



THE CHURCH

3. Its Relationship to Christ

Christ died for the church

Christ's death is related not simply to individuals, but to the people of God, the church. The announcement to Mary about the impending birth of Jesus was that he would save his people from their sins.

It was clear, when Jesus took the cup and gave it to his disciples at the last supper, that he saw his death as bringing a new "Israel" or people of God into being. Ever since that time, the church has remembered in the Lord's Supper the cost Christ paid to found the church.

Christ builds the church

Jesus came to found, not a philosophy, but a community. It was basic to the early Christians' thought that new converts were immediately added to the fellowship; that all who had fellowship with the Father and the Son would be related to one another.

It was more than addition, however. Christ is the very source of the church's life, and so to be in the church is to experience Christ's life in a unique way. By his Spirit he directs the church, gives spiritual gifts to its members and creates unity and love.

Christ protects the church

In the Old Testament God's people were often protected by God, for example, in the story of the blazing furnace in the book of Daniel.

In the New Testament, we are told that Christ protects his people, the church. He defends the church from the attacks of Satan, and preserves it in adversity. More than this, he provides the power for the church to launch its own attacks against Satan. The church is not on the defensive – it is on the offensive.

Christ purifies the church

In the Old Testament, some of the prophets pictured Israel as a wife who had been unfaithful to her husband. God's people had been unfaithful to the promises they had made in their covenant with him.

The church is only seen as faithful and pure in the New Testament because of Christ. He has cleansed the church by his death, and continues to keep her holy. We are told that finally Christ will receive the church as a perfect bride: faithful and pure.

Christ intercedes for the church

The word "intercede" means to act on someone else's behalf as a peacemaker. It is encouraging to know that because of Christ's death on our behalf, he is now in heaven as a man, representing us before the Father.

Because Christ intercedes for us, we are assured of at least three guarantees. First, we are forgiven because of his death. Second, we have free access to God because of his presence in heaven. Third, we are protected against condemnation for our sins by his words spoken in our defence.

Christ prepares for the church

Jesus reassured his friends when he warned them of his departure that they need not be anxious about the future, as he would be preparing a home for them. This shows us that Christ loves the church, and longs to enjoy the company of those who believe in him. His work will not be complete until the church is in the place he has prepared for it.

BIBLE CHECK

Died for: Matthew 1:21; 26:26-29; Acts 20:28

Builds: Ephesians 4:11-16; Acts 2:46-47

Protects: Daniel 3:19-27; Matthew 16:18-19

Purifies: Jeremiah 3:6,14; Ephesians 5:25-27

Intercedes: Hebrews 7:25-27; 1 John 2:1; Romans 8:34

Prepares: John 14:1-4; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17

KEY TRUTH

The life, witness and continuance of the church is totally dependent upon its relationship to Jesus Christ, its builder and protector.

POSTSCRIPT

Christ's love for his church led him to give up his own life for her. The church is called to do the same – to submit to the interests of her Lord and to fulfil his will.

BIBLE STUDY Ephesians 4:1-16

Paul is far from his friends, under house arrest in Rome, awaiting trial under Nero. Yet he is able to remind his readers of the soaring heights to which Christ has lifted the members of God's New Society in Ephesus; men and women who have been chosen in him, predestined, made alive with Christ, reconciled through the cross, given access to the Father, made fellow-citizens and built into a holy temple.

- 1 In view of the Ephesian Christians' high calling, how are they now to live (verses 1-3)?
- 2 When it comes to unity, notice the frequency of the word "one" (verses 3-6). What does this tell us about certain unchangeable facets of the world-wide Christian church?
- 3 Move on to verse 13. If, in verse 3, there is already in existence a spiritual unity to be maintained, there seems to be a second unity that is yet to be attained. Try to establish from verses 13-14 the nature of this unity and goal that still lies ahead.
- 4 If the church at large – indeed any local fellowship – is travelling from a unity that already exists towards a unity that lies ahead, what lies between? What makes it possible to negotiate this journey? The clue lies in verses 7-12.
- 5 If oneness was the earlier theme, now the diversity of the gifts given by the incarnate and now ascended Christ (verses 9,10) comes into prominence. What are the gifts for?
- 6 The Head ... the body (verses 15-16). How do we practise this unique relationship?

REFLECTION

A Consider the message of Revelation 3:1-6. John is conveying Christ's message to the church in Sardis (in present-day Turkey). How is this passage relevant to the church in general, and to your fellowship today? List the accusations, the challenges, and the promises of these verses.

B "The Bible knows nothing of solitary religion" (John Wesley). Why should a Christian bother about the church of Jesus Christ?

C Look at Revelation 1:5-6. What has Jesus done for his church?

D Read Daniel 3:13-28. What message is there in this story for today's church?