

God's Building Plan: The Foundation of Apostles, Prophets, and Christ the Cornerstone
Ephesians 2:19-20
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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. In Ephesians 2 the Lord is addressing the problem of division among people and it seems that this problem is only growing in our world. God offers us, however, a way to bring down walls of division and informs us that there is a way -- even in a world with so much division -- to actually build unity according to God's building plan in Ephesians 2.

It is sobering to realize how much division exists as our highly technological communication has caused our world to shrink. We've never had so much access to each other as we do today. It is nothing unusual that your child might be in their bedroom having a game online with a counter-part in Japan, Australia, or Russia. This is the world we've arrived to. It is exciting, but it is dangerous, because divisions abound.

Beyond a shadow of a doubt perhaps the most common cause for division is sadly enough, religion. It is fascinating to consider for example that the war in the Middle East is essentially one fueled by religion (at least to a considerable extent). Islamic fundamentalists simply do not get along with Israelis and vice versa most especially for religious reasons. Add to the mix Christian fundamentalists and we have more than enough fuel for a very serious fire indeed. It is frightening to consider that there are some Christians who view the war in the Middle East as a possible necessary prelude to the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. That is, both Islamic fundamentalists and Christian fundamentalists see good reasons to keep the war going. Again, divisions abound.

But we don't have to go to the Middle East to experience divisions. Walls of hostility can exist even within our own families. Speaking of prophecy -- but this time used in less alarmist fashion -- St. Paul wrote to St. Timothy about what would occur in the "last days": "People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God -- having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them." (2nd Timothy 3:2-5) All we need to do in other words to check on the reality of division in our household is to consider the level of respect and honor under our own roofs: Fathers are not to exasperate their children (Colossians 3:21); children are to obey their parents (Colossians 3:20); husbands are to love their wives and not be harsh with them (Colossians 3:19); and wives are to submit to their husbands (Colossians 3:18). But when we reject the Word of God, when parents are unnecessarily harsh to their children, when children disrespect their parents, when husbands neglect their wives and when wives put down their husbands, we find the division right under our noses.

Christ said this would happen especially for one reason in particular: you guessed it, religion. Matthew 10:34-36: “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn ‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law – a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.’”

Christ is not saying that He desires division, but He is saying that on account of the Gospel, divisions will exist. That is to say, not everyone will accept the Good News of Christ, not everyone comes to saving faith, but this is not the fault of God, but the fault of the person who rejects their Creator and Redeemer.

Thus, to the end of time, divisions will continue and most likely, they will mount, since the Bible predicts that not long before the second coming of Christ, conditions will worsen (Revelation 20:3).

But dear Christians, this is not to say that we cannot enjoy the gift of unity and know the power of God’s building plan even in the midst of the division in the world. We can nevertheless know the joy and the power of unity and building even in this world. In fact, when we do see God’s unity and building in this world, it is even sweeter, it is even more comforting, because it occurs in the midst of all signs to the contrary, but nothing can stop the Lord from blessing His people who come to know the true foundation of life and immortality.

Ephesians 2 points out that the Gentiles were once totally separated from God. Like all of us, they were “dead in [their] transgressions and sins” (2:1), but St. Paul proclaims the Gospel to them: “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved.” (2:4-5) St. Paul is explaining to the Gentiles in Ephesus that Jesus came to abolish the sacrificial law that marked Jews as the unique people of God. No longer would God’s people get right with God by bringing a clean animal to be sacrificed. Now, Christ has come, the One who sacrificed Himself for the sins of all people for all time! No longer would God’s people be identified through the covenant sign of circumcision, but they would now be identified by having hearts “circumcised,” that is hearts that have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (Colossians 2:11).

When Christ comes in other words and people believe that they are right with God on account of Christ, not on account of anything they are or anything they do, but on account of Jesus, then dividing walls come crumbling down. There is no division, because all become one in Jesus Christ. We read together Galatians 3:28:

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

In Ephesians 2, Paul is saying that when the dividing walls come crashing down, when you are united to Christ, then "...you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's household..." (19). That is, God uses the imagery of both the state and the household to say: "you are in God's country, you are now in God's household...you are built into Christ and you may know more and more the peace and benefits that come with knowing unity with God and with His Church."

But exactly how does this kind of building plan work? It works in terms of the foundation that is laid by God Himself. You see dear Christians God does not wait for you to generate this building. You can't! In His grace, however, He provides the building that puts us into Christ who leads us to new lives. Sometimes people will complain that nothing works for them in religion, they continue to live in their old ways of self-destruction and division (as when a person tries to convince themselves that a life of serving sin is their only option) and in these cases, people push away God's building plan, but we cannot afford to push away God's building plan.

How do we enter into this life of unity and building in Christ? The Word of God in Ephesians 2 explains the way the Lord puts you into the life of His Son: He does so by building you into a house, a spiritual house, a house that will surround you in such a way as to keep you in the life of Jesus Christ. As you know every house that stands must have a foundation. This is also true for the house that God would have you dwell in. This spiritual house, this powerful house is built "on the foundation of the apostles and prophets..." (Ephesians 2:20)

That is, your foundation in life becomes the word and testimony of the apostles of the New Testament and the prophets of the Old Testament. What did they say, what did they point to? Was it to point you to yourself? Did they instruct you to be religious and save yourself? Did they instruct you to pull yourself up by your own boot straps? No, they pointed you to Christ. The apostles like John said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29); the prophets like Moses said, "[Christ] would crush the head of the devil." (Genesis 3:15). Again, this is the foundation that points you to Christ. This is why, for example, that we Lutheran Christians practice confession and absolution. Some Christians wonder, "How can I receive help for the terrible sins that I can't seem to break out of?" Answer: Apply the foundation of the apostles and prophets upon your life! This is why Luther wrote in the Large Catechism: "Therefore, when I urge you go to confession, I am simply urging you to be a Christian." (Tappert, p. 460) This was Luther's way of saying that if you feel plagued by a sin that seems to keep you from being closer to God, then apply the foundation of the apostles and the prophets: let the Word of God be poured upon you more, not less; more and more and more!

A long time ago a former parishioner in another congregation had a terrible bout with depression. By the grace of God, we were led to employ the gift of individual confession and absolution: the word of the apostles and prophets directly given to her as she went through her struggle. One year later, this person experienced the greatest healing they had ever known in her life. This is not an isolated experience for me. I've seen other parishioners also greatly benefit from this gift. The help can be absolutely amazing! I am not saying that you all need to schedule individual confession and absolution with me this coming week, though that is one of the most important reasons for my being here (and this service is right out of our Lutheran hymnal; it is not a counseling session and takes about 15 minutes). But even without individual confession and absolution, you can for example, apply the foundation of God's building plan in other ways.

Another application of the foundation of the prophets and the apostles is learning to live in your baptism through daily devotions in the Word of Christ. One insight that is often neglected is that daily devotions are NOT one size fits all. This very simple idea is one of the keys to growing in your spiritual lives in Christ. Do not assume that just because you've tried a particular devotion and that because it didn't work for you that you have no hope. Not at all, the key to success in daily devotion is to find an approach that "fits." Frankly, some folks need to be more meditative and quiet and others need to be more interactive and analytical. Bottom line: Don't give up striving to live in the foundation of the apostles and the prophets...because it is only through the Word and having Christ daily presented to us that we may know the power of God's building plan.

To conclude, I bring to your attention that Ephesians 2:20 does not only mention the foundation of the apostles and prophets, but also what might be translated as the "final stone" of the building. Some expositors treat this as being part and parcel the foundation and according to 1st Corinthians 3:11, we know that there is no foundation apart from Christ Himself, but Ephesians 2:20 is probably adding to the thought: Christ is not only your foundation, but He is ALSO the "final stone," the stone that marks the building itself as belonging to God that preoccupies your vision of the house. Christ is to be in other words, before you, behind you, above you, below you, Christ is your life, Christ is your unity, your unity with God, your unity with peace, your unity with the Church, your unity with gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit, your unity with life that never ends, and your unity with help for any hardship you face, especially as you grow within this spiritual house. God's building plan is perfect, it keeps you washed in the blood of the lamb; it keeps you filled with the life of the risen Christ which is eternal and it keeps you connected to a country and a household that cannot suffer division, never at its core. Let us be good stewards of this house and drink deeply of Christ's Sacrament and grow in our knowledge and application of the Word of Christ. In this way, we will know the effects of God's saving and brilliant building plan!