

Month of Mission  
i. The Ascended Christ Gifting His Church  
Ephesians 4:7-16

Letters written from prison are particularly poignant be they Dietrich Bonhoeffer writing to his fiancé shortly before his hanging at the hands of the Nazi's, Alexander Solzhenitsyn imprisoned writing from the Gulag in Siberia or Bram Fischer, Afrikaner revolutionary serving a life sentence in Pretoria writing to his family not long after the tragic death of his wife Molly. Perhaps the most moving from a Christian perspective are the prison letters of Paul not least Ephesians written in the early to mid-sixties AD from Rome whilst awaiting death at the hands of Nero.

Ephesus was the centre of worship of the goddess Artemis (Diana) whose massive temple, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens, straddled the city. Paul's three-year ministry at Ephesus in AD 52-55 had impacted the sale of artefacts associated with the worship of Artemis resulting in a riot which caused Paul to leave for Macedonia.

Not surprisingly, Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus dealt with issues raised by devotion to Artemis, notably her perceived power over heaven and earth and even the underworld. Her followers believed she could break the chains of fate, protect her people from tormenting spirits, injury, sickness and harm. Paul counters these claims by proclaiming the supremacy of Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit empowering his church for mission.

Assuredly the focus of our faith is Jesus, not the church. However, the church as the body and bride of Christ, is inseparable from authentic faith. But if the church, rather than Christ becomes the centre of devotion, spiritual decay has already begun. A church which does not centre on Jesus is self-defeating and false. That said, the Great Commission of Matt 28:18-20 to make disciples, not simply converts, presupposes the life of the church to nurture and sustain those who have experienced the new birth. Indeed, the Great Constitution of the church by Jesus (Matt 16:17-19) in response to Peter's apostolic confession of faith, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God', lies equally at the heart of the gospel. The words with which Jesus responded "I will build my church" to Peter's confession show what it means to make disciples. Both words of Jesus are part of the same gospel and must be understood together, both serving a missionary purpose.

Paul in writing his letter encourages the church at Ephesus to grow in maturity. He assumes the unity of the church as a gift, (Eph 2:13, 22) but equally needing to be attained as a goal (Eph 4:3) through growth in maturity, "attaining the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (4:13b). This is made possible by the ascended Christ, having descended to earth, gifting his church through grace. God gives us what we don't deserve viz not only salvation but gifts of the Spirit for effective service. Grace as a gift leaves no room for competitive comparison. "Instead, speaking the truth in love... the whole body (i.e. the church) grows and builds itself up in love as each part does its work" (4:15,16). Truth in isolation from love easily becomes hard and judgemental. Equally love without truth becomes soft and sentimental. As we live close to Jesus and fellow believers, we learn to hold both truth and love together thereby enabling the church to grow in maturity.

Alan Cameron  
Trinity, Lynnwood  
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