

Built on Christ - Ephesians 2:19-22

Somebody made a comment to me recently which I found quite ironic, and it was that we haven't done one of Paul's letters for a while. It's ironic because a common complaint in churches is that they spend too much time in Paul's letters and not enough time in the gospels, and actually it made me realise that we have been the other way around for quite some time. So next week we are going to take a deep dive into Ephesians.

The new series excites me because it is all about identity. As we journey through Ephesians we'll find Paul spelling out what it means to be a Christian and then how to live it out.

One of the prompts for the new series came during my sabbatical last summer when Karen and I went to the ELA Conference; actually there were several people from Ebe there as well as Michael and Cathy - for those who don't know Michael he is my predecessor and served Ebe for 33 years.

At the conference a speaker talked about the church needing a new lens. In short he said that we have to see the world through the truth that in Christ we are a new creation, the old has gone - actually it is dead and buried in Christ. Our lives should be lived as a new creation, not with one foot in the grave trying to make the dead old creation look presentable. As we journey through Ephesians we will see that message time and again, it is the thread that weaves its way throughout the whole book. We will be challenged to take the step of faith and learn to live out life as the new person in Christ, leaving behind our concerns for the old sinful nature which is truly dead and buried with Christ. All that remains is memories, sometimes quite powerful memories, but none the less they are only memories; the old nature is dead and buried.

Apart from hopefully whetting your appetites for the new series, I mention it today because I want to pick up a related issue this morning, what does it mean for our identity to be church? Our lives as new people in Christ are shaped by our being part of this community, and find some of their expression through this community. So what does it mean to be Ebenezer Baptist Church? I'm going to answer that by thinking about three questions; what are we, how are we, why are we?

Let's read a passage from Ephesians to set the scene. We will come to this passage later in the series, but I am sure God will give us fresh revelation from it when we do so don't worry about the repeat. Mind you, that reminds me of the story of a pastor who preached the same sermon, identical sermon, week in week out until eventually after about four weeks a member of the congregation called him out and asked when he was going to preach something else. He replied, when you start living out what I'm teaching in this sermon! Lets turn to Ephesians 2:19-22.

Have you noticed how many people refer to buildings as church? They talk about St Mary's Church, meaning the building up by the castle. Or they talk about Queen Street Methodist Church meaning the huge building in town. Perhaps they talk about Ebenezer Baptist Church meaning this building.

If you talk to one of the FUNLights team you'll hear stories of how parents have said "this is my church" referring to FUNLights. Or if you talk to Tim and Ali, or Bec and Leigh, they have similar stories of parents referring to Restore Stars or Hyp as their church. It is the same with other missional community settings in FAMILYLights Restore Filey, Hope Whitby and Arise Cayton. These people are usually people who haven't yet made a commitment to Christ, yet they properly identify what church actually is. Church is a community of God's people. It isn't a building. Sometimes people, even Christians, refer to rooms like this as the sanctuary, well it isn't - in the Old Testament buildings were sanctuaries, but the New Testament makes clear that it is the people of God who are the sanctuary. We are Ebenezer Baptist Church in this building, or in a pub in town or even down on the beach. Sure the building might be special to us because a loved one had a funeral here, or we were married or came to faith here, but it is nonetheless just a building.

Paul explained this in the passage we read. God's people are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. We are each one of us living stones built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Jesus as the cornerstone. Together we are the holy temple, the sanctuary. If a stone is missing from a building it is incomplete, that is one of the reasons Paul urges us elsewhere not to give up the habit of meeting together. We don't gather here on a Sunday just for our own benefit, our presence enriches other people and blesses God because together we are the holy temple of God. That is part of the privilege of being a new person in Christ, the theme we will explore as we work through Ephesians.

Did you notice the foundation? It isn't bricks and mortar or concrete. It is the apostles and prophets. It's an interesting phrase. The Jews refer to the Bible, what we call the Old Testament, as being in three parts. Moses, Prophets and Writings - writings being the psalms, song of songs, and so on. Moses is the first five books of the Bible and contains the law. Paul could have written Moses and the Prophets, but he didn't, he wrote apostles and the prophets.

Paul didn't mean literally Andrew, James, John, Peter and so on, just as the Jews don't literally mean Moses. What he means is the teaching that they passed on. The foundation of God's people is the prophets and what Jesus taught the apostles which completed the law. Better yet, Jesus himself who we each have a personal relationship with is the cornerstone that holds the building together. That is why in our church meetings we gather to seek the mind of Christ, his church has as its cornerstone the Lord Jesus himself.

So if that is what it means to be church, then what does it mean to be a Baptist Church? This moves on to my how question. We've done the what are we question, this is the how are we question.

The Baptist movement came into being 10 years after the reformation of 1517. Our predecessors came to the conclusion that baptism by full immersion is commanded in scripture as something that has to happen after we confess Jesus Christ as our Lord. Paul's letter to the Romans in chapter 6 talks about us being buried with Jesus through baptism into death in order that we may rise in Jesus to a new life. They reasoned quite

correctly that being baptised as an infant happens before we can confess Christ for ourselves, and therefore once we confess Christ as Lord we need to be baptised in line with Paul's teaching in Romans 6 and elsewhere. This conviction cost them dearly, with many being tortured, drowned, or burnt at the stake by both the Catholic Church and the rest of the Protestant Church.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the immense persecution they faced in the early days, Baptists have always been more at home in a society that values freedom. Over the centuries Baptists have thrown themselves in the fight against tyranny and political oppression. We were among the first to call for complete religious freedom including for those of other faiths than ours, such as Muslims or Hindus. If faith is only genuine if it is free, it follows that it is not the task of states or governments to interfere with our convictions - that is one of the reasons that Baptists do not believe the state church, in this country the Church of England, to be a valid notion - we desire the link between church and state to be broken. The day can't come too soon when the state church is disestablished. That is a core Baptist conviction. We campaign for the Free Church, a body of believers who are free to govern their own affairs under the Lordship of Christ and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, without interference from any other power or external body.