

Built Together into a Dwelling Place for God
Ephesians 2:13-22

Affirmation #7: The Church

"We believe in the universal church, a living spiritual body of which Christ is the head and all regenerated persons are members. We believe in the local church, consisting of a company of believers in Jesus Christ, baptized on a credible profession of faith, and associated for worship, work and fellowship. We believe that God has laid upon the members of the local church the primary task of giving the gospel of Jesus Christ to a lost world."

The Apostles Creed that summarizes the ancient beliefs of the historical church, says: "I believe in the holy Christian Church." The Nicene Creed that we occasionally recite gives a longer version of the beliefs of the early church as formulated at the council of Nicea in the fourth century, and it says, "I believe in one universal and apostolic church." The BGC Affirmation includes a similar statement: "We believe in the universal church."

A month of study of the Trinity brought us last week to answer the question, how do we come into relationship with this majestic and holy Triune God? And the answer was by regeneration, by being born again. The work of the Spirit in the heart that we pray for in our unbelieving friends and loved ones -- "Lord, work in their lives; change their hearts" -- and that we plead for in our own hearts, works in our hearts by grace to soften our resistance and opposition to God and replaces our stony heart with hearts of flesh.

This is the work of the New Covenant that Jeremiah 31 promised the Spirit would do and that Jesus death on the cross for our sins freed the Spirit up to do. And when our softened hearts turn towards God, we welcome him in faith instead of rejecting him in unbelief. And so in Christ, through the Holy Spirit, we become new creatures. The old passes away. The new comes.

In Paul's words in our text in Ephesians (2:18), "through Christ we have access in one Spirit to the Father, no longer strangers and aliens, but fellow citizens with the saints," who love God and who live for the praise of his glory.

That is not the end of the Spirit's work in our heart. That's not the end of Christ's work of reconciliation on the cross. That's not the end of God the Father's causing us by his great mercy to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Regeneration is the beginning. Birth isn't the end of our lives. It's the beginning.

We are born again, as Peter said last week, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you who by God's power are being guarded by faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. And we are not born again, and we are not guarded, and we do not look forward in hope to this priceless inheritance alone. Peter said in 1 Pet 2 that as we come to him, we ourselves like living stones are being built up together as a spiritual house.

That's like the metaphor that Paul uses in our text this morning: (v. 19) No longer are you strangers and aliens but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In Christ we are being *built together into a dwelling place for God* by the Spirit.

We are not born again by the Spirit to live individual lives of waiting to be with God. We are born again into a family, into a household, into a community of faith, into a temple, for which God has purposes he now plans to accomplish.

There is a biblical logic to the sequence of these BGC Affirmations. God is the starting place. God is the foundation and the power and the attraction and the goal. Regeneration is the way we come into a covenant and relationship with the God who rules the Universe. The church is where we live that relationship out and fulfill the purposes God had for bringing us to faith and for making us new-born creatures.

So Paul, in our text, and the Affirmation, in this 7th number, tell us not just what the church is, uniting us together in one family and household. Paul and the Affirmation also tell us what purpose God has for birthing us into a family and a household and not just as isolated hearts and individuals.

We may think of ourselves as individuals who have our own personal relationship with God and no necessary relationship with other believers, free to connect wherever it seems convenient to us. We simply won't be seeing the truth about ourselves the way God sees us. We'll be living in a kind of world of delusion. This is why it's important for us to affirm that "we believe in the universal church, a living spiritual body of which Christ is the head and all regenerated persons are members."

As the Affirmation makes clear by its first two sentences, there are two senses in which scripture uses the word church: One is that happy and holy collection of all those who live now and ever will live and who enjoy that "mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is (already) won," that Bride of Christ who has true union through Christ the Bridegroom with God the Three in One, that Body of Christ that unites all genuine believers from every people and tongue and tribe and nation. This is the universal church. This is the church that in Greek was called "*kata holos*" -- according to the whole -- the words that gave us our English word "catholic," which means "universal."

This universal church is the living spiritual body of which Christ is the head and all regenerated persons are members. That means this church is an invisible church. We can't necessarily and reliably detect it when we look around the world at people who say that they are believers and profess to be Christian. Only God knows the truth of our hearts and so only he knows who in the growing harvest field are the real wheat and who are weeds or tares -- dressed up, looking and acting like wheat, but not really wheat at all.

That's why scripture and the Affirmation have to distinguish a second use of the word, church, to describe the local, visible "company of believers in Jesus Christ, baptized on a credible profession of faith, and associated for worship, work and fellowship." This is the visible church we see. It's defined by profession, and it's defined by the outward expressions of baptism and gathered worship and united work and concrete fellowship

These are local congregations of people like College Baptist Church, or the church where you grew up in some other community. The local, visible expression of the church also refers to whole denominations, like the Baptist General Conference, or the Roman Catholic Church, even though the words General or Catholic in their names mean "universal."

No matter how pure we try to make the admission requirements of a local church or even a worldwide earthly denomination, no matter how sure we are that our doctrine and our ways of conducting ourselves are the best expression of God's truth on earth, these earthly organizations of ours will inevitably include many people who are still inquiring into the faith and some people who have joined these visible congregations because they love fellowship, or they love serving, or they love worship services, or they love being thought of as Christians, yet, when all is said and done, they haven't joined in the outward activities of the church because they love *God*.

This morning I want to draw out a few implications from what scripture has to say about each of these expressions of the church as the body of Christ -- both about the universal church and about the local church. And in both cases I want, as the Affirmation does in its third sentence, to keep us reminded of what we studied all through this past fall [during "Forty Days of Purpose]: the local church, as a concrete expression and picture of the church universal is born again, reconciled to God, and gathered together into a body for a purpose. As the Affirmation puts it, there is a task laid upon us.

We weren't born again to be aimless. We weren't born again to die. We were born again to live to the praise of the glory of God in Christ Jesus.

First, "we believe in the catholic church," -- not the Roman Catholic church, which is a local expression of the universal church with all of the valuable potential and all of the limitations of every local church, including our own -- but we believe in the ideal universal church, "a living spiritual body of which Christ is the head and all regenerated persons are members."

This is the church that was called together to embody Christ Jesus, the head of the church, from the time of his life and ministry on earth for all the ages to come. The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her lord. She is his new creation by water and the blood.

The church is the bride he has chosen to wed at the culmination of history when at the close of the age he calls his universal church home. Life is preparation for a wedding! And we are not just invited guests at the wedding supper of the Lamb. We are the bride.

What we do here on Sunday mornings, what we do when we gather to pray or to work on the property or enjoy a potluck together, whatever we do, is preparation for a great wedding ceremony to come when we'll meet Jesus Christ at the altar and confirm our trust in his provision and protection for us by saying I take you to be my wedded husband.

That makes all our worship and all our fellowship and all our work together as a church *forward* looking. We live and work and worship in anticipation of spectacular promises. That is to say, we live and work and worship by faith. Faith always looks forward, because faith always believes promises. If we're not here this morning in love with Christ, looking forward to our wedding to him as members of the universal church, we are like a fiancée who has forgotten she is getting married next week. There is something very strange about our commitments and our behavior.

And it's not you and it's not me, individually, who will stand at that altar and say "I do" to Jesus Christ. It is the church universal who will be that Bride. As Paul told the Corinthian church in 1 Cor 12:14, "the body does not consist of one member but of many." There are feet and hands and ears and eyes and honorable parts and less presentable parts. But there can't be division among all those parts.

(V.21) "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable. ... God has so composed the body ... that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together."

When Bob McConnell and Dave Dauer land in the hospital, all of us feel that weakness. When a family experiences the joy of a birth, or their kids' picture in the paper, or a promotion at work, or happy news whatever it might be, we all rejoice together. That's what Paul's next chapter, 1 Cor 13, calls "love."

And we are members, hands and feet and vital organs, in a body that includes Paul and the 12 apostles and Clement and Justin and Irenaeus and Augustine and Hildegard and Aquinas and Martin and Katarina Luther and Jonathan and Sarah Edwards and John and Susanna Wesley, and a host of saints yet to come.

In fact, at the heart of Paul's argument in our text this morning in Eph 2 is his doctrine that the work of Jesus Christ accomplished a uniting not just of the saints who would follow him in history but a uniting of those saints of the New Testament church with God's chosen people in the Old Testament, the commonwealth of Israel.

To the descendants of Abraham God had said (Gen 17:7) I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you ... to be God to you." To Moses and the Israelites of the Exodus he said, (Ex 6:7) "I will take you for my people and I will be your God; and you will know that I am the Lord your God."

So now Paul tells the Christians of Ephesus to remember that you Gentiles were at that time separated from the Messiah, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the (marital) covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace. He has made us both one. He has reconciled us both to God in one body through the cross."

We will meet Christ at the altar as members of the same body with Abraham and Sarah, and Hosea and Gomer, and Ruth and Boaz, and Salmon and Rahab, and Deborah, and Jeremiah, and David, and everyone throughout those past ages who was a person after God's own heart.

This is the church universal in which we affirm our belief. This is the living spiritual body of which those who trust Christ are members and of which Christ is the head.

It is massive in number and growing, this body of Christ that will one day be his Bride. Why should it be so large? Why should history go on so long? Why did God give new birth to this creation, the church? What is our purpose in this spiritual ideal that God has conceived?

Look at the end of Eph 1. Eph 1:20 says that God raised Christ not just from the dead but to his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority ... and he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church. And the church is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."

The church exists to embody the fullness of Christ who is the glory of God. God's aim on earth is to glorify himself by filling the earth with his glory like water covers the sea; filling the earth with reflections of his own image so that everywhere one looks one gets a view of the joy and the goodness and the mercy of God. That's what the church is meant to be: an embodiment and vision of the glory of God. That's what we were born again to be.

Paul says it again in Eph 3:10 -- "through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This is the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord." God wants the church to be an expression, a visible, tangible embodiment, a display window of the glory of his excellence and perfections. God is filling the universe with the glory of his Son Jesus Christ by putting the body of his Son, the church, on display.

None of us could do that individually even if we were perfect. Because the glory of God, the character of God, is love. It's relational. God is a Trinity of persons who love each other so palpably that the love itself is a person, the person of the Holy Spirit. And so to image forth the glory of God requires persons joined together in relationship, knitted together in love, displaying for the world the glory that God is love, sacrificial love, love that honors Christ, the supreme sacrifice, and the one who fills all in all.

That means, and here I want to quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the same book [*Life Together*] that is quoted there in the bulletin meditation, who puts it so well: "Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this. Whether it be a brief, single encounter or the daily fellowship of years, Christian community is only this. We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ.

"What does this mean? It means, first that a Christian needs others because of Jesus Christ. It means, second, that a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ. It means, third, that in Jesus Christ we have been chosen from eternity, accepted in time, and united for eternity."

Christ is made the sure foundation, Christ the head and cornerstone. And we are that building, built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit, to show the world what the glory of the Trinity is like. The church is not the brick-and-mortar building where we meet. The church is the spiritual building of regenerated believers who live for the praise of the glory of God in Christ.

But we also believe in the local church, the company of believers in Jesus Christ who have been baptized on a credible profession of faith, and associated for worship, work, and fellowship. The local church is not the universal church. The Baptist church is not the universal church. The Roman Catholic church is not the catholic church. The church around the world today is not even the local church. These are all local churches, as it were, expressions of the church universal, some more accurate to the truth of the eternal, spiritual body, some less, but all of us called to align ourselves visibly, as authentically as we can, with the biblical ideal of the invisible, true Body of Christ.

We, College Baptist Church, exist as a local church to give the best visible demonstration we are able to the community around us that God is glorious, and that his glory is most evident in mercy, and that his glorious mercy has been supremely demonstrated in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Everything we do should be aimed at that. When we pray for our friends who are sick, we should pray that that will help everyone who knows our sick friend to see the glory of God in Christ. When we gather here for worship, we should be so enthralled with the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ that our community doesn't just think, oh, that's a warm and friendly family congregation there. They should think, here is a congregation that has found life's ultimate satisfaction in receiving and reveling in the grace of God.

When we gather around a table to eat, whether it's a potluck or at a restaurant for our monthly fellowship, people should see a congregation not just enjoying food, not just enjoying fellowship, but a congregation anticipating a marriage supper in the Kingdom of God with the Bridegroom Jesus Christ, by enjoying tastes of that table fellowship here on earth.

But the visible, local church will never itself be the invisible, universal church. Our pictures of the Body of Christ will always be imperfect. The tares will always grow up alongside the wheat. We always live in humility and subject to correction and in hope of something even richer and more genuine.

That's why Bonhoeffer reminds us that our life together is always together: We need one another again and again because we become uncertain and discouraged and by ourselves we cannot help ourselves. We need the strong Christ in the word of our brothers and sisters to lift us up in our weakness. Woe to us when we forsake the assembling of ourselves together. Chop off a hand and the body becomes weaker. Worse yet, the hand itself dies.

That our pictures of the Body of Christ will always be imperfect is also why Bonhoeffer reminds us that our life together must always be in Jesus Christ. This imperfect fellowship of the local church is always going to be made up of imperfect people. Those people sitting next to you on the pew, even the ones in your own family, in fact especially the ones in your own family, are likely to be great sources of irritation and heartache.

Sadly, not every word we say to each other is going to be kind. Not every need we have when we walk in these doors is going to be treated sensitively. Not every sermon I preach is going to live up to your hopes and expectations. Not every choice of music to sing is going to be everyone's favorite. Not every person we share this fellowship with is going to agree with us and rub us the right way at every moment. In fact, not every person who sits in these services is even going to love God.

Outside of these walls and this fellowship, it may get even worse. We live in the middle of a world that hates God and who are enemies of Christian truth. We live like Jesus himself, whose disciples deserted him, who was abandoned to the cross, alone, who was laughed at and mocked and finally crucified for bringing the unwelcome good news that God is supreme, not self.

But that was Christ's mission, to live in the midst of enemies. And that is the mission of the local church, to live in the midst of irritating people and people who may even be hostile to God.

As Martin Luther said, "The Kingdom is to be in the midst of your enemies. And he who will not suffer this does not want to be of the Kingdom of Christ; he wants to be among friends, to sit among roses and lilies, not with the bad people but the devout people. O you blasphemers and betrayers of Christ! If Christ had done what you are doing who would ever have been spared?"

We believe that God has laid upon the members of the local church the primary task of giving the gospel of Jesus Christ to a lost world. We believe that the local church itself will inevitably falter in its aspiration to embody the fullness of God in Christ Jesus. And so our love for the world and our fellowship in the body will always be driven, not for the loveliness and perfection of those around us, inside or outside the local church, but always and solely for the sake of Jesus Christ.

One more quotation from Bonhoeffer to summarize this last practical point more effectively than I ever could: (*LT*, p.25)

"Not what a man is in himself as a Christian, his spirituality and piety, constitutes the basis of our community. What determines our brotherhood is what that man is by reason of Christ. Our community with one another consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us. This is true not merely at the beginning, as though in the course of time something else were to be added to our community; it remains so for all the future and to all eternity. I have community with others and I shall continue to have it only through Jesus Christ. The more genuine and the deeper our community becomes, the more will everything else between us recede, the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the one and only thing that is vital between us. We have one another only through Christ, but through Christ we do have one another, wholly, and for all eternity.

"That dismisses once and for all every clamorous desire for something more. One who wants more than what Christ has established does not want Christian brotherhood. He is looking for some extraordinary social experience which he has not found elsewhere; he is bringing muddled and impure desires into Christian brotherhood."

The local church in which we believe does not exist just to provide human community. It exists to show the world the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.