

## The Miracle Called the Church

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“I Believe in the Church” Series

Ephesians 2:19-22

Just about every week I get two or three advertisements in the mail from some consulting group, or some company that is putting on a church-improvement seminar: *How to Organize Your Sunday School Better* or *How to Grow Past 200 Adults*. Just the other day, this is no joke, I got an advertisement from a company who was marketing jelly beans to the church that you could use as part of a fundraiser. I guess you would go around selling jelly beans. This company targeted churches with the spiritual meaning of jelly beans.

Oh, you didn't know jelly beans had a spiritual meaning? You poor, unenlightened person. The advertisement had a little nursery rhyme and I wish I could recreate it for you. But it went something like this:

Black is for the darkness of my sin;

White is for the cleansing of my soul within.

Red is for the blood Christ shed for me.

Blue is celebration – I'm set free!

Yellow is the sun that God created

And Orange tells me I am saved and I'm elated.

Now this may not be Shakespeare, Longfellow, or even Ogden Nash, but this is the kind of stuff I get in the mail. You may think I am joking, but we've received at least three advertisements in the last three months for "Assertiveness Seminars" just for church secretaries. Training executive assistants on how to be more aggressive; how to get their way with the boss. Every time I see one of those in my assistant's box, I pull it out and tear it up!

Do you know that there is a company that sells pastors canned sermons with illustrations and hymns tied to the sermons? It is marketed "for the busy pastor." That goes right into the garbage. I think, "Pastor, if you are too busy to actually study God's Word so that you can teach something that comes from your heart, you are too busy."

There is virtually no issue that is not covered today by some seminar or conference, just as you experience it, in business, in your particular profession. American churches are the most marketed to, best organized, most technically proficient group of churches in the history of the world.

And yet, it occurs to me as I look out on the state of the church in the US, in all honesty, not a lot of what we see requires the presence of God to explain. Follow me here, now. We do have the best technology that the church has ever had and the most sophisticated programs and best methodologies. And there are lots of five-year plans and goal-setting courses and management-by-objectives. And it is all mapped out like clockwork. But if you compare the 21<sup>st</sup> century American church with the explosive growth of the early church, with the impact of the early church on the Roman Empire, which shook the Empire to its foundations and eventually took over – if you begin to evaluate the church by one single criteria, "Does what

I observe require the existence and presence of God or not?” well then the early church could only be explained by the existence and presence of God and most of the American church does not require God at all.

We have the church analyzed, packaged and programmed and organized. In America we have committees and board structures. It is all so very tight and orderly. But where in the whole thing is God? You know, for a person who is looking for God. That’s what’s on our billboards: “Looking for God?” For a person who is looking for God, will they find him here or in one of the other churches around this city?

A lot of folks just throw up their hands in despair about the state of the church and they say, “Forget it. I am going to just try to pursue a relationship with God apart from [what they call] institutional religion.” They usually mean the fellowship of the church. “Forget the church,” they say. “It is hopeless. It is dysfunctional. Just give me Jesus, that’s it. Just me and Jesus. I will listen to Christian teaching on the radio or on television. I will read a book. But I can’t handle the church the way the church is.”

What is so intriguing about the apostle Paul, when you read his writings, is that he never gives up on the church. I’ve been doing a series called “I Believe in the Church” from the book of Ephesians. Ephesians is Paul’s Magnum Opus, his great testimony about his faith in the church, with all of its problems and all of its silliness and its marketing of jelly beans and its reliance on technique and organization. The New Testament is amazingly optimistic about the prospects for the church. The apostle Paul believed in the church.

Jesus believed in the church. He knew the church would have relational stresses and ego issues and would have lots of self-reliance and splits and all the rest. And yet, Jesus says about the church that even the gates of hell would not be able to stand up against the power of the church.

The church, we learned last week, is a new creation by God. Something that never existed in the history of the world. Church is more than a new creation. The church is a miracle. And I am going to talk about that today in a talk that I have titled, “The Miracle Called the Church.” Let’s pray.

*Ephesians 2:19-22 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*

Let me give you some of the larger context for the message I am going to be going through today. Ephesians 2 is sandwiched between two great prayers of the apostle Paul that serve as bookends for this chapter. If you look back to Ephesians 1, beginning in v. 18, the apostle Paul prays: *...that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints...* In particular, Paul is praying that we might know his *incomparably great power for us who believe*. In Ephesians 1 Paul prays that we could come to understand, to know, to have the eyes of our heart enlightened so that we

might grasp the power of God that is at work on our behalf. It is a prayer to know God's power. That's the first bookend.

Then, if you move ahead to Ephesians 3:17-19, Paul prays one other great prayer: *And I pray that you being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.* The apostle Paul, in this second great prayer, prays that we might have the power to grasp the extent of God's love. That you might be able to grasp the extent of God's power and you might be able to grasp the extent of God's love.

Now, the way that the apostle Paul communicates that we can grasp the extent of God's power and the extent of God's love is by looking at the miracle called the church. Because if the church is truly the church described here in Ephesians 2, then it can only be explained on the basis of God's power and God's love.

Let's go back to what I was attempting to say in the introduction. A church ought not to be able to be explained sociologically or merely in terms of human group dynamics. So many churches, even so-called successful churches, can almost be entirely explained in terms of basic social dynamics. People of a certain class - who work in certain occupations who have the same viewpoints and the same predispositions, who are of the same race, same socio-economics, have the same taste in music, the same values - gather together in this institution called the church. And there is nothing particularly miraculous, friends, when birds of a feather flock together. You can find the same thing around any high school lunch table.

The nerds all sit together and the athletes all sit together. The druggies all sit together. It doesn't require God to grow a so-called church based on group dynamic principles of like attracting like.

The miracle that Paul has been speaking about in Ephesians 2 is the formation of something totally unexpected in human terms – a group of people who would never be connected with each other unless God intervened, unless God broke in, unless God did something. Jew and Gentile, with all their historic animosities and racial hostilities formed together in one new creation. Not Jewish Gentiles – Gentiles who have decided to become Jews. Not Gentilized Jews – Jews who choose to eat a lot of Velveeta Cheese. That is, by the way, what I used to think of when I thought of Gentiles growing up. My sister and I said, “You know, I'll bet that Gentiles eat a lot of Velveeta Cheese and Wonder Bread and Kraft products.” That's actually what we thought about when we thought of Middle America from the New York perspective. “I'll bet people out there probably eat a lot of Kraft stuff like Kraft Macaroni and Cheese.”

But what Paul is talking about is not Jews becoming Gentiles or Gentiles becoming Jews. He is talking about this miraculous thing, this thing that requires the intervention of God; he is talking about the new creation called the church. International, interracial, multi-cultural.

Let me put it in a slightly different form. The church is not just called to preach good news. But the church is itself supposed to be good news. See, it is one thing to talk about reconciliation and Almighty God having the power to reconcile men and women to himself and to reconcile people to each other. It's one thing to talk about and preach reconciliation.

It is quite another thing to walk the walk, to connect with people who are different from you and actually pray together and worship together and relate together and to love and to forgive and to bear with and to forbear and to laugh and cry with people who you would never humanly connect with - who are coming from really different places than you are – and to connect at the deepest possible level with different kinds of people. That's not just preaching good news, that's being good news.

Nothing gives the gospel, in my mind, more credibility than when the reconciling power of God is fleshed out in the community of God's people. When two people have a really difficult marriage, when they have hurt each other, when they have sinned against each other, when they are thinking of getting divorced, when two people have no basis in this world for hope for their marriage, and yet in the context of the church, these two people are reconciled. They fall back in love with each other. Their marriage is saved and restored and becomes life giving. When that kind of thing happens, friend, when African Americans and whites, Asians and Hispanics, young people and old people, upper class people and folks coming off the streets, when Jews and Gentiles come together, there's the miracle.

The early church was so effective because it was good news. It didn't just preach good news. It was good news of God's reconciling power. I want you to see this for a moment. I want to depart from the text we are going to look at in just a second in Ephesians 2. I want you to flip with me to Acts 13:1 because I want you to see the reconciling power of God at work in the early church and why the early church was what I would call a miracle and can't be explained on the basis of human technology or engineering. Acts 13:1 – *In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manean (who*

*had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.*

We see this miraculous diversity in the church at Antioch. And their leadership team, first of all, contained prophets and teachers. Acts 13:1 *In the church at Antioch, there were prophets and teachers.* If ever there were two gifts of the Spirit that were oil and water, it would be prophet and teacher. The prophets are always announcing what God is saying today. Whereas, the teacher is someone who is communicating what God has said once for all time. Prophets are fixated on this moment. Teachers are concerned about all moments. Prophets tend to be mystical. Teachers tend to be rational. Prophets tend to be random, they pull together things that the teacher says, "how do those two things go together?" Teachers tend to be logical, orderly, systematic. These are two groups that often don't get along. Prophets are often accusing teachers of being unspiritual, of quenching the Spirit. Teachers are often accusing prophets of being wacko, of unscrewing their heads. Miracle of miracles – prophets and teachers serving together side by side encouraging each other.

And we see the multi-cultural, multi-racial make-up of this leadership team. Barnabas is a Jewish Levite from Cyprus. Simeon – here's an interesting person. You should underline him in your Bible. Simeon, called Niger – Niger was a nickname for Black. He is presumably a Black African. And if you cross reference this guy, (if you are taking notes, you might want to jot down Mark 15:21 and Romans 16:13), this man Simeon called Niger is very likely the man who carried Jesus' cross. He was commandeered by Roman soldiers when our Lord Jesus fell under the weight of his cross. This man Simeon, or Simon, was



commandeered to carry the cross. Some believe that moment of carrying the cross was the moment of Simeon called Niger's conversion.

And then we have Lucius, a Roman from North Africa. And Manaen, who was brought up with – the text could mean a foster brother of - Herod the tetrarch, the same Herod that put John the Baptist to death and who participated in the trial of Jesus. And finally, you have Saul, who was a Pharisee. So you have Blacks and whites; Jews and Gentiles; royalty and commoners; priests and lay people; a man who carried the cross of Jesus and a friend of the man who was partly responsible for sending Jesus to the cross. Multi-cultural, multi-racial – a truly reconciled community.

What you want when someone looks at the church is for a person to say, "Only God could have done this thing, only God. There is no accounting for the blessing, there is no accounting for the grace, there is no accounting for the power or the influence, only God could have pulled that off. That's what I pray for for the Columbus Vineyard. That people would look at this church and say, "You men and women are a testimony to the power and the love of God. We cannot explain you apart from God."

Well, the apostle Paul, flipping back to Ephesians 2, uses three pictures or models in describing this miracle called the church. He says in v. 19 *Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people, members of God's household...* he goes on to say in v. 21 to say, *...in him [that is, in Christ] the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy Temple in the Lord.* Three pictures: we are fellow citizens with God's people, namely we are members of God's kingdom; we are members of God's family; and, the third picture or

model, is that we are living stones in God's temple. I think the reason why Paul used three pictures is because no one picture would have fully captured the miracle called the church.

So Paul begins in v. 19 saying, *Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens*. Paul never tires of reminding Christians of where they came from. It is so important to keep underlining this for believers. To remember where you came from. That to become a Christian requires a decisive break and could only be the result of God's intervention. That salvation is not just something that we choose to do, but if you remember where you came from you will understand that only God could have made this change in your life. There is a major change, a major break. Paul underlines it over and over again. You were this, now you are that. You were spiritually dead. You were enslaved. You were down in the pits. But now because of God, you have been raised up with him in heavenly places. You have been made spiritually alive. You were separated from Christ. You were excluded from the community of Israel. You were without hope, without God in the world. But now you are members of God's kingdom. You are part of God's family. You are stones in God's temple.

First-generation Christians understand this. They understand becoming a Christian is the result of an amazing change that takes place in a person's life. First-generation Christians grasp how far you can be from God, how messed up you can be, how empty. A first generation Christian remembers what it was like to have all the stuff, to have the house and the great job, and the cars, and the mini-van, to have a closet full of clothes and more shoes than you ever could wear, and still be empty. Some of you are in that place today. By any measurable standard, you have made it. In terms of the history of humanity, you are in the 99.9th percentile. You may not realize it, but in material wealth, you are at the top of the

top. I have been around the world. I see how people live in India. They live in places where it would be a major step up to move their whole family into one of those self-storage units like they have south of here on Cooper Road. That's how most of the world has lived for most of history.

Some of you know right now the feeling of having a lot of stuff and still being empty. First generation Christians sure remember this – having a college degree, being well fed, having more clothes than you can fit into your closets and your drawers. First generations Christians know how radical it is to become a Christian.

But by the second generation, the children of believers, the sharp line of moving from death to life is not so clear. Kids of believers, well, you grew up in the church. You grew up around the Bible and talk about Jesus and tithing and blessing our food before meals and Veggie Tales cartoons and singing Christian songs. And by the third generation, that radical change has vanished. You have this mindset, “I was born a Christian.”

“No,” the apostle Paul is saying. “No one is born a Christian. You have to go through a naturalization process to become a citizen of the kingdom of God.” Everyone, Paul says, starts off as an alien, as a foreigner, as a stranger. There is an old saying, “God has no grandchildren, only children.”

By the second or third generation of Christians, we often don't see the miraculous in an individual's life. There is nothing particularly radical when you get down to the great-great-great-grandchildren of God. The question is asked, “Are you a Christian?”

“Oh, yes, yes...I am. I was born Roman Catholic.” Or Methodist, or Lutheran. I was born in the church called Vineyard. Or I was born a Baptist or Nazarene. My parents took me to church since I was a baby.

You may have been born Nazarene or born Vineyard or born Baptist, but you have to become a citizen, a naturalized citizen of the Kingdom of God. Nobody is born into the kingdom. Paul is talking about being a foreigner, an immigrant, an alien and then miraculously being made a full citizen.

Let me press this out a little bit. It is very possible to be a resident alien of some other country for years. To live in a foreign place, to be around citizens of that country, but never to be a full citizen yourself. A lot of people go to church and get their names on a church membership roll and sing in the choir or do church things. You can attend meetings as citizens. You can hold the same book in your hands as the citizens do. You can sing the same songs as the citizens do. But you are still an alien.

The New York Times just had an article this past week about a major change that took place in American immigration laws. It concerned this change in the laws regarding children adopted from another country. In the past, if American parents went over to China or to Russia or to Thailand to adopt a child, they would literally have to go through years of paperwork and processing in order to have that foreign born child become a naturalized American citizen. Mounds of paperwork and tens of thousands of dollars of legal expense were involved. There are cases where children who were born overseas and came to America when they were babies, lived in this country for decades, but, because they didn't

become naturalized citizens, got deported when they were in their 20s or 30s. They were sent back to the land of their birth rather than have the opportunity to stay with all the people they had grown up with.

That, to me, is a perfect picture of folks who are in the church, maybe for decades. They know the language of the church. They know the customs of the church. They become really, really familiar with the church, but they never become naturalized citizens of the kingdom.

Paul is saying here to be a citizen of the kingdom ruled by God, there has to be a moment in time when you swear allegiance to Christ and his government. You were born a citizen of a different kingdom, a different government. But there is a moment in time when you raise your right hand and say, "I am going to change my allegiance. I want to change my nationality. I want to from now on give my allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ. I want to surrender myself to his rule, to his kingdom, to his reign."

How do you know if you have become a naturalized citizen of Jesus' kingdom? One of the marks is that you are going to feel at home in this miracle called the church. I know it is a subjective thing. But citizens of the kingdom feel at home among God's people.

Over the years, as a result of various ministry opportunities, I have had a chance to visit a number of different countries and to enjoy the company of people in India, Russia, Sweden, Haiti, and Holland. I like visiting other cultures. I like seeing the way other people live. I enjoy visiting folks in their homes and eating their food. I like that. But I always, always

have the same feeling when the plane touches down in Columbus, Ohio and I walk down the jet way and my wife, Marlene, is waiting for me at the gate. There is this sigh of relief – it's good to be home. Oh, darling, it's good to be home.

When you are a citizen of the kingdom, you feel the same way about the church. You might enjoy your job. It may not be a drag for you. It may be energizing. You may have good relationships at work. Or you enjoy your school and your classmates and what you are learning. But bottom line, if you are a citizen of the kingdom, the church is your home. It is when you are with other Christians in the church when you are worshipping, when you are talking, when you are praying that you breathe this sigh of relief and say, "I am home. This is the place that I am most comfortable in. This is the place where I can relax."

Have you ever known that in the church? That is what the church is supposed to be, the place where you breathe the sigh of relief and say, "I like some of these other contexts, but, oh, this is my home." If you become a citizen of the kingdom, instead of always feeling tension around other Christians and like you are a little bit of an outsider, an alien or a stranger, instead you become an insider. You are a member of the kingdom. You are one of us.

Paul goes on and shares a second model, a second picture, of the church. We are citizens of God's kingdom, but we are also members of God's own family. And this to me takes the miracle of the church to the next level. Citizenship is primarily a legal thing. It is a matter of rights and privileges, laws and naturalization. But family is personal. Family is relational.

What does it mean, briefly, to be part of the family of God? This is huge, that the church is the family of God.

Well, it means first of all that God is your father. I don't know what your dad was like. Maybe he was always working. In some families, in order to just have bread on the table, Dad has to work two jobs. In some families, that is dad's identity. He is just a worker. He works and works and works.

Or maybe you grew up in a home where Dad was mostly angry. I have talked with people who say that their memories of Dad are of him sitting in his chair, brooding, with a scotch, staring at the TV, just seething below the surface. Or maybe sadly in your home, Dad was absent. He wasn't there. The founder of Vineyard, John Wimber, grew up without ever knowing his dad. His dad took off on the day he was born.

What does it mean to have God as your Father and to be part of God's family? Well, one thing it means is that God your father is accessible and available to you. V. 18, *For through him we both have access to the Father by one spirit.* This is, parenthetically, a great Trinitarian text. The three members of the Trinity are mentioned. *For through him, [Christ] we both [Jew and Gentile] have access to the Father by one Spirit.* If you want to understand a little theology of prayer, prayer is going to the Father through the Son by the Spirit. The Spirit enables us to pray. The Spirit gives us faith to pray, so we pray by the Spirit. Jesus is the mediator of our prayer. The only way you can ever come to God is through Christ. You cannot come to God directly. The entire New Testament is insistent on this point. The only way you can come to God is through Christ. And your prayers are directed to God the Father.

The apostle says, regarding the miracle of the church, that one of the miracles of being a part of God's family is that we have access to the Father, that our Father in heaven is available to us.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was a cardiologist in England and was then called to ministry. For about 40 years he was the senior pastor of Westminster Chapel in London. Dr. Lloyd-Jones had a wonderful illustration of God's availability and his accessibility to us – what v. 18 is talking about. He said, imagine a man who was the head of some major corporation. He is the CEO with thousands of employees. He is very, very busy. He doesn't handle all the details of the business, all the invoices, all the ordering. He has lots and lots of people working under him who take care of all the details of the business. He just meets with major clients and sees a few key reports – the chief financial officer, the chief executive officer, the heads of divisions.

And if you have some little detail about the business, like whether some department would do a Christmas gift exchange, you would not go to the chairman of this big company and ask his opinion. He doesn't have the time for that kind of thing. He is dealing with major acquisitions of foreign companies. His issue is the annual report. He doesn't even see a lot of the senior managers, they report to someone else.

But suddenly this very, very busy man hears a tap on his door and he puts his work aside because he recognizes that the tap at his door is coming from his little girl. She is a little toddler. And so he gets up from behind his desk and opens the door for his daughter. He



walks her into his big office. He picks her up and sits her down on his lap and talks with her for a little while. He plays with her. He opens up the desk drawer to see if there is anything interesting that she might want to play with. Everything is put to one side. Why?

Because this is his child. And children have access to good fathers.

Now our Father in heaven is perfect. He is accessible. He is available. Think about this. The God who made everything, the God for whom the stars are not even the size of a pea - the universe is as nothing before this infinite God - the miracle of being one of his family members is that you have access to your father and there is nothing too trivial, too small to bring before your Father in heaven. It's not as if he is only this busy corporate executive, who only can deal with great concerns. That's how a lot of people think about prayer. Oh, I will handle the little things. I will only come to God on the huge crises when my life is utterly falling apart, when a loved one is dying. That's when I will turn to God. Or when I have lost my job or when I am flat on my back.

Friend, if you have put your trust in Christ, if you are one of God's children, then you are missing out on one of the great privileges of access to your Father if you don't give your Father everything in your life, including those things that are so trivial. Let other people make fun of you because you pray before you get into the car and you invite God into your workouts at the gym. And you lay your hands on your kids every night to pray for them. Let other people make fun of you that you pray for everything that is trivial.

But you know something that they don't. They don't know access to the Father the way you do. They don't know his interest. They don't know the peace and freedom that comes from unburdening yourself. They walk around loaded down, anxious, irritable, and you walk around with peace.

When we talk about being a part of the family of God and having God as our father, that also means that our Father cares for us and protects us. Again, I don't know what your dad was like. Maybe he was utterly passive. Maybe he didn't have the ability to rise to the occasion, to protect you in your moment of need. Again, some of you grew up hardly knowing your dads because of divorce or separation. The wonderful thing about our heavenly Father and being a part of God's family is that God cares for us. He rises to the occasion. He actively gets involved in our lives. He intervenes on our behalf.

Let me tell you a story. When my son was five years old, he was playing in the car with the little girl next door. The car was in her driveway on a hill. Somehow they put the car in neutral and it rolled back down the driveway with the kids in it. It rolled out across the street and it smashed into a parked car across the street causing some significant damage.

My son, Daniel, jumped out of the car and ran into the house in tears, "Daddy, Daddy, look what I did."

I said, "Daniel, it's OK. Tell me what happened."

"Well, I was in the car with Lisa and we broke the car across the street."

I hugged him and said, “Its OK Daniel, Daddy will take care of it. Do you understand that you shouldn’t play in cars?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

So I said, “Daddy will take care of it.”

Well, the neighbor wasn’t home at the moment. But my son, Daniel, had a really sensitive heart and for the next ten minutes I watched him walk to the window and look outside at the car that was smashed and just burst into tears. He would walk away and then walk back to the window and see what he had done. He would just burst into tears again. And he was breaking my heart. I said, “Daniel, come here.” So he came over to me and I picked him up. I said, “Daniel, do you believe that Daddy is going to take care of this?”

He said, “Yes, Daddy.”

I said, “OK, now, you go along and play. Daddy will take care of this.”

Let me ask you adults, do you believe that when you have made a mess, when you are in trouble, when you have done something stupid, when you have broken your car or someone else’s car and you pray, you run to your Father in heaven, do you believe that your Father in heaven will take care of it? That’s what it means to have God as your Father.

Just one more quick thought before we look at the third picture. You know, when I think of being a part of the family of God and the miracle of the church, what excites me is that I get to have the most extraordinary set of brothers and sisters and spiritual dads and moms and sons and daughters. I don't know how weird your family was growing up. Mine ranked pretty hard on the weirdness scale. We were well above the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile of weirdness, right around where some of your families were. I remember wanting to be part of a really great family. I get that now in the miracle called the church. I get that. I get to be a brother with all of you. I get to be connected to people like the apostle Paul, Peter, Abraham, and Jacob. Doesn't it blow your mind to think about who is in your family? Isaiah, St. Francis, Mother Theresa, Dr. Martin Luther King – doesn't it blow your mind? John Calvin? Yeah, he's my bro.

Now, the third model of church that Paul mentions is God's temple. He says that we, the church, [v. 20] are *built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him, the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.*

Paul has spoken of us as citizens of God's kingdom, of members of God's family and now we are stones in God's temple. And I believe that Paul is increasing the miraculous nature of the church. The connection gets closer and closer together between the individual parts. As we think about God's kingdom, diverse people – Jew, Gentile, black, white, rich and poor – these diverse people are citizens. They are fellow country men connected by a common allegiance to their King. So we have diverse people.

But then the relationship between people gets closer. We move from citizens of a country to members of a family. We are brothers and sisters. We are mothers and fathers. We are sons and daughters. There is this strong bond of family connection. There is a family resemblance.

But no connection could be closer than the picture of the temple where we are all joined together, stone on stone, into one organic whole. There is almost no sense of individualism – of each doing our own thing our own way. Stone on stone, brick on brick. All separation is eliminated. Even our connection with God grows closer – God comes and fills the temple. The greatest miracle of all is that we people become the dwelling place of God.

And I believe that all of these pictures speak to the individualism in America today. We have virtually no concept of what the apostle Paul is trying to say about God building us together into this community and this organic whole, all of us together. We are so used to thinking in terms of me and my needs. And even when we think about church, it is really sort of a club that we voluntarily join, a religious club. But a club nonetheless that we join based on our preferences, our tastes and our conveniences. The church is a direct assault on American individualism.

The church that Paul is describing is a direct assault on the fundamental way that we Americans think about life where each of us is the final arbiter of truth for ourselves. In fact, you might say, friend, that much of the problem of Christianity in the United States is we simply do not understand the church. We do not understand that we cannot grow alone. That we were not designed to be Christians by ourselves. It is not only that we can't grow

alone, but we cannot have a testimony to God alone. Yes, you individually have a testimony regarding what God has done in your lives. Yes, you individually are witnesses at your jobs and in your families and neighborhoods and schools. But the testimony, the final defense of the gospel, is the church together, being a miracle, being a reconciled community.

So when Paul talks about the temple, he begins with the foundation. Notice the church is not the foundation. The church is not the source of truth. We don't build on ourselves. The apostle Paul says that we are built on – the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.

I heard Pastor Tony Evans once talk about waking up one day and having some major cracks in his bedroom. The whole wall was cracked. He hired a plasterer to come in and fix the cracks. The plasterer came in and fixed the crack, sanded it and painted over it. It looked really good. A month later, the cracks were back, he said, along with their cousins, aunts and uncles. The whole wall was cracked. He hired another plasterer who came in and fixed the cracks. A few weeks later the cracks ran from top to bottom – a deep crack. He invited a building contractor to come and take a look at the cracks in the walls.

The contractor said, “You don't have a problem with your walls.”

Tony Evans thought to himself, boy, did I invite the wrong guy in. “I can see cracks all over the place. What do you mean I don't have a problem with my walls?”

The contractor said, “You don't have a problem with your walls.”

Tony said, “Well, if I don’t have a problem with my walls, why are there cracks?”

The contractor said, “You have a problem with your foundation.”

A lot of churches have cracks all over the place that they are trying to patch up with another program, with another meeting, going here and there, looking for answers. Very often, the problem is the foundation. The church is not built upon the teaching of the apostles and prophets. In short, the church is not solidly built on the Bible. With people in the church who are earnestly trying to live out the Bible, to do what the Bible tells us to do, to have the character that we see in the Bible, the humility, the willingness to forgive, the forbearance with each other, the willingness to resolve conflict in a biblical way, going to people rather than talking about them, what the Bible teaches us regarding giving and tithing so that the folks in the church are really trying to do Bible. Praying for the sick, ministering to the poor, engaged in world missions.

Friends, this book, this is the foundation. If we start moving away from this, we will start having cracks all over the place.

And then Paul talks about the cornerstone. The cornerstone is of crucial importance to the building. It is part of the foundation, but it also holds the building steady. It sets the lines and it joins the walls together. The apostle Paul says that Christ is the chief cornerstone.

If you and I are going to have relationship with each other, if you and I are going to have relationship with the various kinds of folks here, the way that that is going to happen is only through Christ. The problem with most folks is that they try to relate to each other directly. I am going to find in you or you will find in me those things we like. We will try to find some natural connection based on our mutual shared interests, the way we both relate, a common background. Very often we see in each other things we can't relate to, areas that rub us the wrong way.

How can we be the reconciled community of God through Christ? If you are dealing with someone whom you are struggling with in the church, picture Jesus between you and them – the cornerstone who joins the two of you together. Can you relate to that person if Jesus were in the middle of the two of you? Could you forgive them if Jesus were sticking out his hand toward you and his other hand toward them? Could you speak well, if Jesus were in the room? If Jesus were standing there, would you gossip about them? Would you express judgment? It's Jesus who holds the whole thing together.



## **The Miracle Called the Church**

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**Rich Nathan**

**March 3-4, 2001**

**“I Believe in the Church” Series**

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