

THE IDENTITY OF THE CHURCH EPHESIANS 1:22-23

Like many of you I have a *smart* phone, a device that allows me to access a mind-boggling amount of information. I access that information by simply touching one of the 156 apps that I have downloaded onto my phone. A couple of those apps enable me to listen to *whatever* music I want *whenever* I want. A few apps show me exactly where to find the best restaurants and cafes wherever I may be. I have more than half a dozen apps that allow me to access the latest news, and almost ten that allow me to get the latest sports updates. I have five Bible apps, including one that enables me to read the Bible in twenty different versions and twelve different languages.

The reason I am able to do these and countless more things on my smart phone is not because all that information is stored in the device itself, but because it knows how to access that information. My phone is literally connected to a global set of computer systems numbering in the tens of millions, each of which are connected to each other, and each of which are accessible by every other computer and smart phone.

In other words, my phone is designed to *connect* and *receive*. It is a *receptacle* of information that comes from much bigger sources outside itself, yet it is able to upload that information and then dispense it with amazing speed and accuracy. And that's why my phone is a *smart* phone; that's why it is so cool and capable and useful.

This is the first of an eight-week series on the Church, and it is only logical that we begin this series by examining the identity of the church. What is the church all about? What makes it special? What makes it capable and competent? Why has God assigned the Church such a major role in His plans and purposes during this age?

The answers to these questions are all related to the Church's identity, and some of the most comprehensive instruction about the Church's identity comes from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. We are going to look at one portion in particular that succinctly and profoundly states what the church is. It is found in the context of a section of the letter in which Paul explains how he prays for his readers. And yet, the passage is really the climax of a parenthetical statement in which Paul exalts the Lord Jesus and specifically calls attention to His absolute sovereignty and power. I'd like to read the whole section before focusing on verses 22-23.

Verses 15-23. *¹⁵ For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, ¹⁶ I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, ¹⁷ that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, ¹⁸ having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which He has called you, what are the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His great might ²⁰ that He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. ²² And He put all things under His feet and gave Him as head over all things to the church, ²³ which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.*

The people who lived in and around Ephesus in the first century were acutely aware of spiritual powers. The city was teeming with self-proclaimed sorcerers, practitioners of black magic, and people who were skilled in the "magical arts." Many wore charms, amulets,

and bracelets that were thought to possess supernatural power and thereby ward off evil spirits or prevent illness.

Of course, their motivation for doing so was *fear*. They felt a need to protect themselves from being overpowered by malevolent spiritual forces. And even some of those who had put their faith in Jesus continued to be nagged by those fears. Paul was reminding these believers that, in reality, there was nothing to be afraid of, because every single spiritual power is subject to Christ. In Colossians we are told that those powers were defeated at the cross (2:15). Those spiritual powers may be stronger than human beings, but they are no match for Christ. The allusion in verse 20 to Christ being seated at the right hand of God in the heavenly realms is a reference to His absolute sovereignty, His unrivaled authority, and His total supremacy.

Paul expands on this further in the following verses. **Verses 22-23.** *²² And [God] put all things under His feet and gave Him as head over all things to the church, ²³ which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.*

Not only has Jesus been seated at the right hand of God in the heavenly realms, but God has put all things under His feet. Both of these images come from the Old Testament and have to do with being in a position of authority. In the ancient world, this image of things being placed under one's feet was used in the context of a military victory when enemies were completely conquered.

What's more, the tense of the verb (aorist) indicates that God's act of placing all things under Christ's feet is definitive and once-for-all. Paul is emphatically declaring that Jesus has been given all authority for all time, and that the entire universe is subject to Him. That includes the church.

Look at **verse 22b-23a.** *"And [God] gave Him as head over all things to the church, ²³ which is His body..."*

Please understand that "church," here, is not a reference to Emmanuel Bible Church or the Catholic Church or the Apostolic Church or any other local church or denomination. Paul is talking about the *universal* church comprised of *all* who have put their faith in Jesus Christ and, as a result, have been born again. That's the only church membership that ultimately matters because only members of the universal church will be living and reigning with Jesus in heaven forever. And, once again, you become a member of that church the moment you put your faith in Jesus.

Look at what Paul says about Jesus in relation to the church: *God gave Jesus as head over all things to the church.* To say that Jesus is the head of the church is to say that Jesus is the central Figure in the church's existence and that the church's identity is found exclusively in Him and what He has done for us. In the first part of this chapter, Paul declares that the church has been blessed in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ, and then He proceeds to name several of those blessings. Chosen by Him, adopted by Him, redeemed by Him, forgiven by Him. Lavished with His grace, given His inheritance, and sealed by His Holy Spirit. The church is solely what it is because of Jesus. Without Jesus, there is no church.

But it is not just about what Jesus has given us or done for us. Paul wants us to know that Jesus actually shares His identity with us. And He would know, for when Paul, then Saul, was persecuting the Church prior to becoming a follower of Christ, Jesus revealed Himself to Him on the road to Damascus in a blinding light and booming voice, saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*?" Not, "why do you persecute the church?" But "Why do you persecute *Me*?"

Jesus' identity is inextricably linked to the church. It is *His* church. He is the head of the church, and the church is His *body*. That body moves, functions, reacts, and responds under Jesus' direction, so that what the church does is ultimately an expression of Jesus' will. Which is why Paul would say at the end of **verse 23**, ²² *And [God] put all things under His feet and gave Him as head over all things to the church*, ²³ *which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all*.

You should be aware that this is *the* most difficult verse to interpret in the entire letter. As precise as the Greek language is, the grammar of this verse is such that it could legitimately be translated in four different ways, each of which would alter the meaning. It could mean: 1) the church is the fullness of God, who fills everything; 2) the church is the fullness of Christ, who fills everything; 3) the church is the fullness of Christ, who is *being filled* in every respect by God; or 4) Christ is the fullness of God, who fills all things.

In the Old Testament, "fullness" was largely understood in the context of the tabernacle and the temple. God's presence and His glory *filled* the tabernacle and the temple so that His presence and glory and power were visible.

We know that Jesus is now the visible expression of God's presence and power and glory in heaven. Revelation 4 and 5 tell us that He is presently sitting on the throne and being worshiped by angels and saints who cannot take their eyes off of Him and who cannot stop praising Him.

Likewise, we know that Jesus is the *fullness* of God because Paul uses the same word for fullness (pleroma) in Colossians as he does in Ephesians when describing Jesus.

Still, I think the most natural interpretation of verse 23 is that fullness is a reference to the church being the fullness of Christ on this earth, primarily because Paul is about to launch into a lengthy section of instruction on the nature of the church, and it makes perfect sense to me that this is how he would introduce it. So, whereas in the Old Testament God filled the temple, now He fills Christ, and Christ in turn fills His own so that the church is the visible expression of Christ's presence and power and glory on earth today.

If that is true, it is extremely consequential, for it means that the way people get to accurately see and authentically encounter Christ in this present world is when they come into contact with his body, the church. It means the way that Jesus expresses His life and accomplishes His will and advances His kingdom in this earth realm is through His body, the church.

And that is the clear teaching of other New Testament passages as well. The church is the primary vehicle through which He works in the world. We are His hands, His feet, His mouth, and His heart. We are the instruments through which He reveals Himself and His message on this earth, just as our smart phones are instruments through which the information on the Internet is revealed.

How does this happen? *The church is the fullness of Christ in this world because the Holy Spirit lives in each and every believer*. In John's Gospel Jesus promised to give His Holy Spirit to His followers after His departure in order to continue and complete the work that he started in the world. We are also told in Paul writings that the Holy Spirit indwells every single believer, and that the Spirit expresses the very life of Christ through us.

The implication of this is that Christ is not revealed to the world by us trying really hard to follow His example or display His character or do His work. It is the result of being filled and controlled by the Holy Spirit who lives in us, who displays *His* fruit in and through us, which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-

control. It is the Holy Spirit who expresses the fullness of Christ through frail and fragile vessels (cracked pots as Paul called us).

In Acts 1:8, Jesus promised His disciples that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them and would then be His witnesses all over the world. I have heard quite a few preachers use this verse to exhort Christians to get out and be witnesses for Christ. But this verse is *not* an exhortation. Jesus wasn't commanding His followers to be His witnesses; he was simply telling them that when they received the Holy Spirit, they *would* be his witnesses. The command in Acts 1 was simply to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came, because when He came, they would not have to try and generate courage or enthusiasm to be witnesses.

The Holy Spirit would enable, empower, and motivate them to be His witnesses. The Holy Spirit would fill them and influence them to the degree that they could not help but be His witnesses. The Holy Spirit would be their operating system, connecting them to Christ and enabling them to impart Christ. And not just a little bit of Christ, but the fullness of Christ.

By the way, I have another phone. It was manufactured by the same company and was purchased just about a year before my other phone, so it has nearly identical capabilities and capacities. But these two phones are not at all the same in terms of their functionality, which is why one of them has been relegated to our grandchildren's toy box, where even they grow bored with it after just a short while. That's because, a few years ago, I dove into a pool without realizing it was in my pocket. Suddenly this state-of-the-art device with all its capabilities and capacities became utterly useless. Instantly, my expensive phone became worthless; it lost all of its smartness.

What makes a phone smart and cool and capable and useful is that it is able to *connect* to a global set of computers, knows how to *access* the vast information in those computers, and is able to *dispense* that information instantly.

Connect, access, dispense. That is an illustration of the church and its relationship to Christ. Our connection to Christ gives us access to divine power and energy that enables us to express His character, His love, His wisdom instantaneously, because the Spirit who dwells in us is constantly connected to Jesus, and that connection allows us to be the very expression of Christ on earth today.

But I hasten to add that no one individual and no one local church is the fullness of Christ, able to upload *all* that He is. The complete expression of the life of Christ is in His *entire* body, the church that is made up of *all* who believe. It is when we are cooperating with one another, using the spiritual gifts He has given us, ministering to one another, serving the poor and needy, that the world gets to accurately see and authentically encounter Jesus Christ.

That is one of the reasons why divisions in the body of Christ are so incredibly destructive. Because when Christians separate and don't have fellowship or don't cooperate, we end up doing our own thing independently of the comprehensive body of Christ, and because of that, part of Him is missing (we will address this in another lesson in this series).

But there is something else we must keep in mind. We can only be the fullness of Christ—we can only express the life of Jesus—when we stay connected to Him. My smart phone is able to receive information from the Internet as long as it's connected to Wi-Fi. But if I am out of range, or if I'm in a dead zone, or if my Wi-Fi button is turned off then my incredibly capable smart phone is reduced to being a regular cell phone. It is effective only as long as it stays connected.

Jesus said the same thing about our connection to Him in John 15. *“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener...⁴ Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.⁸ This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples (15:1,4-5,8).*

The key word or concept in this chapter is “remaining” or, as it is translated in some versions, “abiding”. The word is used ten times in six verses. That word (meno) means, “to stay still” or “to remain in one place”. It can also mean, “to hold fast” or “to cling”.

In the context of this metaphor, “remain” means that we as branches must stay connected to the vine—we are to position ourselves in relationship to Jesus so that we can *receive* from Him all that is necessary for strength and health and vitality and fruitfulness. We are to position ourselves in relation to Jesus in such a way that we draw our nourishment from Him and that His life and power are able to flow freely and abundantly into us.

If we are going to bear much fruit—which is God’s will for our lives, if we are going to be spiritually prosperous, we must position ourselves so that we are constantly connected to Jesus.

And staying constantly connected is *our* responsibility. This word “remain,” in verse 4, is an imperative—a command, which means that it is something we must decide and make every effort to do. Jesus is appealing to us to exercise our wills. We must *decide* to do things that expose ourselves to Him and keep ourselves connected to Him.

And the reason we must decide to do this is because it does not happen automatically. In fact, I would go so far as to say that if we don’t decide to do this it will *not* happen. If we don’t make a conscious effort to stay connected to Jesus, then we will inevitably become detached from Jesus. I don’t mean that He will abandon us, or that we will lose our salvation, or that we will be separated from His love; I mean that in our personal relationship with Him there will be *distance*.

Perhaps a couple of other metaphors will drive the point home: *Untended fires soon die and become just a pile of ashes. Untended gardens soon become overgrown with weeds.* And untended relationships become distant. It happens in marriages, it happens in friendships, and it happens in our relationship with the Lord. When we don’t make an effort to stay connected, we naturally grow apart. And that is all the truer in a relationship with a Person we cannot see with our eyes or hear with our ears—where the relationship requires the use of our spiritual senses.

I want to remind you that our connection to Christ allows us to be the very expression of Christ on earth today. He has entrusted His reputation with us; He has entrusted His work to us, and He has made every provision for us to be and do everything that is necessary to advance His kingdom. Because of the Holy Spirit who lives in us, because of the diversity of personalities and giftedness of all of our brothers and sisters in Christ, we are the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

What a privilege! What a blessing! What a responsibility!

The Identity of the Church Ephesians 1:22-23

Main Idea: The Church's identity comes exclusively from its relationship to Jesus, and that relationship allows it to be the very expression of Christ on earth today.

Introduction: The thing about smart phones

Jesus: The sovereign Lord of all (20-23)
Seated in the place of supreme authority (20-22a)

Positioned in relation to the Church (22b-23)
He is head of the Church (22b)

The Church is His Body (23a)

The Church is His Fullness (23b)
The visible expression of Jesus' power and presence on earth

The way Jesus "fills all in all" (23c)

Application
Jesus is not completely expressed in any one church

We must stay connected to Jesus in order for Him to express Himself through us