

The Church, What Is It?

by Stephen Kaung

The church is a mystery conceived in God's thought before the world's foundation, waiting to be revealed and known, and understanding it from an eternal perspective is essential.

Duration: 53:54

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Ephesians 1:3-14, Ephesians 1:19

Topics: "Church Identity", "Body Of Christ"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of knowing who we are as believers in Christ. He encourages the audience to focus less on talking about themselves and more on understanding what the Lord has done for them. The speaker highlights the significance of the church in God's plan and urges the audience to have a greater place for the church in their hearts. He asks the audience to consider their thoughts and impressions of the church, whether it be from a historical perspective or as a collective body of believers.

Transcript

Lord, as we are before Thy word, we ask Thee that Thou wilt give us the spirit of wisdom and revelation, without which we can never know Thee, nor know Thy mind. So Lord, we cast ourselves upon Thee for this morning. We ask Thee that Thou wilt be gracious to every one of us.

We pray that Thou wilt open our eyes, that we may see that which is upon Thy heart. We ask Thee that Thou wilt unite our hearts with Thy heart, that we truly may be one, because Thou dost say, He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit. We ask in Thy precious name.

Amen. This being the first of the morning ministry time, I think probably I should explain a little bit. First of all, I would like to mention this, that this is not just a time that we come together to hear the word of God, of which it is important, but we hope that this time as we come together, we are not only just coming here to hear the word of God, but actually we are coming here to fellowship together in the word of God.

So I hope we will not have that meeting complex. In other words, you just sit there and listen to somebody preaching to you. I'm not going to preach to you this morning, I'm going to talk with you this morning.

So get away with this meeting complex and try to enter together into the word of God, even though I may do the talking and you may do the other thing. During the morning ministry time, as we wait before the

Lord during this month, we feel that it may be of the Lord that we should devote all our morning ministry time to just one subject. It is a subject that concerns every one of us.

In other words, none of us here can be just an observer, because we are going to talk about you. We are going to talk about ourselves. Not ourselves in ourselves, but ourselves in the grace of God.

Now that's what we are going to talk about. What are we? Who are we? Where are we? What has the grace of God brought us to, brought us into? Now all these things we hope that we may have some thorough fellowship together. You remember when John the Baptist came to the sea in the land of Judea? People came to him, those priests and Levites, they came and asked him a very important question.

They want to know who he is. They said, tell us who you are. John the Baptist knew very well who he is not and who he is.

So John the Baptist tells them, very frankly, I'm not the Christ, I'm not Christ. Don't make any mistake about it. But I am a voice in the wilderness proclaiming the coming of the Lord.

And you remember when our Lord Jesus comes into the picture? He is also asked the same question. Now who are you? People wonder, people puzzle, people try to guess and people try to surmise who this man is. And you know even our Lord Jesus himself asked this question.

He asked his disciple, who do men think that I am? And then he turned to his disciples and said, now who do you think that I am? It is very important to know who you are. Because without knowing who you are, you do not know where you are. Without knowing what you are, you will not be able to be a strong testimony for the Lord in this world.

Again I will repeat, we are not going to talk just ourselves. There is nothing to talk about. The less you talk about yourself, the better.

I think every one of you will agree with me. For unfortunately people talk a lot about us even if we do not want to talk about us. But we do not want to come together to talk about each other or to talk about ourselves.

That is, in ourselves. There is nothing good in us to talk about. But I believe we have a great deal to talk about when we realize what the Lord has done to us, in us, and for himself.

And I hope that there will be no ending to our talking. The more you talk, the better. Now what is it that we are going to talk about? What is our subject? Well, we are not talking about you as an individual.

Because God's thought is always corporate. It is true that a corporate is made up of individuals. It is very much related to individuals.

But God's ultimate thought is the collective, the corporate. So you know what we are going to talk about this morning, and that is the Church. Because we are all members of the Church of God.

Therefore, this concerns us. This concerns every one of us. We ought to know what we are.

We ought to know who we are. We ought to know where we are, and wherefore we are. So that we may glorify the Lord and enter into his full thought.

I would like to read two passages first before we go on. Ephesians chapter 1. Ephesians chapter 1. We'll read from verse 3 through verse 14. Ephesians chapter 1 verse 3. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ, according as he has chosen us in him before the world's foundation, that we should be holy and blameless before him in love, having marked us out beforehand for adoption through Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he has taken us into favor in the Beloved, in whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of offenses according to the riches of his grace, which he has caused to abound towards us in all wisdom and intelligence, having made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he purposed in himself for the administration of the fullness of time, to ahead of all things in the Christ, the things in the heavens and the things upon the earth, in him in whom we have also obtained an inheritance, being marked out beforehand according to the purpose of him, who works all things according to the counsel of his own will, that we should be to the praise of his glory, who have pre-trusted in the Christ, in whom he also having trusted, having heard the word of the truth, the glad tidings of your salvation, in whom also having believed, he having sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the earnest of our inheritance, to the redemption of the acquired possession, to the praise of his glory.

I believe every one of us is lost. Lost in the riches of the grace of God. Chapter 3. Ephesians chapter 3. We'll read verse 9 through verse 11.

And to enlighten all with the knowledge of what is the administration of the mystery hidden throughout the ages in God, who has created all things, in order that now to the principalities and authorities in the heavenlies might be made known through the church the all various wisdom of God, according to the purpose of the ages, which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord. Paul is getting very difficult. Usually Paul has very clear thoughts and very clear words.

But as you read Ephesians chapter 1 and chapter 3, you'll find that Paul doesn't seem to have his usual clarity. He seems to be lost himself in thoughts and in words. And that is exactly the case.

The reason is, of course, the magnitude of that which is going to fellowship and the riches of the subject that he is dealing with. Now, dear brothers and sisters, let me ask you from the very beginning a question. What do you think of the church? What is your idea or your reaction or your impression when you hear the word church? What kind of a picture comes to you when you hear the word church? You can see the church with a historical viewpoint.

In other words, when you hear the word church, probably you think of the church in its two thousand years of history. You remember how the church of God has a glorious beginning. You remember the story on the day of Pentecost.

And that is a wonderful beginning. You remember you have read the book of Acts. And you find that even though there are some spots here and there you can find in the book of Acts, and yet you find the church as you see in the book of Acts is really glorious.

And probably you may also remember how during the first two centuries or three centuries, second and the third century, to be exact, how the church of God has gone through persecutions and yet it comes out victorious and glorious. Then you think ahead and you think of the history of the church. You find that the history of the church is like a checkerboard.

Sometimes you find it is glorious. Something to be admired. Sometimes you find it is not as glorious and even disgraceful.

It's a disgrace. You find the history of the church is a history of ups and downs. It is almost like reading the book of Judges.

You know that as you read the book of Judges, sometimes you'll find the people of Israel seem to be in ascendancy, seem to be in good state, but it did not last very long and then declension, degeneration came in and God had to raise up another judge to deliver them from their bondage. You'll find revivals after revivals, declensions after declensions. You'll find it is a mixed history.

And when you come to the end of that history, you'll find everyone just does what it seems good in his sight. As you think of the church in its historical relationship, probably it will give you the same idea and that is in the history of the church there are things to be admired and there are things to be ashamed of. There are times when there are revivals.

There are other times when there are declensions. Because of the declension of the church in general, God has to raise up a vessel or a corporate vessel for some recovery and we do thank the Lord for all these vessels of recovery. But within a very short time these vessels of recovery need to be recovered.

So there you'll find in the history of the church it is just that ups and downs and ups and downs, revivals and declensions, recovery and more recoveries. And sometimes you wonder where it will end. Seeing the church from a historical standpoint does not give you too much comfort, does not give you too much confidence.

Well, maybe you're not looking at the church from the historical standpoint, but you may be looking at the church from the contemporary viewpoint. That is, you look around yourself at this present moment and what do you see of the church of God today? Probably you'll come to about the same conclusion. There are certain things that are commendable, but there are more things that are very depressing.

And you wonder when will the Lord Jesus get that which He is really asking? You know this matter of the church during these recent years or recent decades have arrested the thoughts and the hearts of many believers. I may even say that all Christianity, the whole Christendom is now involved in this very matter of the church. What about the church? God's people everywhere begin to realize that it is not right for God's children to be divided, to be separated.

Why should we be divided? We ought to be one. Therefore, you'll find during these years the great ecumenical movement that is sweeping Christendom today. Many, many books are written, many, many conferences are gathered, many committees are formed, many compromises are made, many agreements are negotiated, and you'll find there is a coming together not only of Protestants but of Catholics, not only of Catholics but of Greek Orthodox, not only of Greek Orthodox, even Mohammedans and even Buddhists.

You'll find there is a trying to gathering together. Why? Because they feel we ought to be one. We should not be separated.

There is a grouping together of Protestant denominations, small denominations combined into a great one, and there is a coming together of the Catholics and the Protestants. The communication is trying to be open, seeing if anything can be done. You'll find all these are sweeping Christianity, Christendom

today.

It is, of course, right that God's people should not be divided. It is, of course, right that we should be separated from the world but not separated from each other. But the trouble is, the more you try to combine and to unite, the less reality you have of the Church and of its fellowship.

The more you try to combine many groups together, you'll find that you have to do so much compromise that the truth of God is sacrificed. And as you try to unite all these different ones, you'll find that even though outwardly there is a greater union, intuitively there is less unity. There is no reality there.

And because of that, many of God's people, those who really love the Lord, they find that they are in a predicament. They find that they have to, for conscience sake, be separated from these unions. They belong to these denominations before, but after these great unions, they have to separate themselves.

They seem to go backward instead of forward, and yet their backward is a forward step. So far as they are concerned, because they are looking for reality. They are looking for fellowship.

They do not find the truth, the reality, the fellowship in these big movements. Therefore, they began to gather in little homes. They began to gather in small places.

They began to gather in threes and fives, in tens and thirties. And there they come together with kindred spirits. They come together to pray together.

They come together to read the Word together. They come together to share with each one another the Christ that they have known. And they find some reality there.

They find some fellowship there. But the trouble is, even though they find good fellowship among these few, yet it always bothers their conscience that they are separated from their other brothers and sisters. How can God's people be really one? I remember our dear brother, Nini, once said that these home meetings are like the midway in.

They are not homes. They are midway in. It's all right to spend a few days there.

And the Lord has only made provision for a few days. You remember that story? He has to take us to home. Therefore, I believe many of God's people today are deeply exercised concerning this matter of the church.

What is the church? Where is our home today? How can God's people really be one? How can we be separated from the world and yet really be one in Christ Jesus? How can the reality of the church and the fellowship of the church be something that is really satisfying? I believe that these are things that are exercising many of God's people's hearts. And I hope that's what is exercising God's people. Your heart today.

Dear brothers and sisters, you cannot understand what the church is if you only look at the church from the historical standpoint. You will be involved in tradition. The more tradition it accumulates, the less the place of the truth of the Word of God is there.

If historical viewpoint is your viewpoint, then you are just living in tradition. The tradition of the fathers. If you are looking at contemporary Christianity, it is true.

You live in current time. But what do you see? There doesn't seem to be too much. And the more you look at contemporary Christianity, probably the less you are assured how God can ever get what He wants.

Therefore, this morning, we feel that if we want to know what the church really is, we have to get away temporarily. Yes, we'll return to that. We have to get away temporarily.

From history. We have to forget temporarily from our contemporary situation. Now, it doesn't mean that by forgetting history, by neglecting contemporary situation, we get into a kind of unrealness.

No. We will come to all these later on. But I think the first thing for us to do, as we are gathered here this morning, may I make a request, a humble request? And that is, try to forget the church according to history.

Try to forget the church that you see around you. That is to say, let us try to forget. Forget time.

Forget space. Let us try to go back to God. And there in God, may we see what the church is.

That is the only way to know the church of God. Dear brothers and sisters, the reason why we cannot understand the church today is because we are too involved with contemporary Christianity. We are too much influenced or prejudiced by historical Christianity.

We are too much bound by what we see. We are too much bound by tradition. And that's the reason why we cannot see the church as God sees it.

Dear brothers and sisters, we must be delivered. Delivered from tradition. Delivered from situation.

Delivered from ourselves. And we must be taking our spirit as it were, by the Spirit of God, to God Himself. And there in Him we shall sleep.

Why? Why must we take this viewpoint? Why is it that this eternal perspective is so basic and important? Because the church is not an accident. Because the church goes way back, way back to eternity. There in eternity past, there in the mind of God, is the concept of the church.

Therefore, unless we go back to the very beginning, we will never be able to understand what it is. Dear brothers and sisters, as you open the book of Ephesians, you'll find Apostle Paul tries to bring all of us back into eternity. And when you go back into eternity, when you go back into God, you'll find even Apostle Paul is lost in words and in thought.

What is the church from the eternal perspective? When you look at the church from the viewpoint of God, what do you see? You'll find that the church in the eternal concept of God is called a mystery. In Ephesians chapter 3, Paul says, he knows the mystery of Christ. The church is the mystery of Christ.

Who is Christ? What is Christ? Christ is the mystery of God. As Christ is the mystery of God, so church is the mystery of God. Why do we call it a mystery? You know, a mystery is not something that is mysterious.

You know, when you think of mystery, maybe you connect it with something mysterious. Now, if it's something mysterious, it is something not only hidden, but it's something not too bright, not too open. Now, you do not have this thought here.

The church is called the mystery of Christ. What do you mean by mystery? By mystery, it means it is something that is conceived by God in His thought before the world's foundation in eternity past. And this thought was hidden throughout the ages, waiting for the right and proper time to be unveiled and to be known to us.

Now, this is a mystery. So you'll find a mystery simply means that it is conceived in God's thought, it was hidden through the ages, and it waits to be revealed, to be known. That is a mystery.

Let me use an illustration. I came from a family that built houses for three generations. My grandfather was a builder, my uncles were builders, and my older brother was a builder.

But I have to tell you, I know nothing about building. I visited the buildings that they built, but I don't know how to build. But anyway, you'll find that if you're going to build something, and not just a barn or a hut, but if you're really going to build something that is magnificent, something that can express yourself, what must you do? First of all, there must be an architect.

There must be an architect. An architect will conceive an idea. I may conceive an idea as how a house should be built.

But if my idea is put into practice, probably it's an upside-down building. But an architect, an architect who has all the training, all the knowledge, all the talents, and I want to say this, all the personality. Now an architect, he conceives an idea of a building.

And that building is according not only to his thought, to his concept, and even to his character. That's the reason why every building is organic. Because it is not just dead things, dead stones piling together.

It is the idea of an architect. An architect projects his character, projects his personality, projects his thought, his idea, his values, his thought of beauty, of strength, and so forth. He projects all these, he conceives a thought.

When the building is in the mind of the architect, it is a mystery. Why? Because it is only known to the architect, but it is unknown to the whole world. Oh, in the mind of the architect, he carries a beautiful and glorious building.

But nobody sees that building. Nobody knows of that building. It is a mystery, a concept, an idea in the architect's mind.

Well, this may be in the architect's mind for years. It may be there for years, until the time is right, then you'll find he tries to translate his ideas into drawings. You have the blueprint? Oh, the blueprint! If you ever have seen an architect's blueprint, I have seen a lot.

I remember my brother used to carry rows after rows of these blueprints, and he would spread on that big table and look at them and study them, and as I look at them, all I can see is lines after lines, lines after lines. I do not understand anything. But here you'll find the architect translates.

He begins to put his ideas, to put his beautiful thoughts into drawings, into lines, into squares, and into all kinds of funny shapes and funny forms. Now he put all these there, and pages after pages, pages after pages. I cannot read these things, but my brother can.

Oh, how he pulled over these things and studied them and studied them, and estimate and compute. Oh, he knows what every line means and everything means. You know, he studied them.

What is it? To me, it's nothing. I cannot see the architect's idea there. I cannot see any beauty there.

I cannot see anything there. But to my brother, he sees a building. He sees before him a building standing up on these lines, standing up on these squares, and standing up on these cubes.

Why? Because he is a man with vision. A mystery is being revealed, and that is a vision to those who can see. But to those who are unlearned, it's nothing.

It's nothing. Then you'll find that after the blueprints are there and have been studied, then the builders came. Those who know how to read these blueprints.

And you'll find they began to work. They began to put these blueprints into concrete, and into bricks, and into mortars, and into all these steel beams and so forth. And they take long years until these lines begin to be transformed.

And then, finally, that building is before us. I go to that building, and then I appreciate it. Dear brothers and sisters, do you know that is exactly what happens? What is the Church? The Church is not something that suddenly comes up as if by accident.

The Church is not something that men try to gradually channel and form it until finally it becomes something. No. What is the Church? The Church is that idea, that concept, that thought, which is in the mind of God before the foundation of the world.

Before you and I ever existed. Before the first man came. Before the universe was formed.

There, in the mind of God, He has a beautiful and glorious idea. The Church does not begin with time. The Church begins before time begins.

The Church begins way back in eternity past. The Church does not begin with man. The Church begins with God.

Oh, dear brothers and sisters, remember this. The Church is not the outcome of time. The Church is not the result of man.

The Church comes directly from God, and it is before the foundation of this world. There, God conceives an idea. Probably you would like to ask the question, why is it that God should conceive the idea of the Church? I do not know too much.

But I think the reason why God conceives such an idea, even before time, is because of two reasons. God the Father. God so loves His only begotten Son that He wants to give something to His Son.

You know, love always likes to expand and to spend. The love of the Father is so great that He wants to expand His love to His Son. He wants to spend His love upon His Son.

How is He going to express His deep love for His Son? He wants to give something. Yes, He creates the universe. He creates the heavens and the earth.

He creates all the things in between. These are His gifts to His beloved Son. But these gifts, good as they are, they cannot communicate with His Son.

And because they cannot communicate with His Son, they cannot satisfy the heart of His beloved Son. Dear brothers and sisters, because of God the Father's great love towards His Son, He has to give some gift to His Son that will really answer the heart of His Son. That can respond.

That can correspond. That can communicate. That can be united.

That can have fellowship. That can be one with His Son. And what is it? It is not the angels.

It is not the heavens. It is not the earth and the fullness of the earth. No.

It is man. It is the Church. Expand and to expand.

So here we are. That's why we are. That's why we are in the mind of God.

Secondly, in the full knowledge of God. He knows that the angels, some of the angels that He has created, will rebel against Him. And that Lucifer, the archangel, will fall and become Satan, the adversary of God.

He knows beforehand, then this whole universe will be thrown into chaos. And He knows that Satan will set up himself an opposite kingdom. How is God going to deal with this situation? God conceives the idea of the Church before time, before anything is created.

It is on the basis of His strategy. The Church is not only His gift to the Son. The Church is God's tragedy towards His enemy.

It is easy for God to wipe out Satan and all his foes. And how often we ask this question. How often people who do not know God will ask this question.

Why is it that God does not wipe out Satan? They will receive lots of trouble. The world will not be like this today. And we will not suffer so much today.

Oh, if only God would be good enough to wipe out Satan. Oh, God just turn His hand and Satan is finished. There is no trouble to it.

Why doesn't God do that? Ah, God has His strategy. It is no glory to God if He just turn His hand and wipe out His enemy. Because He is greater.

There is no glory to Him. Therefore, in God's strategy, He made man a little lower than angels. And yet, with man who is little lower than angels, He destroys the angel that is higher than man.

And that is God's strategy. And because of that, He gets all the glory. Only God can do that.

What is man that Thou mount for of Him? What is man? Thou has made him a little lower than angels, and yet Thou has crowned him with honor. So, dear brothers and sisters, you will find here that in eternity past, God has conceived the idea of the church. On the one hand, as His gift to His Son.

On the other hand, as His answer to the enemy. I'm just getting to the point. My time is over.

Anyway, let me point out to you just a few phrases and leave it with you. If you read Ephesians chapter 1, you will find there are a few key phrases there that would explain the church as the eternal purpose of God in Christ Jesus. The first key phrase is found in verse 5, according to the good pleasure of His will.

First good pleasure of His will. The church is according to the good pleasure of His will. It is God's pleasure.

God has a will. God is the supreme will. And God wills our will.

God is pleased to have the church. It is not your pleasure, nor my pleasure primarily. But it is His pleasure.

It is His sovereign pleasure. It is His sovereign will. So number one, the good pleasure.

Number two, in verse 9. According to His good pleasure, which is purpose in Himself. After He has a good pleasure, then He made a purpose. You may have an idea.

Then you come to a decision, saying that now, this is what I want. I will have it. So remember, the church is the purpose of God, which He purposed in Himself.

And in chapter 3 you'll find it is the purpose of God, which He purposed in Christ Jesus. It is a purpose that concerns Christ. It is a purpose that is to be fulfilled in and through Christ.

And number three, verse 11. According to the purpose of Him, who works all things according to the counsel of His will. The counsel of His will.

First the pleasure, second the purpose, and then the counsel. That is, based on the plan. God has a definite plan concerning the church.

And then finally, also in verse 11, who works all things according to the counsel of His will. And verse 19. And what the surpassing greatness of His power towards us will believe according to the working of the might of His strength.

After He has a counsel and He put to work according to the might of His strength. Dear brothers and sisters, if you try to meditate these four points, then you know what a big place the church has in God. And if the church has such a big place in God, it ought to have a bigger place in each one of our hearts.

Our Heavenly Father, we do look to Thee for the spirit of wisdom and revelation. That we may know the mystery of the Christ, which is the church. We ask Thee that Thou would deliver us from ourselves, from our environment, even from history.

We pray that we may enter into Thy thoughts, enter into Thy mind, and there we may join our hearts with Thee and say glory to Thy name, in Thy precious name. Thank you.

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