

Ephesians

An encyclical letter from the heart of CHRIST
through the heart of Paul to the heart of the Church of all time

by

Walter C. Wright

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CHAPTER EIGHT

THE CALLING AND DESTINY OF THE CHURCH

WE HAVE SPOKEN of the origin, the constituents, and the relationships of the Church: we now enquire as to her calling and destiny.

The Church has been called into being to express a series of divine ideas. This may not be a complete statement of the calling of the Church; but it is a point of view which the content of this Epistle suggests to the mind. No human language is capable of giving adequate expression to the intent and content of those ideas. Perhaps it is because of the inadequacy of human speech to express divine thoughts that the Scripture writers have so often resorted to similes, and fallen back upon figures of speech.

In this incomparable Epistle, the Apostle uses three figures of speech to express three of these divine ideas. He speaks of a body, and of a building, and of a bride. This Epistle, as no other letter of the apostle Paul, gathers about the revelation of the "**mystery**" of the Church. It would be fitting therefore to contemplate discursively the subject of the Mystical CHRIST, and to make specific inquiries as to that Body of which He is the Head. And in this connection, we call to mind the startling and astonishing declaration of the same apostle, where he says that "**as the body is one, and hath many members . . . so also is Christ**" (I Corinthians 12:12).

Now, how are we to understand what is meant by the declaration that the Church is the Body of CHRIST? What is a body for? What is the human body for? The body can be decorated and dressed up, but it was not made for that. The body can enjoy an ascending and descending scale of sensuous pleasures, but it was not made for that - not primarily. The body can indulge repose, but that is not the highest aptitude of the body. What is the body for? The body was made to maintain contacts with the physical order; to express personality; and to accomplish tasks. Thus it is with the Body of CHRIST.

But the Apostle uses a second figure of speech.

The Church is spoken of not only as a body, but as a building. This idea is expressly stated at the close of chapter 2. Allusion has already been made to this. He says that the Church "**is built**

upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone"; and in that in Him "all the building being fitly framed together groweth into an holy temple in the Lord." And then he adds: "**In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.**"

There are three ideas connected with a temple - access, worship, and fellowship. Or, to put it another way - approaching GOD; extolling GOD; sharing GOD.

With the entrance of sin into the world, access to GOD ceased to be a natural and easy thing; and it is only possible by the altar and the priest. Not, however, the altar of Judaism, and not the altar of Roman Catholicism; but nevertheless by altar and priest. "**We have an altar,**" says the Writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, "**whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle**" (Hebrews 13:10); and again: "**we have such an high priest, who is set on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens**" (Hebrews 8:1).

But the temple not only offered a way of approaching GOD, it offered also a means of extolling GOD. The access was with a view to worship. The excuse for a sometimes lavish expenditure upon ecclesiastical architecture is that the building is an emblem of devotion and an aid to it. The vaulted dome suggests to the soul the spaciousness of the divine mind; the steeple directs the thoughts of men to Heaven; the stained glass windows assist to hush and quiet the spirit.

David felt that the temple which Solomon was to build must be worthy of GOD (I Chronicles 22:5). In the temple GOD is extolled. As it is put in the Psalm: "**In his temple doth every one speak of his glory**" (Psalm 29:9). And not only did the temple give a means of access and a stimulus to worship, it also brought the people together at the stated intervals in a happy fellowship. But while all of these ideas may have been in the writer's mind, that which he is expressing is no one of them, but something which is the real meaning and explanation of all of them - the presence of GOD in the temple.

"In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit" (2:22).

This then is the second figure. First: a body for His expression; and then a building for His habitation.

But the Apostle also speaks of the relation of CHRIST to the Church under the figure of husband and wife. And it is perhaps a warning to us not to press analogies too far, in that in the very same passage the two figures of the body and the bride are used alternately.

The race is scattered into many fragments: it has been since Babel; but humanity finds itself everywhere in two parts. And these two parts are one. And the insistent human quest is for a counterpart. Nearly all our fiction bears witness to this physiological and psychological fact, and appeals to it. The universal consciousness of the race registers an incompleteness. The man is incomplete apart from the woman: the woman is incomplete without the man. The Church is sometimes viewed as having official relations to CHRIST, but this is essentially a personal relationship. The choosing of a wife is the most individual affair of human life: it is a choice which is essentially conditioned upon the man himself. *

In each of these three figures, and not in that of husband and wife only, we have the suggestion of incompleteness.

There is, so to speak, a mutual and reciprocal incompleteness.

- The body is incomplete without the head, but the head is incomplete without the body.
- The worshiper needs the temple as an aid to his devotions; but of what purpose is a temple without a worshiper?
- The woman is incomplete without the man, but the man is incomplete without the woman.

And these things are analogies; and the Apostle brings CHRIST into the incompletesses. The believer is unspeakably incomplete without CHRIST; but that is only one side of the spiritual fact which the Epistle is designed to reveal. CHRIST is incomplete without the Church. The Church is His fullness. He needs us in order to complete Himself. That is the unspeakably sacred and exalted calling of the Church.

* Someone may ask: "How can the Church be spoken of as the Body of CHRIST and also as the Bride of CHRIST?" Two answers may be given to that question. (1) The Church is explicitly spoken of as the Body of CHRIST, but is never said to be His Bride. The husband and wife relationship, however, is employed to illustrate the close and intimate relationship of believers to CHRIST (5:25-33), and also of the subjection of the Church to her Lord (5:22-24). (2) We must remember also that analogies must not be pressed too far. Israel is spoken of as GOD's first-born (Exodus 4:22; Hosea 11:1), and also under the symbolism of a wife (Jeremiah 3:14; 31:32; Hosea 2:19). The two analogies are contradictory; nevertheless both are used.

We have considered the origin, the constituents, the relationships, and the calling of the Church; let us finally contemplate her destiny. Let me set out seven passages of Scripture as a background to this inquiry.

"And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day. And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:39-40).

"Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know" (John 14:1-4).

"And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:10-11).

"For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we

which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord (I Thessalonians 4:16-17).

"Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure (I John 3:2-3).

"And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshiped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years" (Revelation 20:4)

"And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away" (Revelation 21:1-4).

If I could but release what is contained in those sentences of revelation, I would gladly lay down my pen and let them speak for themselves; for in them there is disclosed, at least in part, the destiny of the Church. The material universe is very vast, and all that we know of its origin is that it came into existence by the will of GOD. The earth, the abode of man, as it now is, came into existence almost recently; and man has existed only a few millenniums. And yet the purposes of the Creator center around man as around no other creation of GOD. There were other orders of beings, celestial beings, before the creation of man.

The belief in these celestial intelligences took hold of the mind of pagan philosophers, and were probably distortions of a revelation made to primitive humanity. The Scriptures are not silent concerning them. The place which these heavenly hierarchies will have in the eternal kingdom of GOD has not been revealed; but we are told that they will be subordinate to the Church (1 Corinthians 6:3).

What is the destiny of the Church? What we have seen as to the origin, the constituents, the relationships, and the calling of the Church has made it abundantly evident that the Church is inseparably, and therefore eternally, related to CHRIST in the closest of bonds. If, then, we would ascertain the destiny of the Church, we may do well to follow the fortunes of CHRIST.

In seeking to ascertain the destiny of the Church by following the fortunes of CHRIST, we commence at Bethlehem and remember that He became a Man. And He did not assume our humanity as a robe of flesh, which He could discard at will; the choice was a deliberate and an irrevocable one. We do not affirm therefore that He was Man, but that He is Man. And because humanity is eternal for Him, it is therefore and consequently eternal for us. In the Church, humanity will be eternally and universally enthroned.

But we follow the fortunes of CHRIST a step further. What was the last view that the world had of CHRIST? The last time that the world saw Him, He hung upon a cross between two thieves; and they took Him down and placed Him in a tomb, and they sealed the tomb: and the world has never broken the seal; the world has never seen His face again. He was rejected of men (Isaiah 53:3).

Has the world recalled its verdict? Has the world changed its mind? The world is offering Him a good deal of patronage today; but He is not soliciting the patronage of the world. Is this the day of CHRIST's triumph, or of His rejection? Many will say, This is the day of His gradual triumph: He is increasingly finding a place and a larger place in the life of the world.

I believe that is contrary to the teaching of Scripture, and equally contrary to the experience of life. It is that belief that accounts for the compromising attitude of the Church to the world. And it is logical. If the world is improving, and is becoming partially Christian, then the Church must be increasingly tolerant of the world. And it is thus no longer true, as it once was, that friendship with the world is enmity with GOD. If the world is changing its attitude to GOD, then the Church must change its attitude to the world. But there is, and there always has been, and there will continue to be to the end, a world spirit which is opposed to the spirit and the government of GOD.

Observe that it is in the hour of CHRIST's exaltation, as the seventh trumpet sounds, and as the elders in Heaven fall upon their faces and offer up exultant praise, because He is assuming the prerogatives of power - it is in that hour that the nations are "**angry**." And that same spirit will smolder through the millennial age, and once again express itself in violent and concentrated rage. (Revelation 11:17-18; 20:7-9; cf. Psalm 2).

The teaching that the world is gradually being Christianized has a twofold effect upon those who entertain it:

- (1) It concentrates the thought of the Church upon this present world;
- (2) it takes the eye of the Church away from heavenly things and the world to come.

But the Church is consistently exhorted to repudiate the spirit of the world, and to share the rejection of CHRIST.

And there is a connection between all this and the destiny of the Church. It is the Church which has shared in the shame that will share in the glory. The one is a preparation for the other; and there will be countless thousands in the Body of CHRIST who will have known what it is to share in the sufferings and rejection of Him whom the world has despised.

There is a day of triumph coming for CHRIST; and the Church will share in that triumph. Just how, we may not know; but we may suppose that the Church will be active in the administration of the affairs of the earth in the millennial kingdom.

On one occasion. CHRIST said to the disciples: "**Verily, I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye**

also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matthew 19:28). I do not know whether this particular promise may have been spoken to the apostles as representative Israelites - as potential members of the Church; but I am sure that the Church will follow the fortunes of CHRIST, and that when He rules, the Church will rule; and when He triumphs, the Church will triumph.

But the Church will not only enjoy an elevation of place; she will also enjoy an elevation of character, which is far better.

The apostle John says: "**We shall be like him**" (I John 3:2). And we read in the Epistle to the Romans that "**whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son**" (Romans 8:29).

But there is one eternal prerogative of CHRIST which we have not mentioned - the eternal priesthood (Psalm 110:4). In what sense, or in what way, will the Church share in that? We must remember that the priesthood of CHRIST is not limited to humanity. We read in the Epistle to the Hebrews: "**It was therefore necessary that the patterns of things in the heavens should be purified with these; but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these**" (Hebrews 9:23). We may wonder then whether, just as Israel is ideally the priest nation on earth, even so the Church may be the perpetual expression of priesthood in the universe at large.

But let us follow the fortunes of CHRIST one step further. It is the very last glimpse which the Scriptures give us into the ages that are to come.

"Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father: when he shall have put down all rule, and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. For he hath put all things under his feet. But when he saith all things are put under him, it is manifest that he is excepted, which did put all things under him. And when all things shall be subdued unto him, then shall the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all" (I Corinthians 15:24-28).

Will this mean a revelation of GOD which the Church and the universe have never had before? Is there some connection between this and the words of the Revelation? when it says:

"And I heard a great voice out of heaven, saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God" (Revelation 21:3).

~ end of chapter 8 ~

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