

Jesus told a parable we should keep in mind today. He said: **“The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.”** (Matthew 13:35) The point of the parable is that you can’t see the yeast in the dough, and you can’t deny the power of the yeast in the dough. The parable pictures a great fact: the authority of God in human life is as invisible as yeast in flour, and its power in human life is as irresistible as yeast in flour.

**We live by faith, not by sight** (2 Corinthians 5:7), said the Apostle. Jesus’ parable is a picture of what it means to live by faith and not by sight. But the picture is missing something. It is missing emotion. It is missing the emotion people have when their faith grows stale, or they witness appalling evil, and they ask, “Is God real? How do I know the faith is true? God, I don’t feel you. Make me know you are there without a doubt. Where are you in this evil? Will you act?” and they are answered with silence.

It is in precisely that silence that Jesus’ parable gives you strength. When God seems as invisible as yeast in flour, He is just as effective as yeast in flour. It’s a parable handy to have in hand, as we make our way to the end of Ephesians 2 today.

### **The Meaning of the Church**

I have called Ephesians 1 a majestic summary of the meaning of Christ. Ephesians 2 is a majestic summary of the meaning of the Church from its unlikely origins to its unlikely purpose. God made the decision to create a worldwide community He could call His people. He made that decision before He created the world, and love prompted Him to make it.

As it turned out God had to create His chosen people out of people who were **dead in transgressions and sins**. The same love that prompted His decision to create His people prompted Him to mount a costly rescue operation that brought His people into existence. Jesus carried out God’s decision by His death on the cross. The biblical name for God’s costly act kindness for people who don’t deserve it is grace.

We get in on the action by faith. We believe in our hearts that God raised Jesus from the dead, we say publicly, “Jesus is Lord,” and we are baptized into His name. Faith unites us with Christ, joins us to the people of God, and gives us an enduring hope. We are alive. The Bible calls the entire process – from God’s decision before the world began to the death of Christ to the most recent baptism and forward to the New Jerusalem – salvation. Jesus Christ has saved us from spiritual death and constituted us God’s chosen people, the Church.

That is just the starting point. Christ has a purpose in mind for the Church. His purpose became clear thanks to an age-old conflict between Jews and non-Jews, whom we call Gentiles. Jews and Gentiles were oil and water; they were apples and oranges. Many Gentiles despised Jews, and Jews returned the favor. The apostle said that Christ brought them together. They couldn’t agree on the time of day, but they agreed on Christ.

As a result, something unprecedented began to happen in synagogues and house churches of the Roman Empire. Little bands of Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus were meeting together to worship Him. It wasn’t easy. They often disagreed. They disagreed about how believers should spend their time on the Sabbath. They disagreed on what food was proper for Jesus people to eat. They disagreed about where they should buy their meat. They disagreed, but they worshipped together and tried to get along. The unthinkable was happening.

It was not an accident that the unthinkable was happening. Christ intended for it to happen. **His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace.** (Ephesians 2:15) The Church, which came to life out of spiritual death, was to be a place where old feuds and animosities come to die. You'll never be the same, if you catch that vision.

The apostle recapped the reconciliation between long-time enemies in verse 19: **Consequently, you (Gentiles) are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people (the Jews) and members of God's household.** You may say that is wishful thinking and that it can't happen. Why are we so quick to say that? Have we forgotten the parable of the yeast? Why do we not ache for the Church to be such a place of reconciliation? That is Christ's purpose for His Church.

### **A People Under Construction**

The apostle's majestic summary of the meaning of the Church reveals next that Christ's purpose for the Church has another dimension. God's chosen people are a people under construction. He turns our attention to God's people under construction in verse 20. You are, he said, **built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.** A building is only as good as its foundation. Three components form the foundation of the Church: apostles, prophets, and Christ Jesus Himself.

We don't know a lot about New Testament prophets. They could speak with passion and insight about the circumstances in which Christians found themselves. They went from one congregation to another. They could rock the boat. They could be controversial. Occasionally, they predicted the future. They could overdo it. All that could make churches distrust and even ridicule them. The Apostle Paul had to remind the Thessalonian church: **Do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything.**

But prophets did something good for the newly formed churches. They were on fire and they kindled fire in the soul of many a congregation. They kept them on their toes, inspired them, and challenged them. They warned them away from complacency. Some were geniuses, like John, who wrote the book of Revelation. (See Revelation 1:3)

So, how were churches supposed to test the prophets? With collective good sense, I am sure. Every church needed men and women of great good sense, who kept deeply zealous but impractical prophets from doing something stupid. They also tested them by how well they measured up to the teaching of the apostles.

Apostles had unique credentials. They saw Jesus after He rose from the dead, and they received their commission to do ministry directly from Him. Their memories of Jesus and their teaching about Jesus defined the Christian Faith. It is really striking that Jesus left behind no written records. It's like Beethoven, leaving behind no music or Einstein, dying with the theory of relativity still in his head.

One compelling reason to be a Christian is the humility of God. Time after time God puts His reputation in the hands of people, who have no idea of what to do with it. He has to teach them everything, and it takes ever so long. Jesus left His reputation and the meaning of His life in the hands of the apostles with the promise that the Holy Spirit would guide them into all truth. His wisdom in doing that has been justified.

Another compelling reason to be a Christian is the enduring teaching of the apostles,

which the New Testament preserves. 20 centuries have not exhausted the Church's appetite for their teaching. 20 centuries not exhausted the power of their teaching to win a hearing among aboriginals of the Brazilian Rain Forest and even more quaint aboriginals in Mid-town Manhattan.

Our journey through Ephesians is a concerted effort to allow their teaching, on which the Church is built, to test our ideas and practices and bring them more in line with their teaching. We want to build well on that foundation. Well, yes we do! And you know what that means. The Church must remain Christ-centered. **Christ Jesus himself**, says verse 20, is **the chief cornerstone**.

The foundation of the Church would crack and put the whole structure at risk without Christ. Think of the centrality of Christ in Ephesians. We are blessed in Christ, chosen in Christ, and redeemed in Christ. We hope in Christ, believe in Christ, are alive in Christ, seated at God's right hand in Christ, created in Christ, and brought near to God in Christ. He is our peace, and we have access to the Father by one Spirit through Christ.

He is God in flesh. He lived a sinless life. He died as the atonement for our sins. He rose from the dead. He wields all authority in heaven and earth. He will come again to judge the world with justice. We believe in Him. We pray to Him. We sing to Him, sing about Him, bear witness to Him, and commune with Him at the Lord's Supper.

When congregations talk a lot about God and little about Jesus, there is something rotten in Denmark. They are losing their grip on Christ. They are building poorly on the Church's one foundation, who is Jesus Christ, her Lord.

### **God's Dwelling Place on Earth**

The last two verses of Ephesians 2 express the fruition of Christ's purpose for the Church in this world. Don't forget the parable of the yeast. Be prepared for human language to reach its limits. Be prepared to be amazed.

Verse 21 first: **In him** (in Christ) **the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord**. From the day Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, He has been the Architect, who designs and oversees the building of God's chosen people, the Church. He is building a temple, and we are that temple. The other morning in my personal worship the scripture for the day was the prayer of Psalm 43:3: **Send forth your light and your truth, let them guide me; let them bring me to your holy mountain, to the place where you dwell**.

Devout Jews prayed that prayer and thought about Jerusalem and Solomon's temple on Mount Zion and their pilgrimage there to sacrifice and dance and shout and pray before the God of Israel. Devout Christians pray that prayer and do not think about a temple of stones but of a temple of living stones, God's chosen people. They may gather in a cathedral or in dark places far from the prying eyes of a totalitarian state, but they are the holy temple of God. We, O Lord, are **your holy mountain, the place where you dwell**. And that brings us to the greatest mystery.

Verse 22: **And in him** (in Christ) **you** (Gentiles) **too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit**. The Church is God's home away from home. It is His dwelling place on earth. If that's not obvious, I can only say that yeast in flour is

not obvious either. How shall we speak of this mystery?

Michael Wyschogrod, now in his 80s, is a German-born, Jewish philosopher and theologian. I was drawn to his writings, because he takes seriously the doctrine of election. His book, *The Body of Faith*, sets forth an extended study of Israel as God's chosen people.

I believe the statement at the end of his book applies to the Church, because Jesus brought the Church into Israel's election. I have removed the appropriate Jewish word *circumcised*, and I have replaced the words *Israel* and *Jews* with the word *Church*. "The body of *the Church* is the dark, carnal presence through which the redemption makes its way in history. Salvation is of the *Church* because the flesh of the *Church* is the abode of the divine presence in the world. It is the carnal anchor that God has sunk into the soil of creation." (Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith*, 256)

Would you ask God to change your mind about the Church? Your estimate of the Church's value is too low. The Church is indispensable to the salvation of the world. And take one more step. Ask yourself, "How would I treat BVBC, if I loved it the way Christ loves the Church? What could I do to help BVBC mirror Christ better? Remember the parable of the yeast. We are not talking about impossibilities here.

### **Take-aways**

Now that we have reached the end of chapter 2, let's celebrate this milestone by reading or listening to Ephesians 1-2 again at least two times this week. Read Ephesians 1 as a summary of the meaning of Christ, and read Ephesians 2 as a summary of the meaning of the Church.

Second, once again, take the prayer of Ephesians 1:15-20, put it in your own words or use it like it is, and then pray it several times this week. Pray for yourself, the people in the world you love the best, for BVBC, and for the whole beautiful, maddening, Church that is spread throughout the whole wide world.