

Series on the Book of Ephesians
Ephesians 1:19-23
Sermon #16
September 18, 1988

CHRIST, THE EXALTED HEAD OF THE CHURCH L. Dwight Custis

We are studying the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians. We come to the end of chapter one this morning. The last two verses where we see the third way that Paul mentions that God has displayed His power in Christ. Let me just read his prayer requests again, because this is the end of a prayer which begins in verse 15, where Paul's account of this prayer begins. The burden of his prayer begins there in the second statement of verse 18. There are three of them and they are all introduced with the word "what."

That ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, And what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, [when He did three things:] Which he wrought in Christ when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, Far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: [and third,] And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, Which is his body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all (Eph. 1:18-23). So, in display of God's power, He not only raised the Lord Jesus Christ from the dead with a resurrection that was different from any other resurrection and exalted Him to His right hand in heavenly places, but, as we are going to see this morning, He has appointed our Lord Jesus Christ to be head over all things to the church.

At this point Paul introduces for the first time that which, if you have been reading through the epistle, you know to be a prominent theme, perhaps the prominent theme of the epistle: that is, the church. He mentions it here, he mentions it twice in chapter 3, and he mentions it six times in chapter 5: A total of nine times. So this is an extremely important part of the Ephesian epistle.

When we add to these references to the church that we find throughout the epistle, the other expression that he uses here which is really a synonym for the church, it means the same thing as the church. I am referring to that statement "His body", the church which is His body. If we look for that, we also find that that is used nine times in the Ephesian epistle. It is used once in chapter one here; it is used once in chapter two; it is used four times in chapter four; and three times in chapter five. I just mention those rather hurriedly. I would advise you, if you mark your Bible, that it would be good to mark the occasions where Paul refers to the church and the times when he refers to the body, the body of Christ, so that as you read through the epistle you would be reminded that this is really what he is talking to them about. They needed to be instructed about the church which is the body of Christ.

If we are going to understand what Paul is talking about (and I want to keep in mind always that when we come to themes that are very familiar to most of us they may not be familiar at all to some who are with us and we want to carry everybody on together, so I want to be simple and clear in what I have this morning so we can all understand what Paul was talking about.

Let us think, first of all, about this term "the church". We all have ideas of churches. Most of the time, probably, when we think of the church we think of a building. A building is simply the place where the church meets. The church in the New Testament sense is always people. The church is used in two ways when you read through the New Testament. When Paul was talking about the church which is the body of Christ, and if we were to go through the epistle and see his other references to the body we would find that when we get to the fourth chapter he tells us that there is

only one body. Therefore, he has in mind something that is not just local in this sense. He had them, the church at Ephesus, and the church at Rome and the church at Corinth, and so on. Today we have Trinity Bible Church and there are other churches in the city of Portland where the Word of God is being taught and where Jesus Christ is proclaimed as the Saviour. So we have local churches, but there is only one church universal, the body of Christ. This is what Paul is speaking of. He is giving us this larger conception of the work of God. He is not talking about a building, nor is he talking simply about the Ephesian church; he is talking about the entire body of Christ. Literally, this word which is, of course, a very familiar word to all of us, means (in the original language) "a called out group. Those who make up the church, the body of Christ, are called out. But this raises the question, Who does the calling? and, if we are called out from something, What are we called out from? and, What are we called out to? because a calling would certainly indicate not only that you are called from something, but you are called to something.

When we were children and our parents called us, they were calling us from the neighbors house or they were calling us from play, to home, bringing us home, or perhaps calling us to dinner. So there is that two-fold idea in a calling.

The New Testament epistles have a great deal to say about the calling which God issues to us as His people. Much more than I could possibly take up in a service like this; but let me summarize briefly what the New Testament teaches about our calling. True Christians, and I say true Christians and I am going to be referring to true christians, because even this term like the term church has been misused and misapplied. Actually, people who try to live a good life and pay their bills and treat their neighbors right are often inclined to call themselves Christians. A true Christian is one who is believing in the Lord Jesus Christ; one who has recognized his need of Christ and the work that Christ did when He died on the Cross. These are the truly called ones. God has called us, as Peter, for example, says in his first epistle chapter two verse nine, "out of darkness into his marvelous light." By that he meant that God in saving us has called us out of the world, called us from lives of sin, into the marvellous light of the Gospel of Christ, into this salvation where we are able to really see things as they actually are. If we are called out of darkness, if we are called out of sin, and if we are called out of the world, and we are called to Jesus Christ, we are called into this marvellous light; then this means that the true Christian cannot go on living like he lived before he became a Christian. Christians can sin. Christians can fall into sin. But Christians are never happy living that way because the call of God is upon them. He has changed our hearts, not that we naturally are any different from anybody else, but the difference is that God has done something in our lives. So we must assume that what a person whose life has not been changed, has not been called, at least they have not sensed the call of God in their hearts as yet, the true believer has been called to Christ. He belongs to the Lord. And, as such, he is a part of that groups known as "the called out ones." This is what Paul had in mind when he was talking about the church. He mentions our calling only twice in this epistle. If you look at the fourth chapter you can see both of them because they are mentioned very close together. In the first verse of chapter four Paul says, "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called." What kind of a life is that? "With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Then, in verse four he says, "There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling." There is just one calling that he is talking about: called from sin and called from the life that we used to live, called to Jesus Christ, having our lives transformed.

It is very, very important that every child of God understand this: that the church is called to Christ to live a life that is different from the world, a life of separation from sin, a life of holiness, a life that manifests outwardly that we are new creatures in Christ Jesus. So often we are so concerned, and I do not minimize these things, but we are so concerned about when the church began and how long the church is going to be in the world, that we forget what the church is. We forget that if we claim to be part of this body of Christ, the church the body of Christ, that this lays obligations on us as the people of God to live lives that are different from the world. Paul was actually describing what the

church is when he wrote those familiar words in Romans 12:2 when he said, "And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God."

I was thinking this morning as we were singing these wonderful hymns, perhaps they were strange to some of you who are here this morning and you may be familiar with the fact, I am sure most of us are, that there has been for many years and perhaps in every generation, I do not know, a move to make the church as much like the world as we possibly can. People think that you ought to be able to come to church and here the same kind of music, for example, that you hear in the world; be entertained just like you would be entertained in the world. Consequently, the church has lost its distinctiveness and its testimony. People do not look upon the church today as they did in the first century. It meant something to be a part of the body of Christ, to be a part of this called out group. So I want to focus attention this morning, not just on when the church began, I am going to be dealing with that and how long the church is going to be here, but what the church is: It is a called out group, called from the world, called to Jesus Christ, called to live lives that are different. The ministry of the church, our services in the church, ought to be completely different and distinct from anything that you could find in the world. It is actually a credit to any church when people go away and say, "well, that is really different from anything that I have ever heard and anything that I have seen before." It ought to be different because we are different from the world.

Now, let us look at this other word that means the same, "the body of Christ."

In our Scripture reading this morning from 1 Corinthians 12 we had a further description that the church is called the body of Christ to show the intimate relationship that we who are true Christians have not only to Christ but the relationship that we have to each other. We all know what a human body is, the various members, the various parts of the human body. To see this as a portrayal of what our relationship to Jesus Christ is. Our Text says that God "gave Him to be the head over all things to the church, Which is his body..." We are related to Christ in the same way that our heads are related to the rest of our body. The function that our heads have with relation to our body is the place that Jesus Christ has in relation to His people. We are going to be seeing more about this as we go through this epistle. But, you see the intimate relationship that there is. Christ is the head of the church. Therefore, we need to understand this relationship. God has given each one of us the body that we have. Every member of our body is important. Together the members of our body make up a very amazing unity, don't they? The marvels of the human body are things that I am sure we have not discovered fully as yet. Our bodies receive directions from our head. I do not think that I do not need to be any more detailed than that. You could illustrate it yourself. But, I want you to see the point that the Apostle Paul was making. To be members of the body of Christ is to be a part of the most intimate relationship and fellowship with our Lord Jesus Christ that we can possibly be. We are part of Him; He is a part of us. Even as the Lord said when He was talking to the disciples in the Upper Room, "He is in us, we are in Him." These are terms that just defy description. We believe it because it is taught in the Word of God. This is a most amazing truth. It is so wonderful that you and I are going to need to meditate a great deal upon these truths before they begin to become clear to us. But, once it does, once we see how closely related we are to Christ, how intimately related we are to Him, life for us can never be the same again.

Bishop Moule, in his commentary on the Book of Ephesians, he was a Bishop in the Church of England year ago, says, "Yes, this is here given as the final glory of the infinitely exalted Christ. Angels and archangels are subject unto him. (Notice the contrasts that he makes) But believing men are joined to him with a union such as he and they by the same messenger (and he is referring to Paul in another of his epistles) are called elsewhere one Christ. We bear His name because we are in Him. We are joined to Him. He is the head. We are His body and members of the body." This is a wonderful truth, isn't it? This is a truth that will enable us to see what the very secret of our lives is as the people of God.

Let me leave that part of the subject for just a moment. We have been talking about what we are. We are the church, the called out ones, members of the body of Christ. Now let's talk about Christ as the head because that is really the important part of our text.

What does it mean that He is the head of the body and the body is the church?

You will notice, first of all, that it was by the power of God that the Lord Jesus Christ was given this place of authority over us. Remember, he has been saying, "I want you to know what is the exceeding greatness of His power to us who believe." Then he says that this power which is exercised in our behalf was the power that God exercised when He raised Jesus from the dead. It is the same power that He displayed when He exalted the Lord Jesus when He ascended back to the Father and was seated at His right hand, and it is this same power that God used to raise His Son, to exalt His Son, that appointed His Son to be head over all things to the church. Not one kind of power for His resurrection and another for His exaltation and a third for His appointment. It is the same power in each instance. So it is by the power of God that Jesus Christ continues in this position. Various churches have different ideas about who the head of the church is. Sometimes they will take a man who has been elected or appointed by some official group as being the one who is the head of the church. But, I submit to you this morning that Jesus Christ was not elected to that place by the apostles, nor do you find in the Book of Acts that He was given that place by some meeting of the early church. He was given that place by the Father. He is the only One Who has ever been the head of the church, and He is the only One Who will ever be the head of the church. For any man, for me or anybody else, to claim to be the head of the church is to usurp the place of authority that Jesus Christ alone has. For man to claim to be the head of the church amounts to blasphemy. Jesus Christ is the head of the church and the only head of the church. It required this mighty power of God working in our behalf to give Jesus Christ that place. So we are dealing with a subject now which required omnipotence. Please do not forget that when you think of the church, the body of Christ, and Christ as our head. It will keep us from treating this subject lightly. It is a subject of tremendous importance for every child of God.

Three times in the Book of Ephesians Paul refers to Christ as the head of the church. You have that once in chapter four and once in chapter five in addition to this reference in chapter one.

Note carefully what is said here in verse 22. He said that Christ is "the head over all things to the church." If you think about this for just a moment, you will see that Paul was saying at least two things here. He was saying that the Lord is not only the head of the church, but he was saying that the Lord is the head over all things to the church.

Let me explain what I believe this means. It speaks of the absolute sovereignty of our Lord Jesus Christ. This, of course, confirms what we have seen in verse 20 and 21 with respect to the exaltation of Christ. God exalted Him to His own right hand in the heavenly places, Far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named..." That is, as he uses these words and as I sought to explain when we were dealing with that verse, he is talking about angelic authorities and human authorities and the powers of all the heavens and all the earth. You look at each one of them individually, Jesus Christ is far above that. You combine them all together and Jesus Christ is still far above that. He has power and authority over all of these so that we are seeing Paul describe the complete authority, the absolute authority, the unrivaled power of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Just as He is sovereign over men and angels and all the powers of heaven and earth, so He is sovereign over the church. Sometimes, if you read church history you will be impressed the same way, the work of God seems to be in shambles. Those who know the Word of God are greatly concerned about the condition of the church in the world today. The church has come under a lot of scorn in recent days because of things that have happened in the lives of those who have places of leadership in the church. It is getting harder and harder to hear the Word of God in the church,

isn't it? People do not go to church to hear the Word. They go to be entertained. The church is responsible for that. It taught people to expect that sort of thing. But Jesus Christ has never relinquished His headship over the church, and, though the church may go through difficult times, yet God is going to see that His purposes and His work in the church are ultimately carried through to their fulfillment and their completion. Jesus Christ holds that position. He is the sovereign authority over His people. The church is to take its direction from the Lord Jesus Christ. The church may have its leaders, but Christ is the leader of the leaders. The church may have its pastors, but Christ is the supreme pastor and Pastor over all the lesser pastors. The pastor is a shepherd to part of the flock; the Lord Jesus Christ is the Chief Shepherd, isn't He? He is the highest authority in the church, the risen, glorified, exalted Son of God. None is greater than He.

But, when Paul said, "He is the head over all things to the church", this means that those all things, whatever they may be and however they may affect a church and the ministry of the church, these too are under the continuing authority of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Just to illustrate, I mention what governments sometimes do against the church. There are countries in the world today where the church cannot meet as we are meeting because the government says, "no, you cannot meet." Wars affect the church, don't they? Famine affects the church. Disease affects the church just as it affects anyone else. Trials and tribulations and persecutions and sufferings, why you take the Book of Acts and you read about the history of the early church and you just find instance after instance in which there was opposition and this attempt to silence them and to put an end to this ministry. Yet, as you go through the Book of Acts, you are conscious to the fact that though the numbers of the people were insignificant in comparison with the numbers of the enemy, yet somehow that work was being sustained and that work was being blessed and people were being saved and God's work was being prospered. Why was it? Was it because the Christians were so wonderful and were strong and found out ways to overrule the enemy? No. The Book of Acts is one of the greatest testimonies that has ever been written that Jesus Christ is the head of the church with respect to all things that affect the church. Let the devil bring his worst against the church, Jesus Christ the first time He spoke of it said to Peter, "Upon your confession I am going to build this church and the gates of hades will not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18--Pastor, I am not sure about this reference). The church of Jesus Christ exists in the world today not because the church herself has been so wonderful, but because we have a wonderful Lord, a mighty God Who is the victor and Who is seeing to it that though all of these things may affect the church in one way or another, the church is not going to be stamped out and God is going to prevail in His Work.

Now, let me put the cream on top of everything else because, you know, what I have said to far I am sure if you have been listening to me you realize that this is so much more wonderful than you and I ever deserve, that we should be brought into this relationship with Christ, we should have the security of His headship over us and know that He is sovereignly in control and that we are responsible to Him and that He is the One Who is going to meet our needs and give us wisdom, the wisdom that we need to carry on His work. But you notice that it says here at the end of verse 23 that He "gave him to be the head over all things to the church, Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all, Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all." You know, that is a statement that I would rather not try to explain, although I am going to try to explain it, because I think that any explanation I give to it is just going to display my own ignorance to you. Think of the fact that the church of Christ is the fulness of Him (we are talking about Christ) Who fills all in all. When Jesus Christ went back to heaven He went in a body. He is seated at the Father's right hand. Yet He has promised every single one of us and He has promised all of His people throughout the world wherever they may be that He will never leave them nor forsake them. He is up there and He is down here. The person of God, the person of Jesus Christ, is so vast that the Psalmist said concerning God, "If I go to heaven he is there If I descend into the lower parts of the earth he is there if I go to the uttermost parts of the sea he is there I cannot go anyplace and flee from His presence. He is everywhere. (see Psalm 139) Here's this statement, "He is the One Who fills all in all," the transcendent glory of our God so vast and wonderful that you and I cannot begin to comprehend that.

Paul says that God is taking His church and He is pouring into His church the fulness of this One Who fills all in all things so that you cannot go anyplace to flee from His presence. Isn't this amazing? Yet you can see from the fact that we are His body, we have been joined to Christ. This means that God has poured into His people the very Lord Jesus Christ Himself so that the wonderful thing about being together with the people of God again was described by our Lord Jesus Christ when He said, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20). Do you suppose people ever come to Trinity Bible Church and say as they leave, "You know, I do not know what it was, but there was something that filled me with awe as I was in that place. There was something different. The people looked the same. They are just normal people that have come together." But, do you think that people sense as they come among us the very presence of Jesus Christ, His fullness being manifested in us? He has promised each one of us individually that He would never leave us nor forsake us. I do not know how many of us are here this morning, but if we parted here and went in as many different directions as there are people here the Lord Jesus Christ would go with each one of us. But, you see, when you bring even two or three together, when you get 50, 60, 100, 1000, how many of the Lord's people may be gathered together in one place, here is the place where God delights to manifest His omnipotence. This omnipresent God has seen fit to pour into our lives and into our fellowship together the very manifestation of His presence. Oh, God is here this morning. Jesus Christ is here. We do not see Him with our natural eyes, but the things that we see are temporal. The things that we cannot see, those are the things that are really real. The One that we cannot see, but we can recognize His presence and He loves to display His power is our blessed Lord Jesus Christ Himself. So we are not only the church, called out of the world, called to Jesus Christ. We are not only the body of Christ, intimately and eternally related to Him as our head, but we are the very fulness of Him that filleth all in all.

You say, "How can I ever understand what that means?" That is what Paul was praying about. You see, that is what he had in mind when he said, "That you might know the exceeding greatness of his power toward us who believe. He was not thinking of the preacher who is going to stand and just sway a multitude of people or the great results that we are going to see, he is talking about the manifestation of the presence of God in our midst. You see, that takes the same power, the manifestation of the same power that God exercised when Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. Then, later when the Lord Jesus Christ ascended back to the Father and was seated at His right hand, that is the same power that God delights to display among His people when they are gathered together to manifest that we are the fulness of Him Who filleth all in all.

Let's pray for each other. I hope that you will pray for me that I will understand more of what this means. And I pray for you that you will understand more of what this means. I will tell you one other thing that we can do beside praying. You see, this is the purpose for which the Book of Ephesians was written. May I remind you as I close this morning what D. L. Moody said about reading this book? I think I mentioned it at the beginning of our study. D. L. Moody, that man that God so wonderfully blessed in the salvation of so many people was asked one time later on in His ministry what was the greatest experience with God that he had every had. His response was this: The greatest experience I ever had was the month that I read the Book of Ephesians through 47 times. Are you reading this book? Are you memorizing this book? Are you digesting the truth that is in this book? Are you listening with your heart as we gather together? Oh, let's pray that God will so open our eyes to His truth. He works through His Word. Let's pray that in this day that where the manifestation of God's presence is so needed in the lives of the people of God where we become so conscious of the fact that He is with us that our very lives are changed, that God will see fit to work through Trinity Bible Church. Not for our glory, that would spoil it all and He never works for that purpose; but that we may bring greater and greater and greater glory to our blessed Lord Who suffered and died on the Cross, not only that He might redeem us from our sin, but that He might make us the very part of Himself--the fulness of Him Who filleth all in all.

Shall we pray?

Father, we truly have been walking on holy ground this morning and we feel so unworthy to speak of these marvelous truths. Lord, we would never have been able to devise such a wonderful salvation if you had left it up to us. Your ways are past finding out. Oh, the depth of the riches, Father, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God. We bow and worship before you this morning that you would take us, sinners, deserving to be cast forever from your presence, to redeem us by the precious blood of Christ. Make us new creatures and ordain, dear Father, that we would be your fullness, the fullness of Christ in this world in which we live, the fullness of Him Who filleth all in all. Grant, Lord, that we may know more in our ministry and in our experience together that wonderful position that you have given us in Christ, that our lives might be more pleasing to thee. For Jesus' sake, we pray, Amen.