

## **Ephesians**

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

by

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### **CHAPTER SEVEN**

#### **THE ORIGIN, CONSTITUENTS, AND RELATIONSHIPS OF THE CHURCH**

**"For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles" (3:1).**

THE APOSTLE PAUL is trying to pray; but before he completes the sentence in which he is about to announce his prayer, his mind is called back to the unique character of the stewardship which had been entrusted to him as the Prophet of the Mystery; and his letter runs off into an extended parenthesis which is sustained until verse 13 of this third chapter. (cf. vv. 1 and 13.) Is it the word Gentile that turns his thought?

As we review history from GOD's point of view, we see that the course of time has been marked off into periods, some of them of great length, some of shorter duration, which have been distinguished from other periods by at least three things:

- (a) by the special character of the revelation given,
- (b) by the peculiar moral responsibilities associated with them,
- (c) by the particular action of the divine government exercised.

By an accommodation of language, these periods have been called dispensations, because there has been dispensed by GOD a special character of stewardship in each of them, which has distinguished them from the rest.

And these dispensations gather men into groups or companies, as having lived together in them and exercised their stewardship in connection with the special responsibilities involved.

Perhaps this may be made clearer by approaching it from another direction. In that very familiar and incomparable passage on the resurrection in the latter part of the First Corinthian letter, the apostle Paul is careful to announce that every man will be raised in his own order.

The expression is a military term. The word also means "*rank*": it also means "*band*." It seems to be intended to convey the idea of regiments or companies. It is in such a sense of the word that the apostle emphasizes the fact that believers will be raised up in their own "order," "rank,"

"band." In the resurrection the saints will find their place in their own company.

The suggestion then that comes to us from this expression is that these are ranks, or orders, or companies of saints; but the text does not indicate upon what principle these associations will be formed.

There is, however, one tie which in the nature of things binds the children of GOD together into groups or companies. Each dispensation represents a section of humanity which has upon it the impress of some special phase of the divine government.

Let me illustrate: In Revelation 6, at the opening of the fifth seal, there is a company of martyrs spoken of who have already died: these martyrs are represented as speaking. **"And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?"** (Revelation 6:10). But they are bidden to wait for the completion of their "company."

**"And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellow servants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled."** They were waiting in their graves for the completion of their company.

In the next chapter we read of another company, or possibly the same company - those who had come out of **"the great tribulation."** They had witnessed and suffered under conditions which were peculiar to the times in which they lived, and they are linked together as one company by this tie (Revelation 7:9-17).

Now the Church of this present age forms a unique company in the ranks of redeemed humanity; and the apostle is disclosing in this Epistle to these Gentile Christians the nature of that singular fellowship into which they have come. They have been brought into a relationship with CHRIST which is entirely new. The secret which **"in other ages was not made known"** but had now been revealed was this: a new spiritual fellowship had been formed. **"That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel"** (v. 6).

Now let there be no mistake or confusion here. That the Gentiles would participate in the blessings of redemption had been abundantly revealed. In Romans 15 the Apostle quotes passage after passage from the Old Testament Scriptures looking to the blessing of the Gentiles (Romans 15:9-12). Or again, the Evangelist Matthew quotes from Isaiah: **"Behold my servant, whom I have chosen; my beloved, in whom my soul is well pleased: I will put my spirit upon him, and he shall shew judgment to the Gentiles"** (Matthew 12:18). And we could multiply these quotations indefinitely.

But while the Gentiles had been invited to participate in the covenant blessings, hitherto they had come into covenant relationship with GOD through Israel. And this special relationship in which the Jew and the Gentile were to come together in one Body, to be conincorporate in CHRIST, had been kept a secret thing.

Let us therefore enquire what this Epistle, and other parts of the Scriptures, teach us in general outline as to the Church.

The Church is an *ecclesia*, that is it is a "*called-out*" body.

In that sense Israel also was a church; indeed the Scripture speaks of the "**church in the wilderness**" (Acts 7:38). But Israel was a national church. The body of CHRIST is an international church.

Israel was a called-out nation: the body of CHRIST is a people called out from among the nations.

Let us ask ourselves then concerning the Church as to her origin, her constituents, her relationships, her calling and her destiny.

What then is the origin of the Church? From what has been said, it is evident that the Church of this present age, the mystical Body of CHRIST, was not in existence in the Mosaic age; indeed the secret as to GOD's purpose regarding such a body had been hidden from the ages and generations which had gone before (Romans 16:25-26).

We have seen, moreover, that when JESUS CHRIST came into the world He accepted the order of things as He found it as to the special privileges of Israel. He was "**a minister of the circumcision**"; He came to confirm the promises made to the fathers as well as to fulfill them; He sent His messengers out to the lost sheep of the house of Israel; He bade them not to go into the way of the Gentiles nor to enter into the Samaritan cities, and in general He confined his ministry to His own people.

Furthermore, the disclosure was not even made to the twelve apostles: the revelation of this secret was given to the apostle Paul (Colossians 1:24-28; Galatians 2:2). The Church then was not formed during the earthly life of CHRIST: He did not "found" the Church in the days of His flesh.

It has been commonly believed that the Church was formed, as to its first nucleus, on the Day of Pentecost.

If this be so, then it was a Jewish church, responding to a Jewish appeal on Jewish grounds. And the appeal is so Jewish in its character that the question has been raised by some as to whether we must not look to a later date for the beginning of the Church on earth. If then the Church was not in existence during the Old Testament ages; if it was not formed during the earthly life of CHRIST; if, moreover, a diversity of opinion may exist as to its being brought into being on the Day of Pentecost. what date shall we set for its origin?

Whenever the Church may have come into existence in the course of time, her conception is infinitely remote, even before the foundation of the world. The Church looks back into the eternities for her origin. That which the Psalmist declares as to the mystery of the members of his own body is true also as to the members of the mystical Body of CHRIST. "**In thy book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of**

**them**" (Psalm 139:16).

The Psalmist was speaking of the building up of a body: the Apostle also is speaking of the building up of a body. The Church is about to be born. The resurrection morning will be the birthday of the Church.

JESUS CHRIST was the first-begotten from the dead.

We have spoken of the origin of the Church: what then are her constituents? Who are they who constitute her membership?

In John 6 we hear CHRIST ringing the changes upon the Gospel bells. As we listen to the music we catch the tones of the inclusiveness, the exclusiveness, and the conclusiveness of the Gospel call. **"And this is the will of him that sent me, that everyone which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life, and I will raise him up at the last day."**

I am not unmindful of the fact that these words, as indeed almost every word in the Gospel narrative, were spoken to Israelites and that in the earthly ministry of CHRIST there is an inevitable Jewish emphasis. But in every Gospel, and particularly in the Gospel of John, we hear CHRIST speaking in universal tones and expressing universal truths. They are words for all time and for humanity as a whole.

We may say then unhesitatingly that the Church is constituted of those who, in this present age, have caught a vision of CHRIST, who have seen the Son and believed on Him. This is the inclusiveness of the Gospel. And yet the very statement of the inclusiveness draws the lines.

Look at it again. He does not say "every man"; He says every man who sees and believes. It is indeed everyone; but it is everyone who has sight and faith. Here then is the first suggestion of exclusiveness.

But it is further modified. Later on, in the same connection, we hear him saying: **"No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day."** Here is a conspiracy of co-operation, between the Persons of the Trinity. The Father draws to the person of CHRIST, and it is by the ministry of the Spirit.

But notice further the conclusiveness of the Gospel call. **"All that the Father giveth me shall come to me . . . 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 . . . Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me"** (John 6:37, 39, 45).

But turn back again to verse 40 in this chapter of John and observe how the inclusiveness, the exclusiveness, and the conclusiveness of the Gospel call are condensed into one sentence. **"Every one"** - inclusiveness; everyone who **"seeth"** and **"believeth"** - exclusiveness; **"I will raise him up"** - conclusiveness.

But what kind of men are they who see and believe? All of them are found in one class. It is only

sinner who become saint. Over the doorway into sainthood are written these words:

**"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."**

The Church then is constituted of those who, in this present age, have seen the Son and have believed on Him, having been drawn by the Father, with the promise and prospect of eternal life - of sinners who have been called to be saints.

But from whom have they been called?

Here is one of the wonders and glories of the Church. This elect company is called out from the heterogeneous mass of humanity. One might indeed conclude that the call was a promiscuous one. Even in the Book of Acts we have little more than a suggestion of the length to which this principle of grace would go. They were religious Jews and proselytes who crowded the synagogues: they were devout and honorable women who attended to Paul.

Cornelius, the first Gentile convert to be singled out, was one that "**gave much alms... and prayed to God alway**" (see Acts 2:5; 10:2, 7; 17:4, 17; 10:34-35). We perhaps hardly wonder at this, that GOD should stoop down to the morally leprous and loathsome to lift them up to such unspeakable heights - this, from our point of view, is grace indeed.

But not only all moral but all religious, ritual, racial and social distinctions are broken down at the cross of CHRIST and in the constituency of the Church (I Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11).

There was a difference between Jew and Gentile in the Mosaic age; there will be a difference in the millennial age, but now there is "**no difference**," for all have sinned; and there is no difference, for all are one in Christ Jesus. This then is the constituency of the Church.

When we speak of the Church, we are not referring to an organization, but to an organism. The Church is a secret society: we do not know who the members of the Church are. We can ascertain the constituents of a local church, but not of the Church of GOD.

When, it may be asked, will the Church be complete? We cannot answer that question. Like everything else connected with the Church, it is a secret hidden with GOD. But someone may say: Will not the Church be complete at the time of the Rapture? We cannot say as to that, and it is well not to try to be overwise in matters of that kind.

Are there not tribulation saints? May not they be members of the Body of CHRIST? May it not be that the first resurrection is progressive and is prolonged over an extended period of time? These are questions the answers to which are largely hidden in the secret counsels of GOD. There is a passage however in Revelation 20 which seems to connect the "**tribulation**" saints with the first resurrection (Revelation 20:4-5). On these things it is fruitless to dogmatize.

We have considered the origin and the constituents of the Church; let us briefly speak of her relationships. Let me suggest three:

- (1) A relationship to CHRIST; a mystical relationship.
- (2) A relationship to her fellow members; an interdependent relationship.
- (3) A relationship to the world; a detached relationship.

We have seen already in this Epistle how that the Church is spoken of under the figure of speech of a temple for the habitation of GOD, and how she is declared to be the Body of CHRIST. And not only so; but the fullness of CHRIST.

We will see in a later study the similitude of husband and wife. The relationship of the Church to CHRIST is of the most sacred, intimate and indissoluble kind. He is, moreover, through the Church seeking a completeness of self-expression. This is one of the most insistent instincts of humanity; and since man is made in the image of GOD, we must not be surprised if GOD also is seeking this.

He has expressed Himself in the material universe; He has expressed Himself in a sinless human life; He is now seeking one more expression of Himself in the Mystical Body, which is the Church. There is a sense in which CHRIST waits for His completeness upon the completion of the Church: He has chosen to condition Himself thus.

But the Church sustains not only a relationship to CHRIST; she sustains also a relationship to her fellow-members, and this is an interdependent relationship. We depend one upon another for a common motility. It is not only for the accomplishment of a common task that we are interdependent, but for the expression of a complete and vigorous life.

The body is one and has many members. Moreover, the health of the entire body is impaired by the sickness of one member: we can raise or lower the temperature of the Body of CHRIST, and the normal functioning of the body depends upon the health of every part (I Corinthians 12:26). This functioning is controlled by the Spirit for the edification of the Church (I Corinthians 12:4-11), and the members are to have a "**care one for another.**" To this end "**gifts**" are bestowed; "**ministries**" are exercised and "**workings**" are evidenced.

All these are to be expressions of interdependent relationships, for GOD has "**set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him.**" This is the Church's relationship within her own membership.

The third relationship which the Church sustains is to the outside world, and that is a detached relationship. "**If any man love the world,**" says the Apostle, "**the love of the Father is not in him**" (I John 2:15); and again we hear another apostle saying: "**Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God**" (James 4:4).

And it is in agreement with this that the Lord JESUS says of the disciples, "**They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world**" (John 17:16).

What then do the Scriptures mean by "**the world**" in such passages as these?

Do they mean the planet on which we live and the material things about us? Sometimes these are included, but the word in these connections always has a moral complexion and tone. How shall

we define the "**world**" in that sense? We may speak of it as "*the social consciousness of the race expressing itself in all the relations of human life without reference to GOD.*" This is the world from which the Church is divorced.

The question may be asked: Do the saints of all ages bear the same relationship to CHRIST and to one another?

There is one thing that undoubtedly cements them all: they all exercise faith.

A statement at the close of Hebrews 11 may suggest that the Writer had this in mind. "**And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise; God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.**" But the apostle Paul is very explicit where he says: "**Seeing it is one God which shall justify the circumcision by faith, and the uncircumcision through faith**" (Romans 3:30).

In that the saints of all ages are alike. And not only are the saints of all ages cemented together by a common faith, but all will share together in a common triumph and consummation. That does not, however, imply that all will sustain a common relationship to CHRIST. It would seem that Israel will always be an earthly people and that the Church will always be a heavenly people.

There may also be other relationships and spheres of privilege and service for the saints of ages which are past, and of the age to come, who are neither of Israel or of the Church. These things are in the counsels of GOD.

~ end of chapter 7 ~

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