themselves. In a very low tone one of them said, "I would wager money that he is the Archbishop of Canterbury." The other man said, "I don't think so. I'll take that bet." So the first man approached the gentleman and said, "Sir, would you mind telling us, are you the Archbishop of Canterbury?" The man turned and said, "You mind your own blankety blank business! What the blank difference does it make to you?" And the first American turned to the other and said, "The bet's off! There's no way of finding out." Which is but to suggest that Christians ought to be evident by the way they talk and live, the way they think and act. We are designed to do so, to be "holy and blameless before him." That is one of the purposes of the church.

Look at Verse 12 of the same chapter:

we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory. {Eph 1:12 RSV}

Think of that! We who first hoped in Christ, we Christians, have been destined and appointed (here is our calling) to live for the praise of his glory. The first job of the church is not the welfare of men, important as that may be, and as it definitely enters into the picture. But that is not the first thing. The first thing is that we may live to the praise and the glory of God. As the New English Bible puts it, we "should cause his glory to be praised," {Eph 1:12b NEB}.

Well, what is God's glory? It is the story of what God is and does. The problem with this world is that it does not know God. It has no knowledge of him. In all its seeking and wanderings, its endeavors to discover truth, it does not know God. But the glory of God is to reveal the himself, to show what he is like, and the story of what God is and does is the glory of God. You have that in Second Corinthians where the apostle is commenting on this very fact. He says,

For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness" who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. {2 Cor 4:6 RSV}

That is where you see the glory of God, in the face of Christ, in his character, in his being.

In this same chapter the fourth verse confirms this,

In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God. {2 Cor 4:4 RSV}

Now that is the job of the church, to declare the glory of God, the gospel of God's grace and character.

You have it again in Chapter 1 of Ephesians, Verses 22-23:

... he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. {Eph 1:22-23 RSV}

The secret of the church is that Christ lives in it, and the message of the church then is to declare him, to talk about Christ.

You have it again in Ephesians Chapter 2, Verses 19-22:

So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. {Eph 2:19-22 RSV}

There is the holy mystery of the church, it is the dwelling place of God. He lives in his people. That is the great message.

You have it again in Chapter 3, Verses 9-10. Paul says his ministry is,

to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things: that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. {Eph 3:9-10 RSV}

There are others, beside men, watching the church. This is an important aspect of its ministry.

Then again in Chapter 3, the verses immediately before the passage in Chapter 4 that we are considering, Paul says,

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. ... I therefore, ... beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, {cf, Eph 3:20 - 4:1 RSV}

Now that is clear, is it not?

The calling of the church is to declare by our word and to demonstrate by our lives the character and the work of Jesus Christ who lives within.

We are to talk about the reality of a life-changing encounter with a living Christ, and to demonstrate that change by an unselfish love-filled life.

That is why the apostle goes on,

with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. {Eph 4:2-3 RSV}

That is the calling of the church.

Notice how the Lord Jesus himself confirms this in the opening chapter of Acts. Just before he ascended he said to his disciples,

**"... you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth."
{Acts 1:8 RSV}**

There is the calling of the church, to be witnesses of Christ.

A witness is one who declares and who demonstrates. Peter has a wonderful word about this in his first letter, Chapter 2, Verse 9:

... you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. {1 Pet 2:9 RSV}

That is the job of the church.

Notice, this is always addressed to the individual Christian. It is amazing, is it not, that the church is never addressed as a body in the Scriptures, but always as individual units within a body. Therefore the responsibility to fulfill this calling of the church belongs to every true Christian:

- All are called,
- All are indwelt by the Holy Spirit,
- All are expected to fulfill their calling in the world.

This is the first and clearest note the apostle sounds throughout this whole letter. The expression of the church's witness may sometimes be corporate, but the responsibility to do so is always individual.

Now, does this not help us in this great question of what the church is here to do?

Why does it exist in the world?

Where is our emphasis to be put, where shall we start in this job of influencing the world?

Well, in Scripture, the only message that the church has for the world is the gospel. It has nothing to say about politics or substandard housing or civil rights or labor-capital squabbles or anything of the sort -- not because Christians are unconcerned in this realm. Obviously you cannot have a heart filled with love for fellow human beings and not be concerned. The attitude that shrugs its shoulders, and says, "I am indifferent to these things," is horribly sub-Christian. No, the church says little about these things because the Christian knows that the only way to help in these problems is to introduce a new dynamic, the life of Jesus Christ. This is what men need. When those involved in these problems experience this, the testimony of history again and again has been that the problems begin to be solved. They are worked out by the dynamic of a new life that has been introduced into the situation.

Now, we must start there. Arthur Brisbane says a very interesting thing in one of his columns.

We may sweep the world clean of militarism, we may scrub the world white of autocracy, we may carpet it with democracy and drape it with the flag of republicanism. We may hang on the walls the thrilling pictures of freedom: here, the signing of America's Independence; there, the thrilling portrait of Joan of Arc; yonder the Magna Carta; and on this side the inspiring picture of Garibaldi. We may spend energy and effort to make the

world a paradise itself where the lion of capitalism can lie down with the proletarian lamb. But if we turn into that splendid room mankind with the same old heart, deceitful and desperately wicked, we may expect to clean house again not many days hence. What we need is a peace conference with the Prince of Peace.

As the old proverb puts it,

You can bring a pig into the parlor but that doesn't change the pig -- though it certainly changes the parlor!

You can see the primacy of declaring the gospel in the lives of our Lord and the apostles.

Where in the New Testament do you find any programs suggested for social betterment? That silence needs to be faced seriously, for the days in which our Lord and the apostles lived were no different than today. They were surrounded with grievous social issues, as we are, but never is there any direct approach to these problems suggested.

Where are Christians told to demand of government leaders correction of the evils and abuses that were so widespread throughout their land? If anything the opposite is given to us. Look at Ephesians 6, Verses 5-7:

Slaves, be obedient to those who are your earthly masters, with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as to Christ; not in the way of eyeservice, and men-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to men, {Eph 6:5-7 RSV}

How different that is from what it is suggested the church should be saying in relationships like this today.

When did Jesus Christ ever tell the disciples to organize a picket line, or to boycott a business, or conduct a lay-in? -- proper as these things may be in this world from other points of view. But they are not Christian. That is the thing we need to face. The word of the Lord is,

"Bless those that persecute you, do good to those who hate you, overcome evil with good." {cf, Rom 12:14, Matt 5:44, Rom 12:21}

The amazing yet unquestioned fact of history is that by these seemingly indirect methods, and these apparently weak approaches, the Christian church, when it has been faithful to them, has, from time to time, and place to place, drastically and powerfully changed the whole fabric of human society.

One of the famous books of all time is Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. He traces what happened to that mighty empire and how it disintegrated from within. In that book is a passage that Winston Churchill memorized by heart because he felt it so descriptive. Gibbon says this concerning the Roman Empire:

While that great body was invaded by open violence or undermined by slow decay, a pure and humble religion gently insinuated itself into the minds of men, grew up in silence and obscurity, derived new vigor from opposition, and finally erected the triumphant banner of the cross on the ruins of the capital.

On the other hand, whenever the church has forsaken the gospel message, and has turned to direct techniques to relieve human misery as its chief end of existence, it has always been weak and powerless. Its voice is not heard and eventually it is despised and ignored. In his monumental *History of the World*, Will Durant compares the influence of Caesar and Christ. He says of Jesus,

The revolution he sought was a far deeper one, without which reforms could be only superficial and transitory. If he could cleanse the human heart of selfish desire, cruelty and lust, utopia would come of itself and all those institutions that rise out of human greed and violence and the consequent need for law, would disappear. Since this would be the profoundest of all revolutions, beside which all others would be mere coup d'etats of class ousting class and exploiting in its turn, Christ was, in this spiritual sense, the greatest revolutionist in history.

This is a revolutionary age.

The hurricane winds of change are everywhere blowing in our world. The race seethes with unrest and lawless rebellion. What are Christians to do in this hour?

Should we surrender the greatest revolutionary message the world has ever heard, which can come to it from no other source, and content ourselves with doing what any worldling can do?

Shall we become nothing more than another political action group, or succumb to the fallacy that change, any kind of change, represents progress? God forbid!

What the apostle desires is that we heed our calling,

- That we renew our commitment to the Lord who is behind all things to become individually responsible to tell this radical, revolutionary, life-transforming, life-changing good news throughout society;
- That we should invade commercial and industrial life, education and learning, the arts and family life, morals and government with this tremendous, unequalled message.

Ask any Christian what is the greatest thing that ever happened to him in his life. Without hesitation he will reply, when he came to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Then the second question naturally follows, what is the greatest thing he can tell anybody? How to come to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior!

Christians are not to witness in arrogance and rudeness, not in holier-than-thou smugness, not in sanctimonious presumption, and certainly not against the continual background of ugly church fights and harshness and sharpness between Christian and Christian. But, as Paul says,

with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called. {Eph 4:2-3, 4:1 RSV}

Prayer

Our Father, we pray that these words may ring in our ears these days when so much is being said to the contrary. Help us to see that the only impact we can have in this world is by being faithful to the message which has been given to us that in doing so we become the instrument of introducing into this world an element, a dynamic that no other group can introduce, and without which all the attempts at reform are useless and weak. Lord, we pray that we may keep life in perspective and hold truth in focus and be faithful to thee who has called us to be thy representatives, the manifestation of thy life in this world. We pray in Christ's name, Amen.

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