

God's Master Plan for the Church

Preacher: Eric Peterson

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References: **Ephesians 3**, Ephesians 3:4-11; Romans 16:25-26; Colossians 1:24-26; Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 4:8-11; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Acts 1:5; Acts 2:4; Acts 2:47; Acts 5:11; Revelation 2-3

And the subtitle is, "And He Gave Himself for It."

This is God's master plan: a plan conceived in His heart from before the foundation of the world. Israel, His earthly people, were a people that were chosen since the foundation of the world; they were taken from among the people of the world. God's plan for a bride for the King of kings and the Lord of lords is something that He conceived in His heart from all eternity.

The Mystery Hidden in Ages Past

Now, first, last week we looked at—or two weeks ago, I guess it was—we looked at some things that the church was likened to. Well, what is the origin of the church itself? The church did not exist in the Old Testament. Some teach that, and some godly people have taught that the church is a continuation of Israel from the Old Testament into the New. But the Scriptures do not support that position. As a matter of fact, it makes it very plain.

If we turn to Ephesians chapter 3, for example—Ephesians chapter 3 and verses 4, 5, and 9—you'll see this clearly, and we'll look at a couple of others as well. Chapter 3 then of Ephesians, and verse 4:

[Ephesians 3:4-5 NKJV]

⁴ by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), ⁵ which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets:

What was this mystery?

[Ephesians 3:6-7 NKJV]

⁶ that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel, ⁷ of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power.

There we see very plainly. Also verse 9, we'll take a look:

[Ephesians 3:8-11 NKJV]

⁸ To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹ and to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; ¹⁰ to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, ¹¹ according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord,

Then we read also in Romans chapter 16. We read there again that Paul is referring to this mystery—the mystery of the gospel. This is something different altogether; it's the gospel of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Chapter 16 and verse 25:

[Romans 16:25-26 NKJV]

²⁵ Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began ²⁶ but now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith--

And then one that isn't referenced here in the notes, but one that we should look at anyway, is in Colossians chapter 1. Colossians chapter 1, verse 26—and I guess we should read from verse 24:

[Colossians 1:24-26 NKJV]

²⁴ I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in

the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church, ²⁵ of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God, ²⁶ the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints.

So it's very plain that the church was a secret. It was kept by God all through the Old Testament and never revealed until the New Testament apostles and prophets appeared. And then this new revelation of the church came into being. So the church didn't exist in the Old Testament at all; it was something yet to be revealed.

The Foundation and the Bride

Now notice, too, in Matthew chapter 16 and verse 18, it was still future when Jesus was here in the flesh on earth. It was not established yet. We read in Matthew chapter 16 and verse 18:

[Matthew 16:18 NKJV]

And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.

On this rock. This is the first mention of the church in the Bible as such. This new entity would come, and this is the first mention of it, and it's mentioned in the future: "I will build My church." He was not building it in the Old Testament. When He brought Israel out of Egypt, brought them into their promised land, He was not building the church. He wasn't building the church when He set up David on the throne and He conquered nations, and then the glory of Solomon's reign, and then the great temple that Solomon made, which is a marvel of all the earth. He wasn't building His church. He said, "I will build My church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."

You could say here, too, that the risen Christ gave gifts to the church in Ephesians chapter 4:8-11. It wasn't until Christ rose again from the dead that He sent gifts, that is the Holy Spirit, to edify the body of Christ. The body wasn't formed before that. Christ had to rise from the dead in order for the body to be edified by the gifts the risen Lord would give.

The church, then, was God's master plan. It was conceived in His heart before the worlds were ever made. He was going to set up a glorious kingdom, and His Son would be the King of kings, the Lord of lords. But a king needs a queen. And so in the heart of God, He chose

from before the foundation of the world a body of believers who would trust Christ in this age, who would then become the bride of Christ. Master plan.

How do you become part of the bride? Well, through simple faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Whosoever will, let him come; whosoever will, let him be saved. This message is for whosoever—no limit anywhere in the world. Wherever the word is preached, the message goes out for everyone to come into the body of Christ through faith in Him. Then you are the Lord's elect.

The Birth of the Church at Pentecost

Now, when was the church formed? The birth of the church—how was it formed? We read there that the church, the body of Christ, was formed by the baptism of the Holy Spirit. 1 Corinthians chapter 12, please, and verse 13:

[1 Corinthians 12:13 NKJV]

For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free--and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.

So the body of Christ was formed at the baptism of the Spirit, when the Spirit of God came from the Lord Jesus and from the Father who sent the Spirit. But Christ had to die and rise again in order for the Spirit to be sent. He had to be the glorified One for the Spirit to come.

And then when did that happen? Well, that's the next question: when was the church formed? Paul was writing to the Corinthians and saying that that happened in the past. But when did it happen?

Well, we read that in Acts chapter 1. We read that the disciples were all gathered in Jerusalem, and the Lord Jesus there in verse 5 tells them:

[Acts 1:5 NKJV]

for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

Then He was taken up from them after forty days among them. And then on the fiftieth day—so that would be "not many days from now," it would be ten days—they were all together in the house praying on the day of Pentecost. And so in chapter 2 and verse 4, we read:

[Acts 2:4 NKJV]

And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

So the Holy Spirit came down upon them all there in that little room. That was the baptism, or we might say the birth, of the church of Jesus Christ.

And then the church is mentioned for the first time after the new believers are saved in chapter 2 of Acts and verse 47:

[Acts 2:47 NKJV]

praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

There's the first mention of the church in the book of Acts. There we see that the church had already been formed. And again, chapter 5 and verse 11:

[Acts 5:11 NKJV]

So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things.

So the church now is in existence, we find there. It seems to pinpoint the birthday of the church as occurring at Pentecost itself.

The Universal and the Local Church

Now, for the sake of time, we must move on, and we want to look for a brief moment this morning about the local church. We've been talking a lot about the universal church, and that is made up of all believers of all time. We call them the invisible or mystical church. It isn't something you can go to some place to see where the church is. The church basically is made up of true believers who receive Christ in their heart, and so their center is in heaven, not on the earth. That's made up of all believers of all time and all places. Some have fallen asleep; many have fallen asleep, but many are still living. Some are in one place, some are in another. And so that's the universal church of which we've been talking about.

But the New Testament also speaks of local churches; that is, made up of believers in any given locality. For instance, we read of churches or assemblies—because a church, really, that's what it means. The word assembly or church is from the Greek word *ecclesia*, and it's translated normally in our Bibles as "church," but it means an assembly of people called out for any reason, for any purpose. So we read of churches or assemblies in the Bible: of the church at Jerusalem, the church at Corinth, the church at Rome, the church at Ephesus, and so on, one after the other. And these are made up of believers from any local gathering.

Now, the features of a local church, briefly, are:

1. **They're independent of other churches.** That is, each local church that we find in the New Testament is sovereign by itself. It doesn't answer—the church at Rome did not answer to the church at Jerusalem even, and the church at Ephesus did not dominate the churches of Asia, even though it was a very big church and a very wealthy church and a very important church. One church did not dominate others; each church was sovereign, independent of every other church.
2. **The churches all had fellowship with one another.** As Paul moved among the churches, he went from place to place, from one church to another, and we read about those greeting others in other churches and so on. The churches are supposed to have fellowship.
3. **All the churches were subject to one Head.** Not a head that's in Boston or New York or any other place, or in Rome—the Head in heaven. We're subject to the one Head of the church, which is the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is only an introduction to the local church. We're going to be looking at much detail in the future as I have opportunity to speak, and we'll highlight much of the truth of the New Testament assembly.

This is just an introduction: the local church, how do we meet then? What are the principles that we would gather to? Well, we find that the New Testament is the sufficient and the only true guide as to how the local church should function. We don't need the world's ways of thinking. If we do, the world will creep in, and the Head Himself and the Holy Spirit, who is Christ's representative in the church, is obscured, and man becomes the dominant factor. So that around us in the world, we see all kinds of practices that are not scriptural at all, and there's an attendant problem coming with every one of those departures from the New Testament guide that God has given to us.

Motivation and Attitude

Now, in conclusion, all believers are members of the universal church, but we are instructed to gather together in such a way as to give expression to the great truths of the New

Testament. That's our purpose. We don't just do what we feel like. If we are going to be obedient to the word of God, God has given certain guidelines and instructions that we should seek to follow and to carry out. And so that's our great mission there.

Now, some groups of Christians—when you say churches, there's a church down not far from where I live, and there's churches here, there's churches there. As you drive down the roads of the city, you come across these little churches, and there are little gatherings in homes as well. Some are big and some are small. Now, are they churches? Are they assemblies of Christians? Some make a very poor representation of a New Testament assembly, and others present a more faithful likeness of what God requires for a New Testament assembly.

The book of Revelation, in chapters 2 and 3, gives pictures of seven churches in one area of Asia Minor, beginning with Ephesus and Smyrna and so on—seven churches, and they were all different. They were all churches. Some, the doctrine was very bad; some, the practices were bad; some, they were asleep, the churches. But they were all assemblies. Christ viewed them as testimonies because they were lampstands; they were testimony for Him.

How bright a testimony are we going to be will depend upon two things:

1. Which we've been talking about: how closely we try to carry out the principles that the Head has given to us in the Scriptures.
2. What motivates us—and that's probably more important than the principles—is our attitude toward carrying them out.

Because we could be very strict, and we could make a formula that we do this, do that, we don't do this, we don't do that, we do this, and then we could say we're the perfect church—except for the problem: our hearts are far from Him. The heart has to be in tune with the Head of the church, and the Lord's heart, too.

The love for the One who gave Himself for the church should motivate us. If He gave Himself for the church and loved the church, that should be our motivation as well. And we want to present as faithful an image of the body of Christ to those around us, and there be a lampstand that is glorifying to the Lord.

Well, more to come in the future. May the Lord bless.

Let's just close with a word of prayer:

Our God and Father, we thank You once again for Your grace and Your goodness to us. And we thank You that You love the church; You gave Yourself for it. There isn't anything more costly in all the world than that which You purchased for Yourself, and so a pearl of great price is what the church is.

So, Father, we pray Your blessing upon us now for the baptism that will follow, the message that will be given, and we pray a blessing. We thank You for the refreshments that we'll enjoy. We give You thanks in Jesus' name. Amen.

Thank you.