

THE CHURCH IN EPHESIANS

GOD'S PLAN FOR HIS CHURCH

Derek Overstreet

Senior Pastor, Sovereign Grace Church (Tucson, AZ)

What kind of church are you?" is a frequent question for pastors and church members. One such question came as I was greeting on a Sunday morning. I had barely uttered the word "Hello," and the question came, "What kind of church are you?" I don't know how you would have answered that question, but I gave the answer I always give: "Sovereign Grace Church is a church that trusts in a sovereign God as we live and do ministry together in the grace of the gospel for God's glory."

It's a simple answer that represents a profound reality regarding the Church. Ephesians 3:10 says that God's manifold wisdom is revealed through the Church. Like the multi-faceted cuts of a diamond are meant to radiate its beauty and brilliance, the Church displays the multi-faceted wisdom of God in such a way that his glory is revealed in the earth and the cosmos.

The implications for how we view the church could not be more significant. Our ecclesiology matters for the sake of God's glory! Whether it's your church or my church, no matter how big or small, no matter how rich or poor, and no matter how known or unknown, the Church is God's primary means of bringing glory to himself in this world. Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus envisions a God-glorifying, Christ-exalting ecclesiology in three foundational ways.

The Church Trusts in the Sovereign Plan of God

If I had to choose one word to describe the church, it would be grace. If I had to choose two words, they would be sovereign grace. In 1:3-14, Paul pens a breathtaking list of God's multi-faceted grace: election (v. 4), sanctification (v. 4), love (v. 4), adoption (v. 5), redemption (v. 7), forgiveness (v. 7), revelation (v. 8), inheritance (v. 11, 14), and the Spirit (v. 13). Every one of these spiritual blessings represents God's merciful initiative toward us and his gracious work in us as he creates his spiritual community called the Church.

Before the world existed, God determined to set his grace and affection on sinners like you and me. While we were still his enemies, dead in our sin and by nature deserving of his wrath, God reconciled us to himself in Christ. He sealed his work in our lives by his Spirit, making us part of his Church. We do not deserve it.

We did not merit it. We could never accomplish it. God's mercy makes us alive in Christ and members of his spiritual household called the Church (2:1-22).

In his grand purpose of saving sinners in this world, God saved us in a way that ensures his immeasurable grace and glory will reverberate throughout this world and the heavenly realms. From before the foundations of the world, this has always been God's sovereign plan: to build his church to the praise of his glory (1:6, 14).

I love that our family of churches cherishes God's sovereignty in our salvation. Whether it is the songs we sing, the preaching we sit under, or the counseling we receive, the steady reminders of God's sovereignty in our salvation continually produce humility, gratitude, and worship in my heart as well as the confidence to share Christ, knowing God is at work in it all!

The Church Identifies with Christ Alone

The Church is central in the display of God's manifold wisdom. At the heart of the Church is the ultimate display of God's wisdom, Jesus. The person and work of Christ are the heartbeat of the Church. Ephesians makes this clear in rich and powerful ways.

Jesus is head of the Church (1:22-23, 4:15, 5:23). He is supreme. He stands over all things. As one in whom the fullness of deity dwells (Col. 2:9-10), Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth. His reign from the right hand of God is worked out in and through the Church as she follows him.

At the same time, Christ is head to a body, and his body is the Church. As the Church, we live in union with our transcendent king in a profoundly intimate way. Jesus is not like a king living in a high castle, disconnected and distant from his people. His transcendence is intimate. As Charles Spurgeon puts it, "The head is to the body indispensable to life; it is the seat of mental life, the temple of the soul; even so Jesus Christ is the vitalizing Head of all his people. He is our life."⁵

This intimacy is revealed at the cross, where Jesus willingly laid down his life for us as our substitutionary sacrifice on the cross (5:25). The blood he shed provides forgiveness from sin and reconciliation with God. He took our sin upon himself as if it was his own. He bore the judgment we deserved as if he deserved it (2 Cor. 5:21). He is our Great Savior!

⁵ Charles Spurgeon, "The Head of the Church." *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol 14. 1868.

As our **Great Savior**, Jesus is also our **Great Sanctifier (5:26)**. Jesus is at work sanctifying those he saves (5:26-27), purposefully preparing his bride in love for the wedding of the Lamb in the glories of heaven (Rev. 19:6-8). In the words of Martyn Lloyd-Jones,

Jesus cannot stop at the first step [justification]; He goes on to sanctify her. In other words, his death upon the cross for us, and our sins, was simply the first step in this great process. He does not stop at the first step. He has a complete purpose for the Church, and he will go through it all step by step.⁶

The gospel changes the way we think and live as new creations in Christ. Our desire for our churches is the assurance of Christ's ongoing work to change us, which is a promise that should continually compel us to marvel at and worship the Lord!

Jesus is the cornerstone of the Church (2:20). A cornerstone was part of the foundation that ensured the building would be plumb and safe. Jesus is the one true foundation for God's people. As we continue to center and build churches on the person and work of Jesus, we can have every confidence that our lives and the ministry we have been called to as a church (4:11-16) will result in our spiritual maturity, the exaltation of Christ, and the glory of God.

From beginning to end, the church's very existence is determined by Jesus, who fills all things with his power and glory (1:23). For decades, the person and work of Christ has been central to our ecclesiology, as it is for all of theology. As C.J Mahaney reminded us in a memorable sermon, "Keep the main thing, the main thing!" May a gospel-centered ecclesiology be our testimony in this world long after we are gone, to the praise of God's glory!

The Church Joyfully Pursues God's Purposes

The first three chapters of Ephesians reveal that God has sovereignly set his Church apart in Christ through the work of his Spirit. Now, the Church, which is the body of Christ, the fullness of him (1:22-23), is called to give herself to displaying the wisdom, grace, love, and power of the Lord. Paul explains this calling in 4:1 as "walk[ing] in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called."

We live a life worthy of our calling as we humbly submit ourselves to Christ through a life of Spirit-empowered ministry (4:3-16) and a grace-motivated pursuit of holiness (4:17-6:18). These are the fruit and consequence of our salvation in Christ. As redeemed sinners saved into God's Spirit-filled community, we pursue ministry and holiness to the praise of his glorious grace because God has graciously loved us and saved us for this very purpose (2:10, 5:1-2).

⁶ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Life in the Spirit: An Exposition of Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 151.

The Church displays the manifold wisdom of God as she gives herself to imitating him and representing Christ in the world. As we serve one another in love, our faith is strengthened and we mature in Christ together. As the Church follows Christ in righteousness, we become who we already are, growing as a body and bearing spiritual fruit in our relationships and respective stations of life. That's God's plan as we eagerly await Christ's return!

I see God's plan for his Church in our ecclesiology, and I am grateful. I pray the eyes of our hearts will be increasingly opened to the wonder and glory of God's manifold wisdom in and through our churches. He can do this. God can do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, according to the power that raised Christ from the dead and is at work in us now. May he build churches around the globe that trust in his sovereign plan of salvation as they live and do ministry together in the grace of the gospel to the praise of his glorious grace in every place and for all times!