

DUDLEY'S MONTHLY MESSAGE

FEBRUARY 2025 | EPHESIANS 3:1-21

Increasingly, I am being asked about the state of the church. Most of the questions I hear are coming from the United States, so my answers are more related to the church in the Western Hemisphere than the global church. Given that it is a huge subject, this is the first of three planned articles related to it.

WHAT IN THE CHURCH IS GOING ON?

It is common to hear someone say, "What in the world is going on?" Since the health of the world is dependent on the church, the better question relates to the church. There has been a lot happening with denominational splits, scandals among leaders, pastors renouncing the plain values of Scripture, private Christian colleges and universities closing, the rising number of people disaffiliating from church, and the appearance of deconstructionism. So, "***What in the Church is going on?***"

To many, the church is irrelevant to the real dynamics of life. It is where

the weak go to find help in their estimation. Paul had a different view. In his final address to the elders of the church in Ephesus, he exhorted:

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

Acts 20:28, ESV

Jesus paid with His own blood for the church, and it is precious to Him. It is not one of man's creations.

Elders who take care of the flock do well to remember that it is not about them. But some will object and point out the flaws that have been created by man and conclude that the church is simply a religious institution that is led by humans and subject to the foibles of self-centered leaders. Often we talk of the visible and invisible church. These are not two different entities. The visible church is that which we on the earth view with all the structures and organizations connected to it. The invisible church is the one God sees. The visible church has people in its structures that are not true believers in Christ. The invisible church does not.

So let's try to define the church. Several metaphors are used in Scripture to describe it. In the Old Testament, it is the assembly. In the New Testament, it is the temple, the body of Christ, the bride, the redefined Israel of God, and the mystery now revealed:

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles— assuming that you have heard of the

stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known

to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places... Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Ephesians 3:1-10, 20-21

The church is the one new man consisting of Gentiles and Jews, commissioned to fulfill the mission Jesus began. It is not a new thing that God has a people on earth that represent His interest. Actually that was the plan from the beginning. Adam and Eve in a sense were the first church. Then of course there was the church in the wilderness who worshipped according to the covenant God made with Moses. So, there is a continuity of the Old Testament church and the New Testament. Israel was the church in the Old and the church is the Israel of the New. In that sense the church that was bought with the blood of Jesus is the restructured Israel. The Gentiles had no covenant with God and therefore no promises to claim. As Paul de-

scribes Gentiles, he says they were alienated from the commonwealth, strangers to covenant promises, and having no hope. This is the language of Israel's privilege. But, Jesus' blood brought the estranged Gentiles into the commonwealth, and even into the family of God. At the cross the wall that had separated Jews and Gentiles was destroyed; the hostility was crucified. One new man was created. It was believing Jews and believing Gentiles making up the people of God. The temple in Jerusalem has been surpassed by the temple which is the one new man. This new temple is mobile and always open to anyone who comes by faith. So the church is the redefined temple as well as restructured Israel. But the church is also restored humanity. Jesus was not only the ultimate Israelite who was obedient to the covenant, He was the last Adam who carried out the mandate to subdue the earth. The church is the corporate new Adam which is reconciled in relationship to God and restored in destiny with God's assignment for humanity. The church is God's primary instrument of expanding His rule on earth. Since the world is reeling from sin's guilt,

shame, and fear, the church is the perfect solution to humanity's dilemma.

It's a mystery that prior generations did not understand. The Old Testament saints knew of the promises, but now how they could be fulfilled through a fallen Israel. The revelation of the New Testament shows how the promise to Adam and Eve in the garden (crushing the head of the Serpent) is fuller in God's promise to Abraham as the family through which the crusher would come. Israel represented all humanity in revealing that no human could live up to God's expectations. Israel also produced the Seed that would obey the covenant and pay the price of Israel's and the world's failure. He is human, Jewish, and the final sacrifice. Those who believe in Him as the Messiah and Lord are His new people. They carry the message of good news - that which Israel hoped for has come. Sin has been forgiven. Satan's lies have been displaced by the Savior's truth. God has a new man on the earth, not just to till the garden, but to push back darkness, and bring light to the people of the world struggling against evil.

The people who were far off and hopeless have been brought near. The Jews who had the benefit of a covenant and saw Jesus as the new covenant were added to the family. Both the nations on earth and the angelic forces in heaven are astounded by the splendor displayed by God and making one new man. Jesus released a reconciling power when on the cross that makes Jews and Gentiles one. It also offers hope to any person or people who are estranged from God or each other. There is a new hope because of the new man.

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