

GOD'S PLAN FOR THE AGES

A Comprehensive View of God's Great Plan from
Eternity to Eternity Illustrated with Chart

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CHAPTER TEN

THE CHURCH AGE

There are several terms which aptly describe the age in which we live: The Church Age; The Age of Grace; Man under Grace; From Pentecost to the Rapture, or Translation, of the Church. All these are terms applied to the period of time which began with the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, nearly two thousand years ago, and which will come to a close when the church is caught "**up to meet the Lord in the air,**" forever to be with Him.

It is this period of time, about which we are to study today. A glance at the introduction to our last lesson will remind us of the very important fact that, while the Holy Spirit is in the world, calling out the church, the risen Lord is seated at the right hand of the throne of God, ever living to make intercession for the blood-bought members of His church. As the Holy Spirit in the world convicts men of sin and regenerates hearts, the Son of Man in glory appears in the presence of God for these same sinners saved by grace. And so the building of the church goes on, even as believers in Christ are kept by His almighty power.

This is God's purpose for this age; and that is what I want you to see in our lesson today. In other words, I want you to get firmly fixed in your minds these fundamental truths: God's eternal purpose for this age; the difference between the church and the kingdom; and the relationship between Christ and His church.

God's Purpose For This Age — The Building Of The Church

Let me remind you again that the division of time into "*ages*" or "*dispensations*" is not a secret thing; for the Word of God clearly marks the beginning and the ending of each age. So it is that the Church Age had a definite beginning and will have a definite ending. And, as in other dispensations God dealt with man in very definite ways, so also He is dealing with man now in a certain, definite way.

For Scripture concerning these ages, turn to Ephesians 3:1-6, and read this passage carefully.

Note the expression, “**the dispensation of the grace of God**”; these words, as well as those already suggested, might well be used as the theme of our lesson today. Then note especially verses five and six, which plainly state that the building of the church, composed of Jew and Gentile, was not revealed to men “**in other ages.**”

What a clear statement of the orderly arrangement of the ever-unfolding purpose of the eternal God! “**In other ages!**” “**From the beginning of the world,**” that is, throughout the ages God knew that He was going to build His church (Ephesians 3:9); but in His wisdom He withheld this great revelation concerning Christ and the church until He gave it to the world through the Apostle Paul. Therefore, that apostle could write the words which we have just read:

“**By revelation he made known unto me the mystery . . . which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men**” (verses 3 and 5).

Just here let us remember that in the Word of God a “**mystery**” is not something mysterious. It is, rather, a term used in a special sense and meaning “*something not hitherto revealed.*” That is why Paul writes of “**the mystery**” concerning the church. It was “**not made known unto the sons of men**” “**in other ages.**”

We have seen in our former studies that each dispensation is marked at the beginning by some new probation, and at the end by judgment. Each time, as God has given man a new chance, man has failed; and God in His holiness and righteousness has judged sin.

Likewise, in the Church Age God offers man — not another trial — man’s testing time has passed, and the verdict has been rendered: “**All the world**” is “**guilty before God . . . For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God**” (Romans 3:19, 23). But in this Church Age God is offering man a full and free salvation. As we shall see in the progress of our study, this age, too, will end in judgment. Yet God’s eternal purpose for this age is being fulfilled in the building of His church.

It is very important that you grasp this truth, my friend. God does not promise the church that through her He will convert the world, or “win the world for Christ,” as many ardent Christians believe. God does tell the church to evangelize the world. But only the coming of the King will bring in the golden age of peace and righteousness! Nothing is more pathetic than to see Christian men who are sincere, but who are burning their lives out in efforts doomed to fail. Reformers, seeking to “**bring in the kingdom**” while the King is away, are like workmen trying to construct a building without knowing the blueprint.

The very word “**church**” in the Greek is “*ecclesia,*” and means “*the called out ones.*” James realized this when, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, he spoke at the first Church Council in Jerusalem, saying: “**Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name**” (Acts 15:14). “**And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down . . . Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world**” (Acts 15: 15-18).

What a significant statement is that last sentence! “**Known unto God**” was His great plan for this present age of grace, “**from the beginning of the world**”!

The little flock of disciples in Jerusalem began their work on the Day of Pentecost. They began to preach and to evangelize. Three thousand souls were saved on that memorable day; but Jerusalem was not converted; nor was it later. Yet the apostles were preaching the Word in all its purity. The Lord took out three thousand souls.

Philip preached in Samaria, and there was a great revival; but not all the Samaritans were saved.

Paul preached in city after city; and the Gospel was “**a savour of life unto life**”; but it was also “**a savour of death unto death**” — to those who accepted it, life; but to those who rejected it, death.

So all through the ages the power of God can save even the brutal jailer; yet it can also be rejected. No city has ever been wholly converted. Few families are all Christian.

But some will ask, “Then is the Gospel a failure?”

Let me put the question in this way: “A failure to do what?” Look at the nations today with their rumors of wars, the race for armaments, the wave of crime and lawlessness. If the church were supposed to convert the world, then we might well grow discouraged, to say the least.

My friend, the day will come when the world will be converted — when the King comes back! But God has another purpose for this age; He is calling out the church, “**a people for his name.**”

Then let me ask again: Is the Gospel a failure? No, never! Throughout every country, wherever the Gospel of our crucified and risen Lord is faithfully preached, the Holy Spirit is saving souls, uniting them into one body, building the church, which is the bride of Christ. How necessary it is that we understand God’s purpose for this age! This is the age of “*the called out ones.*”

Moreover, this is the age when Christians are to evangelize the world, not to amuse the people or entertain them in the house of God, in the name of Christianity. “**Go ye into all the world,**” Christ said, “**and preach the gospel to every creature.**”

When the last soul is saved to complete the body of Christ, then the church will be caught away to be with Christ. And every soul saved brings the church that much nearer to completion. What an incentive to be a winner of souls! Yet God has not revealed the time when the body of Christ will be complete. He has told us to preach the Gospel, to point sinners to the Saviour — and to be ready for His coming!

Yes, God is working His purpose out. The Church Age had a definite beginning on the Day of Pentecost. It will have a definite ending at the translation of the church. And in between these two great events His eternal purpose for this age is being fulfilled in the building of the church of our crucified and risen Lord.

This purpose which Paul declared was foretold by the Lord Jesus while He was still on earth; for in Matthew 16:18 He expressly stated: **“I will build my church”** — not *“I have built,”* and not *“I am building,”* but **“I will build.”**

Again, He said to His disciples:

“It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you.” (John 16:7).

The Holy Spirit could not come to accomplish His purpose for this age until the Lord Jesus was crucified and glorified. That is what Christ meant when He uttered the significant words which we have just quoted. The Holy Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost; and then the building of the church began — not before then.

Now it is quite true that the Holy Spirit was in the world from the beginning. In Genesis 1:2 we read that **“the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.”** Throughout the Old Testament we read that He came upon individual men, upon Saul, upon David, Samuel, Solomon, and many others. But let us remember that He came upon these men, as individuals, for special service. He was not in the world then as He is today, uniting believers into the body of Christ, which is His church.

This point is made very clear in John 7:37-39, especially verse 39. Referring to Himself as the **“living water,”** and looking forward to the Church Age when believers in Him should have dwelling in them and with them, His own Holy Spirit. The Lord Jesus spoke these words, and at that time **“the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified”** (verse 39).

Do you not see, my friend, that the church did not begin to evangelize until the Holy Spirit came in great power on the Day of Pentecost, in fulfillment of these prophecies of the all-wise Son of God? (See also Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8; and other such predictions of Christ, fulfilled at Pentecost).

Now let us turn to the second chapter of Acts and read the account of the beginning of the church. As we read, let us keep in mind the eternal truth that the Holy Spirit is a living Person, the third Person of the Holy Trinity. Even though some ten or fifteen false creeds today deny the personality of the Holy Spirit, yet God’s Word is forever true. The Holy Spirit is not an influence; He is not some inanimate thing. The Lord Jesus always referred to Him as a living and a powerful Person. (See chapter one of this series, *“The Eternal Spirit.”*)

Space will not permit an exposition of this wonderful record, found in the second chapter of Acts. But I trust you will read prayerfully and repeatedly this story, noting the miracles attending the descent of the Holy Spirit; the significance of the Jewish feast day on which it occurred (compare Leviticus 23:15-22; see also our radio lectures on *“The Feasts of Jehovah”*); Peter’s remarkable sermon, with its statement of fulfilled prophecy, and with its exaltation of the crucified and risen Lord; the brotherly love manifested by this first church. What a marvelous chapter it is!

Then if you will turn to the tenth and eleventh chapters of Acts, you will find the story of how the Holy Spirit came in like power upon the Gentiles in the house of Cornelius.

The record in chapter two has to do with Jews (verse 5); in chapters ten and eleven, with Gentiles.

“The gospel of Christ . . . is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek” (Romans 1:16).

“For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit”; (I Corinthians 12:13; compare Galatians 3:28).

In Christ all barriers are broken down, for **“God is no respecter of persons”!** **“O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!”** (Romans 11:33).

Such was the miraculous beginning of the church. The whole of the book of Acts tells of her early growth; and the whole of the New Testament tells of God’s plan for her — here on earth and for all eternity.

The Difference Between The Church And The Kingdom

Much confusion seems to exist in the minds of many regarding the difference between the church and the kingdom.

A clear understanding of this subject will help us to see God’s plan for this age through the church. The earthly kingdom was no **“mystery . . . in other ages hid in God”**; that is, not revealed to man. On the contrary, the coming kingdom was the theme of all the prophets. It is described in detail in the Old Testament, Then in the fulness of time John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus Himself heralded the kingdom, saying: **“Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”** But Israel rejected her King, and the kingdom was postponed. Then it was, and not until then, that Christ announced His eternal purpose in the building of His church, as already referred to in Matthew 16:18, **“I will build my church.”**

The kingdom always refers to this world; the church is a heavenly body.

- The kingdom is to be a physical, literal reality on earth. The church has a heavenly inheritance; she is the bride of Christ.
- The kingdom is to be established when the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of David, returns in power and great glory to rule; the church is being formed now by the Holy Spirit, as believers are baptized into the one body, which is the church.
- Jerusalem will be the metropolis of the world, and Christ will sit upon an earthly throne, the throne of His father, David; the church will reign with Him in glory for a thousand years, and will share His glory throughout the endless ages.

Briefly, this is the difference between the church and the kingdom; and once it is understood, God's great plan concerning future events is clearly seen.

I do not refer to any particular branch of the church — I refer to all born-again souls, to all who have put their faith in the shed blood of the Lord Jesus as the only Way of salvation.

Have you done that, my brother? Are you baptized into the body of Christ by the quickening power of the Holy Spirit of God? Unless you let the Holy Spirit regenerate your heart, you will not share the glory of Christ when He comes back to earth — and for all eternity. You will live forever in outer darkness and remorse and anguish of soul.

“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved” (Acts 16:31).

The Relationship Between Christ and the Church

As we consider the figures used to describe the church of Christ, we begin to see something of the marvelous relationship between the great Head of the church and the members of His body. Let us look briefly at some of these:

1. The Church Is the Body of Christ.

Read carefully Ephesians 1:17-23. Christ is here called **“the head over all things to the church, which is his body”** (verses 22, 23). This speaks of union with Him and life in Him. Without the head, the physical body dies; and apart from eternal life in Christ, there is eternal separation from God.

But this figure speaks to us of yet another vital truth. Let me ask you: What is your body for? Is it not for the manifestation of your personality? Your spirit can exist without your body; but you need your body to manifest your spirit. Your body executes your purposes. Your tongue speaks for you; your feet go for you; your hands serve for you.

My Christian friend, God has a great purpose to carry out. And in this age He is manifested to the world only through His church. Through her He seeks to carry out the will of the unseen Christ.

Paul says in Colossians 1:24-27 that **“the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints”** is this: **“Christ in you, the hope of glory.”**

May I ask you, my brother: Are you carrying out the will and purpose of the unseen Christ before a world that does not know Him? As you and I preach and live the Gospel of the unseen Christ, the Holy Spirit saves sinners, adding the members to the body of Christ, and hastening the day when she will be complete, translated — forever to be with Him.

2. The Church Is the Bride of Christ.

Turn to II Corinthians 11:2 and Ephesians 5:25-30 to find two very clear references which use the figure of the bride and the bridegroom, as illustrating the relationship between Christ and the church. This figure speaks to us of union, affection, tenderness, nearness.

Our “God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ . . . And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:4-6).

Even as a queen sits beside the king, so the bride of Christ shall rule and reign with Him who will one day be acknowledged by all the world as King of kings and Lord of lords.

In our next lesson we shall consider, among other things, the marriage supper of the Lamb, at which time we shall study it more fully. But here let us read the Bible record of that time of rejoicing. It is found in Revelation 19:7-10.

- No wonder **“the Spirit and the bride say, Come”!** (See Revelation 22:17).
- No wonder the child of God looks beyond the strain and stress, sorrow and suffering of this present life, and prays: **“Even so, come, Lord Jesus”!** (See Revelation 22:20).

3. The Church Is the Temple of the Holy Spirit.

In Old Testament days God came down in the Shekinah Glory and dwelt in the tabernacle and temple. During this age He dwells, not in a material house of brick and stone, but in a living temple.

“What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s” (I Corinthians 6:19, 20). (See also I Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 2:19-22; I Peter 2:5; and other references).

What a solemn thought this is!

How it should make us want to please Him!

Our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit; we are not our own; we are bought with a price, the precious blood of Jesus! He wants to speak through our tongues, to serve through our hands, to send our feet on soul-saving errands. How are we using these members? They belong to Him!

When He was on earth, the Lord Jesus cleansed the temple, the house of God.

What must He think as His all-seeing eye looks down into these temples which He has purchased on Calvary?

“What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost?”

“Unto Him Be Glory In The Church”

The church will ever be an object-lesson of the grace of God.

“In the ages to come” the church will **“shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus”** (Ephesians 2:7). The grace, wisdom, and love of God will be made manifest through the church.

The distinctive characteristic of this age is grace; in the millennium it will be righteousness.

God permits evil today, for His grace is withholding judgment. Under the Law of Moses the Gentiles had no claim to the covenants and promises. But now, in Christ, God has taken us up, without the promises, apart from the covenants; and in so doing, He manifests His grace.

If I wanted to manifest my grace, my friend, I should not bestow it upon my own child. I should choose someone who has less claim on me than anyone else in the world. I should adopt that person, educate him, take him into my home — and manifest my grace upon him.

Do you not see that God has done this, and more? Our great sin manifests His limitless grace. His love for us **“while we were yet sinners”** will, through the endless ages, be to the praise of His glory. For **“where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.”**

The holy angels know something of the power and glory and majesty and holiness of God; but only a redeemed sinner can know His grace.

We deserved judgment, but God’s grace saved us. Your sin and mine and the sin of the world crucified the Lord Jesus. This is the story we shall tell throughout the endless ages, my Christian friend. Before principalities and powers we shall make known **“the manifold wisdom of God.”** We shall be kept busy in eternity, telling the angels and cherubim and seraphim and archangels what the grace of God has done for us.

Are you not glad you are a Christian, a member of the bride of Christ, which is His body? My unsaved brother, will you not this moment bow the knee before Him who loved you and died for you, that He might bestow upon you the riches of His grace? At any moment the church may be complete. At any moment the Lord may take His bride, forever to be with Him. Will you not let the Holy Spirit make your body His temple? If you will, then you will be able to sing, with the Apostle Paul, the praise of Him who loved us and gave Himself for us — now and forevermore: **“Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.”** (Ephesians 3:21).

~ end of chapter 10 ~

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