

Sermon File # 868

Scripture Text: Ephesians 2:11-22

Sermon Title: *This Church Is God's Building!*

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Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

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This Church Is God's Building!

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to Ephesians 2:11-22, as we continue to look at this letter of Paul, who writes to the church about our new life in Christ and our life within God's New Society (Stott). We have noted from Chapter One about the individual believer's significance in Christ, who has chosen us to be his holy children (1-14) and then Paul's first prayer in this letter, which concerns our need for spiritual insight into our riches in Christ (15-23). Last Sunday, we considered the first ten verses of Chapter Two, how that God has made us his children by his saving grace that is received through faith alone. This saving grace also is shaping us into God's "poems," his masterpieces that fulfill his preordained works for us to do.

Today we will see, in verses 11-22 of Chapter Two, that even though individuals receive salvation by grace through faith (1-10), we are not left alone in our faith and our relationship with God; rather, we are united with other believers in a corporate unity that we know to be the church (Hoehner, 351). Paul's Letter to the Ephesians is thought by many to have been intended as a general letter, not just for the church in Ephesus, but to be circulated among all the churches in the surrounding cities and towns of Asia Minor. Evidence for this is in the lack of personal references that Paul makes in his other letters, which are directed to specific individuals (his Pastorals) and local churches (Mohrlang, 1996). Generally, Paul refers to the church as the body of Christ, which includes all believers everywhere. But the practical applications of his teachings about the church have relevance only with specific local congregations of believers which we call "the local church." And in our text for today Paul is speaking of the church, including this local church, as God's building.

Follow as I read **Ephesians 2:11-22**.

This week promises to be an important one for IBC Brussels. Along with a number of other churches who have disaffiliated with the Union of Baptist in Belgium and have also obtained their not-for profit charter in Belgium, representatives from our congregation will meet with a notary and officers from the UBB to obtain titles to our church properties. If all goes well, and largely to the credit of our Elder Robert Pretorius, IBC Brussels will obtain full and rightful possession of the title to our building and grounds. This rightful and legal acquisition of our building and its property that this church purchased and has improved and maintained for more than two decades will signal the end of a long struggle. Along with other like-minded churches, we affirm the autonomy of the local church and the right and responsibility of the local church to own and oversee its own property.

One thing, however, I hope we will never forget, which we affirmed at the height of our struggle when the elders and congregation decided to seek reconciliation and peace with the leadership and other churches in the UBB, and that is this: This church and its physical property are not in the final analysis ours—they are and always will be the Lord's. We hold possession of this building and property "loosely," and must assume that the Lord Jesus, the head of the church, has entrusted them to us as his managers and we must be ready to use the building and property and even part with them as he may see fit.

Another fact we must always maintain, and the one that stands out as the central idea of our text for today, is that the church is not the material, the physical building in which we meet and which we use and maintain for God's purposes. International Baptist Church of Brussels has existed long before we will have hopefully obtained our property tile this week. IBC Brussels has existed even before we purchased and move to this property, as some of you will recall. IBC has been God's church, his building in the sense of our text, even before we had a physical building.

In our text for today, Paul writes to the churches that in all likelihood had no physical property of their own and met as house churches in the homes of church members. Yet Paul speaks of them as God's temple, his building project. No doubt Paul is building his imagery on what the Lord Jesus said to his disciples about his purpose of building his church on the testimony of Simon Peter and others who would confess him as Lord and Messiah (Matthew 16:13-20). The church Christ builds will be a spiritual building that would be impervious to the attacks of Satan and the forces of Hades (18). Paul's fellow apostle, Simon Peter, no doubt recalling Jesus' naming him "Petros," or Peter, spoke of the chosen people of God as a "spiritual house" which God was building by joining believers together as "living stones" (1 Peter 2:4-10). And elsewhere Paul also speaks of the church as a building, as "God's temple" that God has allowed him to assist in building "as an expert builder" (1 Corinthians 3:10-17).

In setting forth the new life we have in Christ, the riches we have in our relationship with him, Paul makes it clear that, although we are individuals who must have a personal encounter and relationship with Christ, we cannot live our Christian life in isolation from one another. We are necessarily called into the body of Christ, which is essential for us in living this new life and in experiencing the full measure of the blessings of Christ. Certainly, as Ephesians Chapter one makes clear, there is the vital role of individuation, the importance and even necessity of a personal faith in Christ. Yet, there is the problem of individualism that focuses only on the individual's

needs and ignores the responsibility we have to one another in the larger context of the church, the body of Christ (Rah, 31-45).

We need to see that our new life in Christ is dependent upon our being a vital part of God's building, and not the building in which we are meeting today, but rather the building of the church which is his people. This church is God's building, first of all...

With the people he has gathered (verses 11-13)

Paul addresses a church (perhaps more than one congregation) that consisted of primarily Gentiles, non-Jews with a pagan background, far removed from the law and tradition of the Old Covenant Scriptures (Liefeld, 1789). In verses 11-13, he reminds us that in his building his church the Triune God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, has gathered all of us...

From a hopeless condition

The image is of God building his church from "material," i.e. people whom he has chosen and reclaimed from a hopeless condition, to be part of his new structure. Only God, in his infinite wisdom and grace, could see something good and useful in us. It's as though God went to an abandoned rock quarry, long ago forgotten, and there he sees us for the potential we have and selects us to be a part of his new building. He sees something in us that we could hardly see in ourselves.

Just as in the first verse of this Second Chapter, Paul takes the spiritually dead and enslaved by the tyrant of death, Satan, and rescues us by his grace. Paul refers to the Gentiles as outsiders to God's Old Covenant people, the Jews, who had access to the Scriptures, including the Moral Law and the promise of the Messiah. The picture is of real pagan, secular outsiders, who had no knowledge of God and thus were without hope and without God in the world.

In this culture, the word "atheist" is a title some wear with an air of distinction and superiority to those they often regard as ignorant religious folks. But as Paul uses it, it's a word connoting pathetic desperation, to be alone in God's creation without the Creator and Father God to rescue and to care for us. Atheist means "without God," and to be without God is to be without any hope whatsoever, either in this life or the one to come (Lloyd-Jones, 164ff). These Gentiles had a plethora of pagan gods, but were without the true God of love, grace and saving power. It was said that in First Century Athens, it was easier to find a god than a person (Wiersbe, 55). But these gods were capricious, elusive and unreliable at best and destructive at worst. Today's pagans worship the false gods of materialism and secular humanism that fail to deliver and lead finally to emptiness and despair and end in hopelessness in the finality of death.

Paul was addressing the majority of Gentiles in the church, but the Jews, the religious insiders, also were in desperate need of the good news of the message of Christ. They had become blinded by their religious tradition and in bondage to their religious legalism. Instead of the Law and the Prophets leading them to Christ as a "school teacher," their tradition and interpretation of the Old Covenant served only to blind their eyes to the truth of the Messiah (Galatians 3:23-25; 2 Corinthians 3:7-18). The dead letter of the law and their self-righteousness was just another pathway to spiritual death and the same hopelessness as the pagan outsiders.

In verse 13, Paul uses another strong adversative conjunction for a “strong contrast” (Robertson, 526) when he speaks of God’s rescue work. “But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.” We were all without hope and without God, of no lasting value and use, but God saw our potential worth as material, as “living stones,” for his building project, and has brought us...

Into a useful collection

I like the way Peterson in *The Message* paraphrases this 13th verse:

“Now because of Christ—dying that death, shedding that blood—you who were once out of it altogether are in on everything.”

As one has said, “the cost of bringing the Gentile near was dear” (Hoehner, 363). And that’s true for all of us. It cost God the blood of his Son, that is, his horrible suffering and death, to purchase us from lost-ness, uselessness and eternal condemnation for eternal life in his kingdom (1 Peter 1:18-19).

We, who in our lost condition “were once out of it altogether,” are in on what God is doing and are a part of what he is doing in building his church. Whatever our station in life or our religious or pagan, secular background, we were all in captivity to the power of Satan and his doomed kingdom. Regardless of how “together” our lives may have appeared, we were “out of it altogether” and were helpless to free ourselves from our spiritual captivity or bring ourselves out of our spiritual darkness to the light and life of God. But God paid the price for us in Christ and pursued us by the Spirit and now we are saved by his grace and gathered as part of his useful collection.

I think of our recent roof project, when those newly crafted and baked red roofing tiles were delivered by the contractor and placed here on site, ready to be installed on our once-leaky roof.

God is collecting his people here at IBC from literally all over the world, from more than 40 nations at last estimate. This is part of the uniqueness and beauty of IBC—its diversity. God has assembled and continues to assemble the kind of cultural and ethnic diversity that will characterize heaven—people “from every nation, tribe, people and language” (Revelation 7:9). But he also has collected us from different kinds of lost-ness, whether as secular pagans, living with no thought of God, or as “law-abiding” religious, church-type people who also were strangers to God’s grace, thinking that we could somehow earn or deserve our salvation and thus lost and hopeless.

God has gathered his people to do his building...

On the site he has prepared (verses 14-18)

Just as the building materials were gathered and placed on site, so God has gathered his people. But also, as with our new roof, there needed to be a clearing off of the old roof, which was a barrier to the new one. Those old useless tiles represented a barrier to what needed to be done. And here in these next verses 14-18, Paul pictures God’s...

Destroying the barrier

Paul said God made peace between Jews and Gentiles, who had for generations been separated by a wall of legalism, exclusivity and animosity. To make way for Jews and Gentiles to become unity, the wall of division, the old barrier, had to be removed. God had given the Law of Moses to his people, helping them to live in a way that was distinctively different from the pagans that surrounded them in the land of Promise. But the design of God was to use Israel to eventually become a light to the nations, bringing pagan nations also to become part of the people of God.

There was the Moral law, contained in the Ten Commandments, which Jesus said he did not come to destroy but to fulfill. In the Sermon on the Mount, we see how that through a relationship with Christ we are given grace and power to live a life that exceeds legalistic righteousness, thus fulfilling the full intention of the Moral Law (Matthew 5:17ff). The dietary and ceremonial laws pointed to Christ and were superseded by Christ, who has nullified these legal and symbolic imperatives (Romans 10:4). These laws were God's "school teachers" to bring us to Christ, enabling us to see him more clearly and to realize our inability to please God apart from his grace and imputed and Spirit-imparted righteousness (Galatians 3:23-25). Now, through Christ and our faith in him, we are freed from the curse of the Law, have died to the Law and are under the New Covenant, which is the Law of Love for God and neighbor (Romans 7:1-6; Matthew 22:34-40; Romans 13:8-10; Hoehner, 374-376).

So, Jews, who had been under the legalistic requirements of the Old Covenant, and pagan Gentiles, who were totally clueless about the Law of Moses, are now on equal footing, and that footing is faith in Jesus Christ and a personal relationship with him.

Again, I like the way *The Message* expresses this passage:

"The Messiah has made things up between us so that we're now together on this, both non-Jewish outsiders and Jewish insiders. He tore down the wall we used to keep each other at a distance. He repealed the law code that had become so clogged with fine print and footnotes that it hindered more than it helped. Then he started over. Instead of continuing with two groups of people separated by centuries of animosity and suspicion, he created a new kind of human being, a fresh start for everybody" (14f).

In building his church, God had to destroy a barrier between the religious Jews and the pagan Gentiles, the insiders and the outsiders. No doubt Paul was thinking about the four and a half foot wall that separated the Jerusalem Temple from the surrounding Court of the Gentiles. Paul got into serious trouble when a rumor accused him of taking a Gentile, Trophimus, through this barrier and into the Temple. This was a crime punishable by death, and after this accusation, the Temple was shut down because it was thought to have been defiled by the presence of this Gentile (See Acts 21:28f and Wilson, 55). Talk about serious religious exclusiveness!

Christ brought the peace of salvation through the forgiveness of sins to both Jews and Gentiles, and this barrier of separation was removed through his death on the cross. "When Jerusalem fell in AD 70, this partition (the wall around the Temple) was demolished along with the temple itself. But Paul saw it as already destroyed by Christ at the cross" in AD 30 (Wood, 40). The miraculous tearing of the veil before the Holy of Holies at Jesus' death symbolized that access is open for all into the

presence of God (Matthew 27:51). Paul says that the wall of separation between people is now torn down, allowing for the building of Christ's church. Now he is...

Bringing us together

This is another beautiful feature of IBC Brussels, our amazing unity amidst all of our diversity. Our unity is not based on our knowledge and use of the English language. Our unity transcends all the cultural differences, and what draws us together, rather, *who* draws us together, is Christ Jesus and our common faith and commitment to follow him as Lord.

Paul reminds us that, whatever our past differences and animosities, Christ has preached peace to us and brought peace to all of our hearts, and transformed us from God's enemies into his friends (17f; Romans 5:9-11). And now that we are God's reconciled friends, we are necessarily reconciled friends with one another and even ministers of reconciliation, friend-making, with one another (2 Corinthians 5:16-21).

Paul makes it very clear that there are no special "box seats" for those of religious pedigree and church background or tenure of church membership. There is no hierarchy in God's Temple, his church. We're on the same ground at the foot of the cross and in the presence of Christ, whether long-time church leader or newly born child of God, freshly snatched from a life of paganism and unbelief.

God made the Jew and the Gentile one person in Christ, one body of Christ. And today he has made this diverse congregation of 40-some nationalities and numerous Christian confessions into a unified body of believers in Jesus.

Paul notes that it is solely through Christ that we all have access to God the Father, and are ushered by him, in the fashion of an oriental royal court, into the presence of the Father through the Holy Spirit (18, and Wood, 41). The Triune God once again is at work in behalf of every one of God's children, drawing us to saving grace and also into his loving hands and into the full fellowship of his church, with its mystical unity.

When Solomon's temple was being built, all the stones were quarried and prepared off site, so that no hammering and chiseling could be heard at the temple site itself (1 Kings 6:7). And the stones were prepared to fit together because no mortar was used. It was simply stone against stone, in perfect unity (Hoehner, 409). In the same way, God brings together his living stones, his people (1 Peter 2:4ff), and makes us one in Christ, the foundation and also the capstone (Galatians 3:28). All cultural, religious and gender differences are erased, chiseled away, as he brings us together into his temple.

We are gathered together in this place, where God has cleared away all that would hinder his work. And we need to understand that the church is God's building...

For the temple he has envisioned (verses 19-22)

God has gathered his people and cleared the site of all barriers between us, and now is ready to fit us together in the places he has assigned to each one of us in order to build his temple.

When Paul used the imagery of a holy temple (21) the Jews probably thought of the temple in Jerusalem, a magnificent structure but one that would in a few years be destroyed by the Romans, just as Jesus prophesied (Matthew 24:1-3). The Gentiles in Ephesus would have thought of the temple to the goddess Artemis, which was one of the Seven Wonders of the World (Hoehner, 415 and 83). Paul knew that God was building something more wonderful than any man-made structure—he was building his holy temple, his people, united to worship, fellowship with and serve him for his glory.

And we need to note that in God's building...

Every member is essential

In other places, Paul emphasizes the importance of every member of the church, as a vital part of the body of Christ, with its organic unity and need for various spiritual gifts (4:1-16; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31; Romans 12:3-8). God has brought together for the building of his church, and each of us has equal status and importance, whether new or longtime member.

Probably in Ephesus and surrounding churches in Asia Minor, there were “ex-pats,” as many of us are here. There were perhaps also some asylum (from persecution) seekers and a lot of foreigners who didn't have the full rights of citizenship. But now, in God's building, the church, everyone has full kingdom citizenship. Paul uses the words “foreigners and aliens” (19) to describe what they used to be, but says now they all have full status in the church. A foreigner, translated also as “stranger” (ESV), was similar to a tourist, a temporary visitor without citizen rights, just as some of you may be visiting Belgium on a tourist visa. The other word, “alien,” is a resident alien, like me, who is “legally residing in a foreign country with a residence visa. But neither the stranger nor alien has the rights of a citizen (Hoehner, 392). (Every time I go to our local commune, government office, I'm reminded that I'm a ‘vreemdeling,’ a foreigner in Belgium, and not a “burger,” a citizen, even though I have a residence card).

Because we belong to Christ as his children and followers, “we no longer live on a passport but...we really have our birth certificates...we really do belong” (Lloyd-Jones, 302). Here in IBC we all, regardless of our legal standing in Belgium, really do belong. We have our spiritual birth certificates as re-born children of God and citizens of the heavenly kingdom. We have not only our spiritual birth certificates but also our full citizenship papers and are on equal footing. Each one of us is vital to the body of Christ and has been brought into this fellowship for a distinct purpose. You are as important as anyone.

God is building his temple, his church and...

The foundation and cornerstone are vital

The foundation upon which God builds his church is that which has been laid by the apostles and prophets, a term sometimes used to refer to all of the Scriptures. In this instance, I think Paul is referring to the words of the Apostles and prophets of the church, who had knowledge and authority that were eventually replaced by the Scriptures (Stott, 107). God continues to build his church on the authority and under the guidance of his written word, which must be our sole guide and source for teaching and preaching.

As Jesus taught us in his Sermon on the Mount, it's not enough to give "lip service" to the Scriptures. We are to build our lives and our church upon the solid foundation of obedience to the Word (Matthew 7:24ff). The word of God contains everything we need for life and godliness and for the understanding and direction of the church (2 Peter 1:3).

And the church is built on Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone (20). In modern architecture, the cornerstone is often simply ornamental, often inscribed and inserted in the dedication of a building. But in the ancient world, the cornerstone was the main foundation stone, which determined the position and stability of the structure. All the other stones and the rest of the building had to be in line with the cornerstone. Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of the "precious cornerstone for a sure foundation" (Isaiah 28:16), as both Paul (20) and Peter (1 Peter 2:6) understood. Jesus is the head of his church and the Lord of his people, his followers, who are to love and obey him and to be a vital part of his building, his church.

There is no concept in the Scriptures of a Christian who lives in isolation from the church, Christ's body and temple. To be separated from the church and uninvolved with its life and ministry is as unthinkable as a limb severed from the body and as useless as a brick taken from the building. And only when we are rightly related to Christ, the Cornerstone, are we rightly related to one another, and if we are "out of sorts" with others in the temple, we need to examine if we are not out of fellowship with Christ himself.

The Lord Jesus is building his temple, his church and...

The work continues until the building is final

One of the most impressive buildings I have seen is the Sagrada Familia, the masterwork of Antoni Gaudi (1852-1926) in Barcelona, Spain. This massive, ornate structure has been under construction since 1882 and is not expected to be completed until 2026. But this September, a portion of the building's interior is scheduled to open for public worship, and not just for tourist sightseeing. I like what Gaudi himself said when asked about the extremely long construction period by those anxious for it to be finished: "My client is not in a hurry." And we can assume his client was God himself.

Our God is at work building his temple and he also is not rushing things. He is patiently building his church and also patiently polishing us as his building stones. While the construction is going on, the building is open for worship, fellowship and service. I've seen signs in buildings where work is going on while the buildings are in use, and they say something like "Pardon our mess; we're getting bigger to serve you better."

And while God is working on his temple, things are rarely tidy and sometimes we grow impatient with others and with ourselves when we don't always live up to God's standards. I must ask you to be patient with me, with all of my imperfections and failings, and try to remember that God is not through working with me yet. But we're "open for business" as God adds his stones to his building and shapes us according to his word and will. We have no idea about the final date of completion, but we know the end result will be a glorious temple, but not one made of bricks and mortar:

"I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple" (Revelation 21:22).

God is building his church in preparation for everlasting worship in this glorious temple.

Conclusion:

Until that Day, God is at work building his temple, with the people he has gathered, on the site he has prepared, for the temple he has envisioned. What a privilege it is, to be chosen by God to be a part of this magnificent building project! And he has a place for each one of us.

Whatever our past, our background and even the load of sin and guilt we bring to this place of worship today, realize that God delights in taking what is “throwaway” materials and making something useful of our lives. That’s the meaning of redemption, the heart of our understanding of salvation. The good news of Jesus is for pagan Gentile sinners, those who know nothing about the Bible, church or any kind of religion. By turning to Christ, asking him to forgive your sins, and committing yourself to follow him as your Master and Lord, you will receive the free gift of eternal life and a new purpose and direction for your life.

And it’s good for “church” people like me to be reminded that God isn’t through with us, as he continues to shape and to smooth our rough edges so we will be better fitted for his temple. He patiently works through our spiritual disciplines and obedience, but also through our trials, disappointments and difficulties to teach us obedience in our spirit and strength in faith and perseverance. As much as I don’t like difficulties, I must confess that I grow through them more than through the good times of evident success. During the tough times, I *must* grow. I sink or swim—sink in discouragement and defeat or swim in trust and hope.

He also works with us to teach and to correct and to assist us in our relationships with each other. We must learn to fit together in love. We don’t always agree on everything. We have our own opinions, but the beauty of Christ-like love is the ability to accept, love and seek to listen to and understand one another and be certain that our disagreements don’t become disagreeable and a threat to the unity and overall integrity of God’s temple, his church.

This church building is God’s building, and we must always remember that as we care for and utilize what he has entrusted to us. Let us pray that all will go well this week for the transfer of the title to our church property, that the former and darker part of our church’s history might be put behind us. May we commit to be good stewards of the building and grounds and use it all for his glory and be willing even to let go of it as he may direct.

But more important and much larger than the building, this church is God’s holy people, his holy temple that he is building up for himself and his eternal kingdom and glory. May that be our focus, as we seek to reach out and receive other “building stones” God is adding to his church and as we seek to build up one another in faith and love. May that be our building project that will last until human temples are no more.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. Many people think of the church as the church building. Why do you think this is so?
2. Give your definition of the church, both the universal and the local church.
3. What is individuation and individualism? What is the solution to individualism in the Christian community?
4. Paul speaks of the Gentile pagans as being without hope. How is it also possible for church people to be “without God”?
5. There was a cultural and religious barrier between Jews and Gentiles in Paul’s day. What are some barriers that might keep secular unbelievers in this culture from coming to faith in Christ? How might they be removed?
6. What are some barriers that divide people in the church? How might these barriers be removed?
7. Why is every member of the church, the body of Christ and God’s holy temple, important to its functioning?
8. Reflect about your place in the church and your relationships with your fellow members, and ask God to use you in the growth and strengthening of his temple.

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