

CHAPTER TWO

The Church's Highest Priority

This is a revolutionary age.

The hurricane winds of change are howling around the world. The human race seethes with unrest and rebellion. Our political institutions are polarized, divided to the left and right without any common ground in the center. Despite the signs of current prosperity, our debt-ridden, hair-triggered economy seems precariously balanced on the verge of collapse. We have barred and deadbolted our homes, making ourselves prisoners while criminals roam free in our neighborhoods, graffiti-tagging and shooting at random, filling our hearts with fear. With every day's headlines, with every new atrocity or terrorist attack, we see more evidence that there is a very thin line which separates civilization from anarchy. We seem to be approaching not just a political breakdown, but a cultural meltdown.

What is our response? Is there anything the church can do in the face of such complex and insoluble problems? Can the church make a difference in this wobbly, dangerous world? Or has the church simply become irrelevant?

Amazingly, when Paul wrote his letter to the Christians in the city of Ephesus, the Christians of the first century faced strikingly similar problems and asked similar questions. Ephesus was a city in the Roman province of Asia, and the entire Roman empire was being shaken by political instability, civil unrest, crime, and radical change. Half the population of the Empire were slaves, sunk into such hopeless bondage that they were traded and sold like cattle. Except for a small class of rich aristocrats and patricians, most of the population eked out a poverty-line living as farmers, tradesmen, and laborers.

The moral corruption of Ephesus was legendary. The city was the center of worship for the sex-goddess, Diana of the Ephesians. As for cruelty, the Roman legions were ready to march anywhere to suppress any rebellion or civil disorder with ruthless slaughter. The ruler of the Roman world was Emperor Nero, whose sordid and savage life had scandalized the empire.

Paul was in Rome, a prisoner of Caesar, when he wrote his letter to the Ephesians. He was awaiting the hour when he would be summoned before Nero. Though permitted to live in his own rented house, Paul could not go about the city. Instead, he was subjected to the indignity of being chained day and night to a Roman guard. Seeing about him the decadent life of the city and knowing the conditions which prevailed in distant Ephesus, what would the apostle tell the Christians to do when he wrote? The answer is striking and instructive: "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Eph. 4:1-3.)

What does the apostle say to the Ephesian church in the face of so many desperate cries of human need? What is his answer to the pleas for justice and relief from oppression all around him? Simply this: *Fulfill your calling! Obey your orders! Don't deviate from the divine strategy! Follow your Lord!*

In this admonition the apostle clearly recognizes the true nature and function of the church. It is not a human institution. It is not expected to devise its own strategy and set its own goals. It is not an independent organization, existing by means of the strength of its numbers. It is, rather, a body called into a special relationship to God. Within this letter to the Ephesians, the apostle employs several word-pictures to describe the relationship between God and the church:

A body: Paul says the church is a body under the control of its Head. What a tragedy it would be if that body refused to respond to the direction of its Head! In realm of medicine, there are diseases which ravage the nerve pathways which enable the human brain to control the human body. It is tragic and heartbreaking to see a person bound to a wheelchair or hospital bed, unable to control his movements and body functions. A church which is unresponsive to its Head is every bit as tragic and heartbreaking to watch.

A temple: The church is also a temple for the exclusive habitation and use of a Person who dwells within, and who has the right to do with that temple whatever He wills.

An army: The church is an army under the command of a king. An army that will not obey its leader is useless as a fighting force. Therefore, says Paul to the church, obey your orders, follow your Head.

The divine strategy

Paul didn't just preach to the Ephesians. He was an example to them. After languishing for two years as a prisoner in Caesarea, Palestine, he had been sent to Rome on a perilous sea voyage which ended in shipwreck on the island of Malta. Finally, he arrived at Rome, a prisoner of the Roman emperor. Yet never once in his letter does he refer to himself as "the prisoner of Caesar." He always calls himself "a prisoner of [or for] the Lord." He does not fret about being chained up in prison. Read his letter to the Philippians (which was also written from prison in Rome), and you'll find it glows with an aura of joy and the assurance of ultimate triumph.

Paul does not consider himself a prisoner of Caesar. The Roman emperor may think he runs the world and everyone in it, but there is a much higher Authority in charge. Behind Caesar is Christ, and Caesar can do nothing to Paul unless the Lord Jesus Christ allows it. Paul sees beyond the chains and the guard and the imperial processes of justice--and what he sees there is the controlling hand of Jesus Christ.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul says, "We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen" (2 Cor. 4:18). Why? Because that is where the ultimate answers lie. That is where ultimate truth is found, where the ultimate power exists. Jesus himself reflected this same attitude when He stood before Pontius Pilate.

Pilate said to Him, "Do you not know that I have power ... to crucify you?" Jesus replied immediately, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above" (John 19:10,11).

Much of the explanation for the confusion which exists so widely in the church today is that Christians have been looking at the things seen instead of at the things that are unseen. We see a suffering world with human need groaning and screaming everywhere. Hate and bigotry abound, injustice prevails and misery exists wherever we turn. The obvious solution: Let's get to work--now! What are we waiting for? Let's do something--*anything!*

It sounds so logical--but that is because our human thinking is shallow and superficial. We only see the things that are visible. In our shallow concern for externals we treat symptoms and not causes. We apply superficial remedies that work only for the moment, if they work at all. Soon the situation is worse than before--and we wonder why.

We desperately need this practical admonition of the apostle: "Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called" (Eph. 4:1). The One who has called us sees life much more clearly than we do. He has devised a strategy that will actually remove the root cause of human darkness and misery--not just cover the cancer of sin with a Band-Aid. When the church is faithful to its calling--it becomes a healing agency in society, able to lift a whole nation or an empire to a higher plateau of healthy, wholesome living.

In his monumental history of the world, *The Story of Civilization*, Will Durant compares the influence of Caesar and Christ. He says of Jesus:

The revolution he sought was a far deeper one, without which reforms could be only superficial and transitory. If he could cleanse the human heart of selfish desire, cruelty, and lust, utopia would come of itself, and all those institutions that rise out of human greed and violence, and the consequent need for law, would disappear. Since this would be the profoundest of all revolutions, beside which all others would be mere coup d'etats of class ousting class and exploiting in its turn, Christ was, in this spiritual sense the greatest revolutionist in history. (1)

The true church is here to effect that revolution. The false church is here to oppose it. But true Christians actually promote the cause of false Christianity when, through ignorance or mistaken zeal, they deviate from the divine strategy and disobey their divine calling. We mere humans cannot improve on the divine program. Nor are we left in doubt as to what that calling is. The first three chapters of Ephesians are devoted to describing it, and it is also detailed elsewhere throughout the New Testament. If Christians are to give intelligent obedience to their Lord, they must give highest priority to understanding what He wants them to be and do.

Back to reality

Human strategies are founded upon limited human understanding and the best estimates human beings can make. But God's strategy, His calling upon our lives, is based upon an absolutely perfect understanding of fundamental and ultimate reality. In fact, that is the glory of Christianity: it sets forth things as they really are. The Christian diagnosis of all the world's ills--from conflicts between nations to conflicts within an individual human soul--is accurate because it reflects a true understanding of the human condition.

The New Testament epistles always begin with the truth--what we call "doctrine." The New Testament writers always call us back to reality. Then, on the basis of that underlying foundation of truth, they go on to suggest certain practical applications. How foolish it is to start with anything but truth!

In the opening chapters of Ephesians, Paul makes several clear statements regarding the purpose of the church--and not merely its purpose for eternity, off in misty futurity, but its purpose right *here*, right *now*. Let's examine some of these statements of the nature and purpose of the church:

Purpose No. 1: *The church is to reflect God's holiness.*

"He chose us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him" (Eph. 1:4). Here we see clearly that the church is no afterthought with God. It was planned long before the world was made.

And what is God's first concern for the church? He is not, first of all, concerned with what the church *does*, but with what the church *is*. *Being* must always precede *doing*, for what we *are* determines what we *do*. To understand the moral character of God's people is essential to understanding the nature of the church. As Christians, we are to be a moral example to the world, reflecting the pure character and holiness of Jesus Christ.

I once read of two American men who were riding on a train in Britain. (English trains have compartments where up to six people can be seated). In the compartment with these two men was a very distinguished-looking gentleman. The two Americans were quietly discussing him. "I'd wager money," whispered one of them, "that the fellow over there is the Archbishop of Canterbury."

The other American said, "He can't be. I'll take that wager."

So the first man approached the gentleman and said, "Sir, would you mind telling us, are you the Archbishop of Canterbury?"

The Englishman looked up in annoyance and snarled, "Mind your own blankety-blank business! What the

blankety-blank difference does it make to you who I am?"

So the first American turned to the other and said, "He'll never tell us if he's the Archbishop or not! The bet's off!"

Obviously, a genuine Christian--whether he's an Archbishop or a run-of-the-mill layperson--ought to give clear, convincing evidence of their Christianity by the way they talk, live, act, and react. We Christians are called to be "holy and blameless" before God. We are to reflect His holiness. That is one of the purposes of the church.

Purpose No. 2: *The church is to reveal God's glory.*

Paul gives us another purpose of the church in the first chapter of Ephesians:

"He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace" (v. 5).

"We who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory" (v. 12).

Think of that! The phrase "we who first hoped in Christ" refers to us who are Christians as having been destined and appointed (here is our calling again) to live for the praise of his glory. The first task of the church is not the welfare of human beings. Yes, our welfare is definitely important to God, but that is not the church's first task. Rather, we have been chosen by God to live to the praise and glory of God, so that through our lives His glory will be revealed to the world. As the New English Bible states it, "We should cause his glory to be praised."

What is God's glory? It is God himself, the revelation of what God is and does. The problem with this world is that it does not know God. It has no understanding of him. In all its seekings and wanderings, its endeavors to discover truth, it does not know God. But the glory of God is to reveal Himself, to show the world what He Himself is like. When the works of God and the nature of God are demonstrated through the church, He is glorified. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians, "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

People can see the glory of God in the face of Christ, in His character, His being. And that glory is also found, says Paul, in "our hearts." God calls the church to reveal to the world the glory of His character, which is found in the face of Jesus Christ. This is stated again in chapter 1 of Ephesians: "He has put all things under his [Christ's] feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Eph. 1:22,23).

That is a tremendous statement! Here, Paul says that all that Jesus Christ is (his fullness) is to be seen in His body, which is the church! The secret of the church is that Christ lives in it and the message of the church to the world is to declare him, to talk about Jesus Christ. Paul describes this secret of the true church again in the second chapter of Ephesians: "So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit" (Eph. 2:19-22).

There is the holy mystery of the church--it is the dwelling place of God. He lives in His people. That is the great calling of the church--to make visible the invisible Christ. Paul describes his own ministry as a pattern Christian in these terms: "To make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places" (Eph. 3:9,10).

There it is very plainly. The task of the church is "to make known the manifold wisdom of God," to make it known not only to human beings but also to angels who are observing the church. These are "the principalities and powers in the heavenly places." There are others besides human beings watching the church and learning from it.

Surely the verses above are enough to make one thing perfectly clear. The calling of the church is to declare in word and demonstrate in attitude and deed the character of Christ who lives within is people. We are to declare the reality of a life-changing encounter with a living Christ and to demonstrate that change by an unselfish, love-filled life. Until we have done that, nothing else we can do will be effective for God. That is the calling of the church Paul talks about when he writes, "I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called" (Eph. 4:1).

Notice how the Lord Jesus Himself confirms this calling in the opening chapter of the book of Acts. Just before Jesus ascended to His Father, He said to His disciples: "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Purpose No. 3: *The church is to be a witness to Christ.*

The church is called to be a witness--and a witness is one who declares and demonstrates. The apostle Peter has a wonderful word about the church's witnessing role in his first letter: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light" (1 Peter 2:9).

Notice the structure, "You are ... that you may." That is our primary task as Christians. We are indwelt by Jesus Christ so that we may demonstrate the life and character of the One who lives within. The responsibility to fulfill this calling of the church belongs to every true Christian. All are called, all are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, all are expected to fulfill their calling in the midst of the world. That is the clear note the apostle sounds throughout the whole Ephesian letter. The expression of the church's witness may sometimes be corporate, but the responsibility to witness is always individual. It is your individual responsibility and mine.

But here a problem re-emerges: the problem of possible counterfeit Christians. It is easy for the church (or the individual Christian) to talk about displaying the character of Christ and to make grandiose claims about doing so. However, as many knowledgeable pagans know from Christians closely, the image Christians project is not always the true, biblical image of Jesus Christ. That is why the apostle Paul is careful to describe that authentic Christlike character in more specific terms: "With all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:2,3).

Humility, patience, love, unity, and peace--these are the true marks of Jesus. Christians are to witness, but not arrogantly or rudely, not with an attitude of holier-than-thou smugness, not in sanctimonious presumption, and certainly not against a background of ugly church fights, Christian against Christian. The church is not to talk about itself. It is to be lowly in mind, not boasting of its power or seeking to advance its prestige. The church cannot save the world--but the Lord of the church can. It is not the church for which Christians are to labor and spend their lives, but for the Lord of the church.

The church cannot exalt its Lord while it seeks to exalt itself. The true church does not seek to gain power in the eyes of the world. It already has all the power it needs from the Lord who indwells it.

Further, the church is to be patient and forbearing, knowing that the seeds of truth take time to sprout, time to grow, and time to come to full harvest. The church is not to demand that society make sudden, tearing changes in long established social patterns. Rather, the church is to exemplify positive social change by shunning evil and practicing righteousness, and thus planting seeds of truth which will take root in society and ultimately produce the fruit of change.

The supreme mark of the authentic Christianity

In *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, historian Edward Gibbon ascribes the collapse of Rome not to invading enemies, but to disintegration from within. In that book is a passage Sir Winston Churchill committed to memory because he felt it was so instructive and accurate. It is significant that this passage talks about the role of the church within the declining empire:

While that great body [the Roman empire] was invaded by open violence or undermined by slow decay, a pure and humble religion gently insinuated itself into the minds of men, grew up in silence and obscurity, derived new vigor from opposition, and finally erected the triumphant banner of the Cross on the ruins of the Capitol. (2)

The supreme mark of the life of Jesus Christ within the Christian is, of course, *love*. Love which accepts others as they are. Love which is tenderhearted and forgiving. Love which seeks to heal misunderstandings, divisions, and broken relationships. Jesus said, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). That love is never manifested by rivalry, greed, ostentatious display, indifference, or prejudice. It is the very opposite of name-calling, backbiting, stubbornness, and division.

Here we discover the unifying force which enables the church to carry out its purpose in the world: Christlike love. How do we reflect God's holiness? By our love! How do we reveal God's glory? By our love! How do we witness to the reality of Jesus Christ? By our love!

The New Testament has very little to say about Christian involvement in politics or defending "family values" or promoting peace and justice or opposing pornography or defending the rights of this or that oppressed group. I'm not saying Christians should not be concerned about these issues. Obviously you cannot have a heart filled with love for human beings and not be concerned about these things. But the New Testament says relatively little about these things because God knows that the only way to solve these problems and heal broken relationships is by introducing a *totally new dynamic* into human life--the dynamic of the life of Jesus Christ.

The life of Jesus Christ is what men and women truly need. The elimination of darkness begins with the introduction of light. The elimination of hatred begins with the introduction of *love*. The elimination of sickness and corruption begins with the introduction of life. We must begin with the introduction of Christ, for that is the calling to which we have been called.

The Gospel germinated in a social climate much like our own--a time of injustice, racial division, social unrest, rampant crime, unbridled immorality, economic uncertainty, and widespread fear. The early Christian church struggled to survive under persecution so relentless and murderous it is beyond our ability to imagine. But the early church did not see its calling as one of fighting injustice and oppression, or demanding its "rights." The early church saw its mission as one of reflecting God's holiness, revealing God's glory, and witnessing to the reality of Jesus Christ--and it did so by demonstrating *relentless love*, both toward those within the fellowship, and those outside.

The outside of the cup

Those who look for proof texts to justify picketing, protests, boycotts, and other "in-your-face" political action to cure social ills are doomed to disappointment. Jesus called this "washing the outside of the cup." A true Christian revolution changes people from the inside. It cleanses the inside of the cup. It doesn't just change the slogan on the sign a person carries. It transforms that person's heart.

This is where churches so often go astray. They become obsessed with a political agenda--either on the right or the left. Christ came to transform society--but He didn't come to do so through political action. His plan was to *change society by transforming the individual people in that society* --by giving them a new heart, a new spirit, a new orientation, a new direction, a new birth, a resurrection life, and the death of self and selfishness. Once you transform the individuals, you will have a new society.

When we are changed from within, when the inside of the cup is cleansed, our entire outlook on human relationships changes. Our natural inclination, when confronted with conflict and mistreatment, is to respond

with "an eye for an eye." But Jesus calls us to a new kind of response: "Bless those who persecute you." This is the response the apostle Paul calls us to when he writes, "Live in harmony with one another. ... Repay no one evil for evil. ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:14-21).

The message God has entrusted to the church is the most revolutionary message the world has ever heard. Should we now surrender that message in favor of mere political and social action? Should we content ourselves with allowing the church to become just another worldly political or social organization? Do we believe God enough to agree with Him that it is Christlike love, lived out in the koinonia-community of His church, that will change the world--not political power or social agendas?

God calls us to become individually responsible to spread the radical, revolutionary, life-transforming good news of Jesus Christ throughout society. The church must again invade commercial and industrial life, education and learning, the arts and family life, government and our social institutions with this tremendous, transforming, unequalled message. The risen Lord Jesus Christ has come among us to implant His own never-ending life within us. He is ready and able to transform us into loving, compassionate, confident people, empowered to cope with any problem, any challenge life sets before us. That is our message to a weary, fearful, sorrowing world. That is the message of love and hope we bring to a hostile and despairing world.

We exist to reflect God's holiness, to reveal God's glory, and witness to the fact that Jesus has come to cleanse men and women, inside and out. We exist to love one another, and to demonstrate Christlike love to the world. That is our purpose. That is the calling of the church.

[Body Life](#), [Table of Contents](#) | [Next Chapter](#) | [The Ray Stedman Library Index Page](#) | [Biography of Ray Stedman](#) | [Peninsula Bible Church](#)

Copyright 1996 by Elaine C. Stedman. All Rights Reserved. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery House Publishers, Box 3566, Grand Rapids, MI 49501.