

# Introduction



## WHY DO I NEED THE CHURCH?

Spirituality is not declining in America, but church affiliation is. Even those whose spirituality is grounded in the tenets of Christianity may question the value of the church. We hear things like, “I love Jesus, so why do I need the church?” Such thinking overlooks the great truth of the purpose of the church. Through faith in Christ, God gives us a new identity through Jesus and a new family in His church. Commitment to the church is a nonnegotiable part of Christian discipleship; by neglecting the church we will miss the great benefits and opportunities that come from being affiliated with and committed to God’s people.

In our study, we will explore Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians. We’re going to see how God’s encouragement to these first-century Christians still instructs our twenty-first century lives today. During our time together, we’ll discuss the following more deeply:

- ▶ We are joined together.
- ▶ We pray for one another.
- ▶ We support one another.
- ▶ We encourage one another.
- ▶ We strengthen one another.
- ▶ We stand together in spiritual battle.

Let’s dive in and see why we need the church—and why the church needs us.

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## SESSION 1

# We Are Joined Together



### **QUESTION 1:**

*When have you felt most at home with a group of people?*

## **THE POINT**

When we come to Christ, we also become a part of the body of Christ.

## **THE PASSAGES**

Ephesians 1:20-23; 2:8-10,19-22

## **THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE**

A few years ago, I visited Muir Woods National Monument—known for its beautiful California redwoods. Dwarfing other tree species, redwoods can grow to over 350 feet high and can be over 20 feet in diameter.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, as massive as these trees are, redwoods possess remarkably shallow root systems. But the roots overcome their lack of depth by extending outward more than 100 feet from the tree's base. Each tree's roots then intertwine with the roots of other redwoods. By joining together, the individual root systems create a forest of trees with staggering strength.<sup>2</sup>

The simple reality is that redwood trees were not created to exist in isolation—and neither were we. Just as a redwood tree requires a forest of other redwood trees in order to stand, so also the Christian requires a spiritual family in order to grow. The church—the body of Christ—is that family. Being a part of Christ's church is not an option. Through Jesus, God designed us to live and serve together as His body.

## Ephesians 1:20-23

**20** He exercised this power in Christ by raising him from the dead and seating him at his right hand in the heavens—

**21** far above every ruler and authority, power and dominion, and every title given, not only in this age but also in the one to come.

**22** And he subjected everything under his feet and appointed him as head over everything for the church,

**23** which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way.

**KEY WORDS:** **Right hand** (1:20)—To be at the “right hand” suggests occupying a position of prominence and power. James and John wanted to sit near Jesus after He was glorified (Mark 10:37).

The New Testament writers used various metaphors to describe God’s church, such as flock, temple, household, gathering, and so forth. But the most frequently used metaphor is “the body.” Through this picture, we learn that each Christ-follower is a member (or part) of the body while Jesus Christ is the head. Bodies have many parts, but a body possesses only one head. So, if the church is considered a body and that body can have just one head, then it only makes sense that Jesus would be the head.

As its head, Jesus holds ultimate authority over the church. His authority is not dictatorial, oppressive, arrogant, or abusive—but it is absolute. Someone might ask, “How is it that Jesus gets absolute authority over the church?” Jesus’ authority was neither received by democratic vote nor granted by a council’s affirmation; His authority has no root in human decision at all. Jesus received His authority as a demonstration of God’s power. In other words, Jesus’ authority is all about who He is as the Son of God. Consider what this passage tells us about God’s demonstration of His power through His Son, Jesus:

## DIGGING DEEPER

### EPHESIANS' UNIQUE MESSAGE

The cosmic rule of Christ is a unique

theme in Ephesians. For a deeper explanation about his reign, see the article on pages 106-109.

- ▶ God raised Jesus from the dead.
- ▶ God seated Jesus at His right hand in a place of ultimate authority over every other ruler.
- ▶ God gave Jesus an eternal rule—not only in this age, but also in the one to come.
- ▶ God put everything under Jesus' authority.
- ▶ God appointed Jesus as head over everything for the church.
- ▶ God appointed Jesus to fill all things in every way; in other words, everything finds its purpose in Jesus.

Through His power, God pronounced Jesus as the Ruler of all things—including His role as head of the church. This means no human leader stands as the ultimate authority in the local church. Although God has ordained offices to exist in the local church, no pastor or board serves as head. Only Jesus Christ sits at the right hand of God in the seat of ultimate authority as head of His church. All human leaders are to look to Jesus, follow His example, teach His Word, and submit to His leadership.

In the ancient world, the head was considered the life-giving member of the body—one that both controlled and sustained it. This is exactly what Paul told us in verse 22: Jesus is “head over *everything* for the church” (emphasis added). Jesus is not the head over *some* things for the church; He is head over *all* things. The church can do nothing of spiritual significance apart from Jesus. And since every Christian is a member of the body, it means that, as individuals, we can't do anything significant apart from Jesus.

The word *everything* also teaches us that believers cannot compartmentalize life so that Jesus is head over some things and not over others. Jesus is to be Lord over every aspect of our

lives. Whether we're obeying Jesus all alone in our workplaces or serving Jesus together through our church, we need the life-giving sustenance that only He can give. Just as a human body is lifeless without a human head, so also the church is powerless without a spiritual head. Jesus is head over everything for the church!

**QUESTION 2:**

*How is being a part of a church different from being a part of any other organization?*

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**Ephesians 2:8-10**

**8 For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift—**

**9 not from works, so that no one can boast.**

**10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do.**

In most clubs and organizations, you sign up to become a member. You pay the dues. You attend the meetings. Then, you go to work on the club's agenda. Unfortunately, we're often tempted to approach the church with a similar mindset. The Bible teaches us a radically different method for membership in His body. Membership in the body of Christ is not about what we do to get in. Instead, it's about what Jesus has done to bring us in. Few passages of Scripture sum up Jesus' work on our behalf like Ephesians 2:8-9. Follow Paul's train of thought in these two verses:

- ▶ **We are saved.** The need to be saved implies peril. We don't cry out for rescue from a party or game night. We cry for help when our lives are in danger. Paul described that danger earlier in the chapter: "You were dead in your trespasses and

sins” (Eph. 2:1). Consequently, “we were by nature children under wrath” (v. 3) Because of sin, everybody enters into the world spiritually dead. Accompanying that spiritual state is a nature opposed to God. In that condition, we face God’s wrath and judgment. Against the backdrop of this bad news, Paul gave us good news: God is merciful and loving toward us! “God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love that he had for us, made us alive with Christ” (vv. 4-5).

- ▶ **We are saved by grace!** *Grace* describes God’s undeserved favor towards sinful humanity. The One we’ve sinned against initiates the salvation we need. That’s other-worldly! It’s definitely counter-cultural—and it’s utterly undeserved. That’s grace at its heart. Salvation begins with God’s benevolent initiative toward us—not the other way around.
- ▶ **We are saved by grace through faith.** Some people think faith is simply a shot in the dark, an intellectual leap, or just believing without seeing. That’s not how the Bible describes faith. Faith is accepting the truth about who Jesus is and what He has done to reconcile us to God. What has Jesus done? He lived the perfect life we were required to live. He died the punishing death sin required us to die. God approved Christ’s sacrifice and raised Jesus from the dead; Jesus gained victory over death and offers us eternal life. Trusting these truths to make you right with God is at the heart of saving faith.
- ▶ **Every aspect of our salvation is God’s gift to us—not work done by us.** Twice in this passage, Paul reminded us that no work on our part can earn salvation. Rather, the entire process is a gift of God’s grace. We don’t enter Christ’s church by paying dues, signing a roster, or performing good works. God’s sovereign, merciful, and gracious work on our behalf enable us to be saved and to come into His church.

### QUESTION 3:

*What do these verses teach us about God’s grace?*



Why does God save sinners like you and me? We might think it's simply because He loves us. God most certainly loves us, but He saves us for a bigger reason than just to display His love. "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works." Do you see that distinction? God doesn't save us *by our* good works; He saves us *for His* good works. God saves us to show His divine handiwork. Through our redeemed lives, He displays for the world His character, love, and glory. And the local church is the place where He does that best.

## ENGAGE

*Since you are God's workmanship, what specific good works have you been "created in Christ Jesus" to do?*

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## Ephesians 2:19-22

**19** So then you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God's household,  
**20** built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.  
**21** In him the whole building, being put together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.  
**22** In him you are also being built together for God's dwelling in the Spirit.

God has always had a people. The Old Testament records God calling Israel (the Jews) to Himself. They were God's chosen people among the nations (the Gentiles). God commanded the Jews to

obey Him, to tell of His greatness, and to believe His promises—the greatest of which was the promise of salvation for both Jew and Gentile alike. God set His people apart from the nations to be a witness to the nations. But rather than obeying and believing, Israel continually disobeyed and disbelieved. And rather than allowing their chosen status to be a blessing to the nations, many used it as a tool of derision against the nations. *We're better than you because we're chosen; you're not.*

Fast forward to the New Testament. Both Jews and Gentiles populated the streets of the first-century world. This reality presented a dilemma for missionaries like Paul. As he preached the gospel, the message fell on different sets of ears.

- ▶ If you were a Jew, you'd likely think the gospel was just for you; after all, you were offspring of the covenant people of God!
- ▶ If you were a Gentile, you might hardly believe this message included you. Spiritually, your people had been on the outside looking in for generations. Moreover, your Jewish neighbors regularly reminded you of the racial divide that existed between you.

To the Gentile Christians in the Ephesian church, Paul wrote,

**“You were without Christ, excluded from the citizenship of Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Eph. 2:12-13).**

Because of their faith in Christ, the Gentile believers had been brought near and were “no longer foreigners and strangers.” Though foreigners and strangers possessed some legal rights, they lacked the full rights of citizenship. Spiritually, the Jews felt superior while the Gentiles felt inferior. But Paul shattered both of these feelings by pointing to the uniting work of the gospel. God's people come from many nations and backgrounds, but we are all one in Christ.

You and I are modern-day Gentiles. We come from a variety of countries, speak a multitude of languages, and celebrate diverse traditions. Our skin colors are various shades of light and dark. Our accents preclude any sense of sameness. We eat different foods, play different games, and vote for different leaders. Yet, in Christ's church, we share the same citizenship and hail from the same family through Jesus!

Great diversity exists in the family of God, but we hold a mutual responsibility of togetherness. God built us together to be His dwelling. Each follower of Christ in your church is a brick in the temple of God. He takes those individual bricks and forges us together by the mortar of His gospel. We depend on each other far more than we may think.

Our culture is becoming increasingly individualistic. It's hard not to allow that reality to affect the way we view the church. But Scripture presents a radically different approach. The church is not simply about me or my needs. The church is not a club we can take or leave. Fellow church members are not spiritual acquaintances we should keep at arm's length. The church is God's household—His family. It's the Body for whom Christ died. And for the Christian, the church is a nonnegotiable need. When we come to Christ, we also become a part of the body of Christ. Just as the California redwoods grow by the united togetherness of their roots, so also Christians grow by the united togetherness of our souls.

**QUESTION 4:**

*When have you experienced a sense of togetherness in your church?*

**QUESTION 5:**

*How has the church played a significant role in your life?*

## LIVE IT OUT

How will you embrace your role as a member of Christ's church? Consider the following applications:

- ▶ **Confess.** In order to adopt a right mindset of your part in Christ's church, confess any wrong attitudes you hold (or have previously held) about individuals in your local church.
- ▶ **Submit.** Read Ephesians 1:20-23 again and reflect upon the power and authority of Jesus Christ. Submit your life to His authority and control.
- ▶ **Commit.** If you're not a member of a local church, pursue membership to begin experiencing the beauty of living "together" in the household of God. This might mean going through a membership class or talking to a pastor. If you're already a member, commit yourself anew to the covenant and mission of your church.

Our experiences with church in the past can affect our approach to church today. But God's grace can help us embrace a healthy view of our role in Christ's church. Make a conscious decision to commit to God's view of His church rather than a human approach.



### END NOTES

1. "Ancient Redwoods Thrive Along the Big Sur Coast," *Big Sur Chamber of Commerce*, <http://www.bigsurcalifornia.org/redwoods.html>

2. "The Redwood Root System," *Exploring the Eel River Valley*, [https://sunnyfortuna.com/explore/redwoods\\_and\\_water.htm](https://sunnyfortuna.com/explore/redwoods_and_water.htm)



## EPHESIANS' UNIQUE MESSAGE

By Rodney Reeves

Ephesians reads like a collection of what Paul had written in his other letters. As any Bible with cross references reveals, every verse in Ephesians leads the reader to passages in Paul's other letters that deal with the same subject. This is especially true since Ephesians is so similar to Colossians—they share the same outline, they develop the same topics in much the same way, and they even have the same instructions regarding Tychicus (nearly verbatim agreement, Eph. 6:21-22; Col. 4:7-8). What makes Ephesians unique, however, is the way certain ideas Paul briefly mentioned in other

Marketplace at Ephesus.

letters are developed more fully in this letter, which was written toward the end of his life. “We may never know for certain the situation that prompted Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. What is apparent, however, is that this letter captures the heart and soul of his gospel ministry, the essence of his Christology and ecclesiology.”<sup>1</sup> Although several topics in Ephesians could be explored, for the purposes of this article, I would like to feature what could be considered the main themes of the letter: the cosmic rule of Christ, how believers reign with Christ, and how believers can overcome evil.

### **PAUL’S MESSAGE**

Paul wrote about the implications of Christ’s resurrection for all creation in Romans 8:18-25. His main focus, however, was on believers—how the resurrection glory of Christ will be revealed in us on the last day: a hope that is not seen but confirmed by the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit. That Christ’s resurrection would affect all creation—an ancillary point in Romans—Paul developed in Colossians 1:11-23 and Ephesians 1:11-23. In particular, Paul wanted “the eyes” of the Ephesians’ “heart to be enlightened” to realize the power of Christ’s victory over death, over the malevolent powers “of the air,” and over every named creature of this age and the age to come (Eph. 1:18–2:2).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Paul used quite a bit of “power talk” wrapped in royal imagery as he tried to get his converts to see the implications of Christ’s resurrection: Christ ascended

to God’s throne, was seated at the right hand (an idiom of unquestioned authority), having put all creation “under his feet” (another idiom of royal supremacy), and was installed with the highest name (the King!). Therefore, no power can oppose the Ruler of all things

On the heels of making these claims regarding Christ’s resurrection power, Paul wrote about how believers share in Christ’s reign (2:1-16; see also Rom. 6:4-14; Col. 2:9-15). Paul made the connection when he described the church as the body of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23). In other words, since the church is the body of Christ, and since Christ has put all creation under His feet, then the church reigns over all things—even created powers that are hostile to Christ and His kingdom. And, what does that look like? Before they were saved, Paul’s converts were dead in sin—beholden to the ways of the world, to fleshly desires, and to the “spirit” that incites disobedience (2:1-3). But Christ’s resurrection—His victory over sin, death, and all powers that oppose God—is a power that is realized by those who have been saved by grace through faith. Believers are co-regents of Christ’s kingdom, installed by God “in heavenly places in Christ Jesus” because we are His body. This explains how believers live transformed lives; they do the work of God because they are the work of God (vv. 8-10). For Paul the best evidence of transformed lives was the peace of Christ found in the church. Ethnic strife (what Paul called “the



Baths with stilted floor. At Ephesus, the Baths of Varius were located just off Curetes Street. The limited excavations have revealed a changing room, a frigidarium (for a cool bath), a tepidarium (for warm baths), a caldarium with its heated floors (shown), and a sudatorium (sweat room).

enmity”) between Jews and Gentiles—a wall erected by the law—was abolished through the work of Christ because God has reconciled the whole world, turning enemies into friends (vv. 11-16). If believers are seated in heavenly places with Christ, having authority over all powers, then what happens in the “real world”—for Christians who still face the reality of living on the earth “below” with the “ruler of the power of the air” (the devil?) above us? In Ephesians 4:24, Paul encouraged his converts to put on “the new man,” wearing Christ like a garment. A similar idea appears in Romans 13:12-14, where Paul encouraged the Romans to resist evil by wearing Christ like an “armor of light.” In this way, they would make “no provision for the flesh.” Paul expanded that idea in Ephesians 6:10-17, where he described the “whole armor of God,” relying on imagery in Isaiah 11:5; 49:2;

52:7; and 59:17. By wearing Christ like an armor, the believer does battle against evil powers, both in heavenly places and on earth (Eph. 6:12). Like a bullet-proof vest, Christ defends His co-regents from the flaming missiles of the evil one, that is, “the schemes of the devil” (v. 16, see v. 11). And, by His Spirit, Christ empowers believers to use God’s Word like a sword through prayer and the proclamation of the gospel (vv. 18-20). In this way, Ephesian believers would “be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might” (v. 10). Christ leaves them neither defenseless nor powerless.

### PAUL’S MOTIVATION

Why did Paul highlight these ideas in his Letter to the Ephesians? His reason had everything to do with what was going on in Ephesus at the time. Said one writer:

Ephesus was the center of magic, astrology, and the mystery religions, and many converts to Christ in that city were once involved with these religious practices. They believed that their lives were under the influence of cosmic powers. Paul may have written, among other purposes, to alleviate their fears by showing that Christ is sovereign in the cosmos.<sup>3</sup>

One of the seven wonders of the ancient world was in Ephesus, the great Temple of Artemis (also called Diana). The temple had a reputation for trafficking in magic; priests who served sold magical amulets to protect devotees from malevolent powers. Sown into their clothes or worn

around their necks and wrists (charm bracelets!), these charms protected parts or zones of the body: head, heart, hands, loins, or feet. According to Luke, when the Ephesians believed Paul’s gospel, they burned all of their magical paraphernalia (Acts 19:18-19). Once Paul left the area, evidently the Ephesians began to question their impulsive response to the gospel: should they have destroyed their magical protection? Without their amulets, would they be vulnerable to the attacks of the devil and his minions? This makes Paul’s argument regarding the power of Christ’s resurrection even more poignant. Since Christ put all enemies under His feet (“rule, authority, power, and dominion” were technical words used to refer to the angelic or demonic powers), and since the church is His body, then all powers (angelic and demonic) are—by the power and presence of Christ in us— under our feet, too. Indeed, believers reign with Christ in their victory over every enemy of God: sin, death, the flesh, and the devil. Raised with Christ, a believer wears Christ in His resurrection power like an armor, protecting every zone of his or her body: head (helmet of salvation), heart (breastplate of righteousness), hands (shield of faith), loins (belt of truth), and feet (gospel of peace). So that, no matter what happened to them (even to a man like Paul who was in prison when he wrote this letter, Eph. 6:20), the Ephesian believers should have been inspired to proclaim boldly the good news of Jesus Christ. Indeed, more than for self-defense, Christ put into the hands of the Ephesians the sword of His Spirit—the Word of God—to advance His reign against the forces of darkness in wicked places. The Ephesians had everything they needed to “stand firm” (6:14) in the faith because Christ was raised from the dead and His soldiers reigned with Him—on earth as it is in heaven.

1. David B. Capes, Rodney Reeves, and E. Randolph Richards, *Rediscovering Paul: An Introduction to His World, Letters and Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 234.
2. Scripture quotes are the writer’s own translation.
3. John McRay, *Paul: His Life and Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 348.



Doorway in the foreground. In the distance, columns of the Church of St. John. According to some early church traditions, after John completed his exile on Patmos, he made his home in Ephesus. Once a massive structure, the church was built over the supposed burial site of John.

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