

The Church Which Is His Body

by Lewis Sperry Chafer

The sermon explores the purpose of God in this age, the formation of the church, and the growth of the heavenly body.

Scripture: Acts 1:6, Acts 15:13, Romans 11:25, 1 Corinthians 12:12, Ephesians 1:22, Ephesians 4:7, Ephesians 5:29, 2 Timothy 2:12, Revelation 20:6

Topics: "Church Formation", "Eternal Purpose"

Description

Lewis Sperry Chafer preaches about the new purpose of God in this age, focusing on the formation of a heavenly people who are part of the kingdom in its present mystery form but not related to the Messianic earthly kingdom of Israel. The disciples, being Jews, initially struggled to understand Jesus' sacrificial death and the ministry of the new gospel age, which was later revealed through divine compulsion and the first church council. The Apostle Paul received a special revelation about the church as the 'called out ones,' a new body formed by both Jews and Gentiles, united in Christ and destined to be His bride and body, fulfilling the eternal purpose of God in this age of grace.

Transcript

THE new purpose of God in this age is seen to be the out-calling of a heavenly people. They form a part of the kingdom in its present mystery form (Mt. xiii.); but are in no way related to the Messianic earthly kingdom of Israel other than that they, as the bride of the King, will be associated with Him in His reign (Eph. v. 29-32; 2 Tim. ii. 12; Rev. xx. 6; xxi. 9-21). The disciples, being Jews, needed no instruction as to the message of the kingdom; but in marked contrast to this they did not once grasp any reference Jesus made to His sacrificial death by which He was to open the flood-gates of the grace of God. Even after His resurrection and forty days of instruction concerning the kingdom of God (Acts i. 3) they questioned Him as to the realization of the nation's hope: "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts i. 6). His reply is suggestive: "It is not for you to know the times and seasons, which the Father has put in his own power. But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in Judea, and in Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth" (Acts 1. 7, 8).

He does not tell them their kingdom is abandoned, or merged into a spiritual conquest of all nations: He plainly infers that every promise of God is still intact; but assigns to them the immediate ministry of the new gospel age. Even this they failed to comprehend; for it was not until Peter by divine compulsion had

first preached the Gospel to Gentiles in Cornelius' house, and Paul and Barnabas had returned to Jerusalem reporting the same out-flowing salvation to Gentiles as had been given to Jews that they were able to grasp the meaning of the new age. This new light came in connection with the deliberations of the first church council, called by the mother church at Jerusalem, and recorded in Acts xv. 13-18. The issue before this council was of the present obligation of believers toward circumcision, the sign of Judaism. Any departure from that divinely given sign naturally required a new revelation of the scope and character of the new divine purpose. Apparently the Jewish system was being set aside.

The conclusion of this first council is recorded thus:

"And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying, Men and brethren, hearken unto me: Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: that the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things. Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world (ages)."

There is no more important prophetic Scripture than this because of the arresting fact that it states the present-age purpose of God in relation to the future purposes, and places these in an exact order. The answer to the question of these Jewish Christians as to what was superseding Judaism (the new order having set aside its last distinction, circumcision), is given by James, the pastor of the church in Jerusalem. In this concluding discourse of the council he first states the divine purpose in the new age: "God at the first (in the house of Cornelius, as Peter had just stated) did visit Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name" (v. 14). The realization of the purpose to gather out a people is to be followed by a "return" of the divine Person to the earth and the reestablishment of the Davidic order, and with this the long awaited world-wide blessing.

The meaning of the word "church" is the "called out ones," and this, it will be seen, is identical with the present-age purpose "to take out a people for his name." The word "church" appears for the first time in the Bible at Mt. xvi. 18, and here Jesus speaks of it as a then future thing: "On this rock I will build my church." An entirely new word is used, it would seem, that there should be no confusion of what this word represents with any Old Testament revelation.

The general use of the word in the Scriptures is of a collection, or assembly, of people. Thus Israel, separated and called out of Egypt, is termed by Stephen as "the church in the wilderness" (Acts vii. 38), and Luke uses the same word in mentioning the assembly of people in the town meeting at Ephesus (Acts xix. 29). When the word is now used to denote a company of professing Christians, or united worshippers, the reference is to an organization of people of one generation united by human ties, and not all, necessarily, saved ones.

The deeper and more important use of the word, however, is the designation of the born-again ones of all generations since Pentecost as "baptized into one body and made to drink into one Spirit," each one so perfectly in the saving and transforming power of God that he will rightfully appear in glory in the exact likeness of Christ; and the whole company, finally perfected, "without spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing" will be His bride and His body, "the fullness of him that filleth all in all."

Such a perfect organism, with its heavenly destiny and glory, could hardly be confused with Israel in the wilderness, called out and separated from Egypt, or the ungovernable assembly of the town meeting at Ephesus, called out for the time being from their homes. The latter are merely incidental: the former is no less than the primary purpose of God in this age of grace.

Little would be known of the out-called heavenly body from the teachings of Jesus, and nothing could be known from any portion of the Old Testament, where it is not once directly mentioned. As recorded, Jesus spoke of the church but three times, and then as something yet to be realized by virtue of His own power; for He said, "I will build my church." That this was a reference to His own body and bride, rather than any local assembly, is evident from His following sentence: "And the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." How woefully they have prevailed against the professing, visible church! Not so, however, against His body and bride.

The fuller revelation of "the church which is his body" (Eph. i. 22, 23) was committed to the Apostle Paul. Her formation, being and destiny is the theme of the prison revelation and forms the basis of the prison epistles, especially Ephesians and Colossians. The Apostle, writing of this special revelation given to him concerning the purpose of God in this dispensation of grace, records that there was a mystery, or a sacred secret, not made known to other ages, but revealed to himself and the other Apostles that Gentiles were to become fellow heirs with the Jews in one body. A Gentile blessing had been a foreview of the Old Testament and was associated with the earthly kingdom glories of Israel; but Paul's revelation is of a new formation, into a new body, a new creation, "partakers of his promises in Christ by the Gospel," which is not found in the Old Testament. The whole passage is as follows:

"For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles, if ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward: how that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery;... which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel: whereof I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power. Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ; and to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ: to the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God, according to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph. iii. 1-11).

From this passage it may be seen that the mystery, or sacred secret, concerning this age was the forming of a new body out of both Jews and Gentiles. This was the "eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Preceding this passage, the Apostle has, in Eph. ii. 11-18, not only defined the state of the Gentiles before God, but has made clear that, during this age, all hindrances that might arise from such distinctions have been put away that He might of the two, Jews and Gentiles, make one "new man." "Reconciling both unto God in one body by the cross." The two elements of this body, then, are Jews and Gentiles,--Gentiles that were "far off," "made nigh by the blood of Christ," and Jews that, by covenant, were "nigh," with Gentiles, "reconciled unto God in one body by the cross":

"Wherefore remember, that ye being in times past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made with hands; that at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: but now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; and that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: and came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh. For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father" (Eph. ii. 11-18).

The risen and ascended Christ is "head over all things to the church which is his body." And they in turn are "the fullness of him that filleth all in all." This is revealed in Eph. i. 18-23:

"The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: and hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all."

The accomplishment of this age purpose Paul also mentioned in connection with its time relation to the kingdom covenanted to Israel in Rom. xi. 25-27:

"For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles be come in. And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob: for this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins."

All this, it will be seen, is in complete accord with the conclusions of the council at Jerusalem:

"God at the first did visit Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: that the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things" (Acts xv. 14-17).

This heavenly body is being formed by a process. It had a distinct time of beginning. It could not have existed before the cross; for it must be reconciled unto God by that cross. It could not have existed before His resurrection; for its members must partake of His resurrection life. It could not have existed before His ascension; for it would have been a body without its Head (Eph. i. 22, 23). It could not have existed before Pentecost; for until then there could have been no organic union by the baptism of the Spirit into one body (1 Cor. xii. 13).

"The church which is his body" began to be formed at Pentecost through the new ministries of the Spirit. Believers, at that time and through the baptism of the Spirit, became an organism by virtue of a divine life indwelling all, and that life was Christ. This is fitly illustrated in Scripture by the figures of the vine and the

branches and the head and the body. One life animates every branch of the vine and every member of the body:

"For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many" (1 Cor. xii. 12-14).

"So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another" (Rom. xii. 5).

"For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones" (Eph. v. 30).

Thus the formation of the body began at Pentecost and since that time "the Lord has added unto the church daily such as should be saved." It remains to be seen, then, that since the Lord is adding to this body, it is growing, or increasing, unto its perfection during the course of this age. Special ministry gifts, unknown in other ages, are bestowed in this age to serve at divine appointments and in divine power for a limited time, or "until" the body is completed:

"But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ. Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men... And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, and for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. iv. 7-13).

This, it should be noted, is not the individual perfection of many; but rather the perfection of one body by the adding of many individuals until there is formed "the full measure of the stature of Christ." The Apostle continues with regard to the growing of this body:

"But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love" (Eph. iv. 15, 16).

So, again, the church is said to be a growing temple eventually to reach its completion, according to another passage in the same Epistle:

"Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; and are built (lit, are being built) upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: in whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit" (Eph. ii. 19-22).

"On this rock I will build my church."

The outward visible church is not equivalent to "the church which is his body." To that imperfect organization these revelations concerning organic union with Christ and perfection in Christ could hardly be applied.

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