

I need to tell you how much I love the Church. I don't just mean our church. You know how much I love Brandywine Valley Baptist Church. I mean the whole beautiful, maddening, global Church that now claims two persons out of every seven on the planet. It is more than a one-stop shopping store for religious consumers; it is more than fodder for scandalmongers. So, I ask you, I beg you, plead, cajole, and otherwise exhort you to adopt new ways of thinking about the Church. Let's start with a noble theme: The Church has a vocation. God created the Church and gave it a job to do.

That theme comes from the biblical writing we call Ephesians. Why should we care about something written 2000 years ago? We should care for several reasons. **First**, it has survived for 2000 years. Even if you don't care for old things, aren't you curious to know why people preserved this letter instead of letting it disappear like most letters people write? **Second**, it is part of the Bible. It made the cut. Very few religious writings and none in the past 1900 years made it into the Bible. How did Ephesians get into such elite company? We have to read it to find out. **Third**, for centuries people have thought of Ephesians as more than a message from Paul. They have read it as a message from God. That's how I read it. That's how this church reads it. That's how *the* Church reads it. That's why I don't want you to miss it. So, let's get started with Ephesians 1:1-2.

Weeding the Biblical Garden

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. People call Ephesians a letter because it begins in the form of an ancient letter. That form differs from ours. The biblical writer put his name first – **Paul**. He also said who he was (**an apostle of Christ Jesus**). That gave him authority to write to them. Then, he identified the people he wrote – **to the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus**. We will come back to that. Finally, he wrote a greeting, and it is a lovely one: **Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

The name Paul gave to the Christians in Ephesus stops us in our tracks: **To the saints in Ephesus. Saints!** Why call church people saints? The ones we know aren't saints. Was he talking about Saint Patrick or Saint Genevieve? It can't be. The Roman Catholic Church idea of saints didn't exist. I know it's hard to get your head around it, but Paul meant all the clever, beautiful, irritating, and impossible people who met together each Sunday to worship Jesus. But why call them **saints**? Great question! Let me tell you the answer I found.

The Saints

Paul wrote Ephesians in Greek. The literal translation of the Greek word Paul used here is *holy ones*. That's even more troubling than **saints**. Can you imagine yourself saying, "Oh, yes, I am one of the holy ones over at Brandywine Valley Baptist Church"? Not gonna happen! Using the word *holy* or the word *saints* to describe ourselves is off-limits in public. Maybe you wish Paul hadn't said it. But he did. Here's why.

Paul was a Jew. He knew the Jewish Bible from stem to stern. In the Jewish Bible the word *saints* and the word *holy* are words that refer to a relationship with God. They also refer to the right way to live in that relationship. In Exodus 19:6 God said to the new nation, Israel.

“You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Calling them saints or holy people or a holy nation didn’t mean they lived up to their high privilege. They didn’t. The Old Testament tells the sad story of God’s less-than-successful effort to teach them to act like His holy people. They often failed, but they never stopped being His holy people. That’s the idea I want to get into your head. It’s a game-changer. Being holy is about who you are before it is about what you do.

When Paul called the Ephesian Christians **saints**, he used a loaded word. It was his way of saying that they were God’s people. God created the Church to carry on the vocation that began with Israel. Hold on to that idea. It unlocks the meaning of Ephesians. It unlocks the meaning of the Church.

General Stanley McChrystal commanded U. S. forces in Afghanistan from May 2009, to June 2010. Recently, I heard him tell his experience as a Company Commander during war games at the National Training Center in California. His armored group stayed up all night planning a classic dawn attack on the enemy. Dawn broke, they moved out, and the enemy wiped them out almost immediately.

Then they did what the Army calls “an after action review” to show them in detail what they did wrong. McChrystal called it “leadership by humiliation.” He felt “as low as a snake’s belly.” He went to apologize to his battalion commander for his failure. His battalion commander said to him, “Stanley, I thought you did great.” McChrystal said, “In one sentence he lifted me, put me back on my feet, and taught me that leaders can let you fail and yet not let you be a failure.” Being a soldier is about who you are before it is about what you do. Being holy is about who you are before it is about what you do.

Becoming Saints

So, what qualified the fine Ephesians to be **saints**? Look again at the last phrase of verse one. Paul labeled them **the faithful in Christ Jesus**. Their loyalty to Christ Jesus made them **saints**, the people of God, who carry on the vocation that began with Israel.

Would the Apostle Paul include BVBC in **the saints**? I can’t think why not. We believe the same gospel as the Ephesians. We are loyal to Christ just like them. That includes us in the people of God, who carry on the vocation that began with Israel. Let us wake from our secular enchantment. Let us wake up to who we are.

Take-aways

Since Ephesians is about the Church’s vocation, let’s make April “Read Ephesians Month.” No matter what else you are reading, read Ephesians at least two times each week between now and May 5. Let’s immerse ourselves in Ephesians.

Also, at least once between now and May 5 read or listen to Ephesians all the way through at one sitting. If you prefer to listen to instead of reading, you can do it on your smart phone, iPod, or tablet. Here is an exceptional resource: **youversion.com**. It’s free, and it works offline. Reading Ephesians like that puts us all on the same page, it prepares you to hear my sermons on Ephesians, and it helps make the Bible an open book for you.

And now Communion. But wait! Recall the meaning Jesus gave to the wine. **“This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”**

(Matthew 26:28) **“My blood of the covenant!”** A covenant is an agreement that brings about a relationship of commitment between God and His people. By eating the bread and drinking the cup we bear witness to the covenant by which God established the Church as the people of God. The waters here run deep. We will map them out in weeks to come. For now, we reaffirm our holy vocation to carry on what God began with Israel.