



Together, the Last Frontier

What Do You Value About Church?

The church that raised me spiritually, that baptized me and showed me how it could be a Christian family had a thriving youth ministry. It wasn't large but it was close knit and we had lots of fun together. Somehow, we were given permission by the leadership to paint the youth rooms so colors were decided, and our group got after it. I was a teenager and of course knew everything and decided that it would be a good idea to paint a cross on the ceiling. The ceiling in the back may have been the most beautiful part of the facility. It was high, maybe fifteen feet up, and was built out of wood lacquered panels and large natural wood crossbeams. For some reason I thought we were also going to paint the ceiling and so I decided, when no one was looking, it would be somehow "spiritual" to take the yellow paint and with two swishes of it, create a large cross on the natural wood paneling. No one, as far as I knew it, saw me do my "masterpiece". When the rooms were finished, not another drop was put on the ceiling...it was left with the yellow cross plastered on the lovely, naturally stained redwood panels. What is more, it remained. No one confronted me over what I had done. I was never reprimanded. Thirty years later, I returned to my home church and went back to the rooms that used to house our youth group and there was that cross, still there, a monument to my childish attempt at being funny. I can't imagine anyone was ever inspired by that bright yellow cross, but over the years I realized just how valuable a church is that keeps you a part of it, even when you play the fool.

There is contained within our three key verses today, a lovely picture of God's blueprint for the Church. **But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus...** (Ephesians 2:4-6 NIV) It takes a bit of sleuthing to unpack the hidden treasure here, some knowledge of the Greek language which was originally used to provide us this passage. Three Greek words tell us how the Lord puts the church together. The first, found in verse five is translated "made us alive" by the NIV. We don't have an English term that matches its meaning precisely. The Greek word is *Suzopoieo* and means to "make alive together with another". Here is the gist of it. God's work was to make us alive together along with Christ. What we are told is that when God made us alive in salvation He also unites us with one another and with Christ.

The next verse, six, has two more Greek words that make a similar point. The first, translated "raised us up with" is *sunegeiro* and means to raise up together. In other words, the whole group is raised as a unit, lifted out of death together. And who is it that is with them? It is Jesus. Our second term which is translated "seated us with" in the verse is *sugkathizo*. It means to cause to sit with, to be seated in the company of all the rest and again it is with Christ. Salvation is God's work of putting all His people together in union with our Lord Jesus. So here is the gist of salvation. We are made alive altogether...with Christ. We are raised up altogether...with Christ. We are seated in the heavenlies altogether...with Christ. There is, in this compounding of similar verbs, the magnifying effect upon the main point. Salvation is not a solitary event. It

automatically brings you together with each and every one who has been born again and unites all Christians with Christ. This of course is not a development instituted by people, it is a supernatural work of God that cannot be stopped and will not be dismantled. To be Christian means that you automatically are joined to every other Christian and united with Christ through the work of God alone.

This cannot be expressed too emphatically. The Church is not a collection of religious minded individuals working for a common cause. It is the accomplishment of God, uniting all born-again believers into a union with Christ. We are in this together literally and Christ is at the center of us all. The Church is God created and God continued. One more point must be made here. All of this, being made alive together, being raised together and being seated in the heavenlies together happened at a particular moment in time. When Christ died on the Cross to save us, this complete work, described by the three Greek verbs took place then and was completed. Although we don't see it done yet, in God it is, it is finished and accomplished. To put it within an expression we often use, "what's done is done". Our destiny is fixed already and cannot be altered because it has occurred in and through Christ. Your place with Christ and all other believers was settled when Jesus was crucified. We live made alive with Christ, raised with Christ, and seated with Christ in the Heavenlies. As Jesus Himself stated on the Cross, "It is finished".

When Moses and his fellow Israelites marched out of Egypt, they did so together. Not one of those who were walking toward the Red Sea thought, "I did this myself". There was no puffed up pride in what was happening. It was God through and through who made the Exodus happen. The Israelites were not some great fighting force marching off to conquest. They were thoroughly in the hands of God, pulled together by Him and whatever they would accomplish was going to be because He was in it. When they crossed the Red Sea, it wasn't because they were master boat builders or inventors of wind machines that could push back the sea. It was all God and they followed Him. That is how we are. The Church is Christ living through all His people, putting them together and accomplishing with them what they could not do without Him. The Church is the center of God's greatest and most miraculous work and His people are cherished by Him.

A great picture of the Church is the account in the Old Testament of David and his collection of misfits and ruffians who joined him out in the desert. Together they wandered from cave to village, united in their loyalty to David and God. Wives and children were with them, a congregation of God's people who depended on Him to see them through their common trials. They didn't know what the future held or even if they would survive against King Saul, but they were in it together. The Church, when it is at its best, realizes that above all else we stick together. We may not agree on everything, it may get rough and challenges might seem too big to overcome, but with Christ as our King, we will see it through to the end. What is striking about this band of believers is how often they looked to God for guidance. A Church is no church if Christ is not constantly being sought for direction. What good is a church that is not sensitive to the Holy Spirit and able to find Him to show the way. We are so far beyond where David and his community were. We have both the Scriptures to direct us and the Holy Spirit to lead us. What a marvelous thing it is to be a part of the Church, full of God and joined with His people.

For me, the perfect picture of the Church is Christ in the boat with His disciples. Take any of the times that happened as recorded in the Bible and you have it perfectly. The disciples together, with all their faults, strengths and weaknesses going across the lake. Eventually they got there but it wasn't always easy for them and often they weren't sure they would make it across. Storms, frustrations, and worries shook them and yet they were all together with Jesus in it. Remember when the disciples got bent out of shape with each other for their failure to bring enough food for the trip. **The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat.** (Mark 8:14 NIV) Jesus had to remind them of all the times He provided for them bread, when He multiplied five small loaves and made enough to feed five-thousand. So often, we as the Church forget about how big Christ is and how able He is to make things work when it seems there is no way they can! Great storms are not too big for Jesus to manage! **Then he**

got into the boat and his disciples followed him. Without warning, a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!" He replied, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. The men were amazed and asked, "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!" (Matthew 8:23-27 NIV)

We are not perfect, us in the church, and we might not be respected for what we have done by the outside world, but we are, and will always be, God's plan for how to put His people together. We are a glimpse into heaven. Not the full view, not a clear picture, but a keyhole look into it. We stay together with Christ because that is how God wants us. We pray for one another, encourage each other, work together, laugh together, cry together, and come up short together sometimes, but always love each other because that is how Christ made us to be when we were born again. No, we won't agree all the time and sometimes we struggle to get along because we still are on this side of perfection, but we are above all else made for one another and it is quite comforting to know that among God's people, we belong.