



“Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end,” Ephesians 3:21.

Diligent Service: Advancement

Covenant: We engage therefore, by the aid of the Holy Spirit . . . to strive for the advancement of this church, in knowledge, holiness, and comfort.

Aim: To emphasize the fact that the believer covenants to strive for the advancement of the church

Text: Ephesians 3:8-21

INTRODUCTION—It is no easy thing to be a faithful member of a Baptist church. It requires diligent effort. One portion of the church covenant reads, “We engage therefore, by the aid of the Holy spirit . . . to strive for the advancement of this church, in knowledge, holiness, and comfort.” Observe the word “strive.” It means “to make a great effort; to try very hard; to give great, strenuous and earnest exertion.” There is no place for a lazy person in the work of the church.

The advancement of the church must be manifest in two directions. Each member must strive for his own personal advancement in spiritual things and then aid the growth of the brethren. In I Corinthians 12 the church is described by analogy with the human body. Paul says that just as the body needs sight, smell, hearing, etc., to be complete, so the church needs each member God adds to her, 12:18. As all the body is affected by suffering or honour which comes to any member, so it is with the church 12:26-27. Just as each member of the body receives strength and sustenance from other members, so the church is strengthened by the relationship of her members with one another.

The church must advance. Her work is too important for her to sit still. When a person unites with a Baptist church he gives his solemn consent to the obligation to strive for the advancement of his church “in knowledge,

holiness, and comfort.” Fulfillment of this obligation will demand time, patience, energy, money and prayer. Are you living up to your commitment?

EXPOSITION

I. THE IMPORTANCE OF ADVANCEMENT, 3:8-13.

1. The purpose of God, verse 8. God intended each of His churches to be a spiritual dynamo, a veritable lighthouse, from which the gospel of salvation would be sounded out through a local community and around the world. To use the church as a social club or benevolent society is to miss her basic purpose. She is a spiritual organism set in the world with a redemptive message

In His great wisdom, God knew that the members of the church would need guidance and help in their spiritual ministry. So He set men with special gifts in the church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers, Ephesians 4:11. The purpose of these gifts to the church is three-fold: to mature the saints, to carry on the work of ministering, and to build up the body of Christ, Ephesians 4:12.

This was God's purpose in adding you to the church. What was your purpose in joining? Even if you have not the gift of evangelism or ministering or teaching, you do have some contribution to make to the church body. Find it and make it! This is the purpose of God for you.

2. The need of the church, verses 9-13. The church needs her apostles, prophets, teachers, and others with special gifts of God. But she needs more than these. Paul makes a great emphasis in I Corinthians 12:14-31 upon the unity of the body. 'Even the members of the physical body which we deem less beautiful or less necessary have a significant place. Indeed, the body would be seriously handicapped without them. If God has not given you a place in the “leadership” of the church, be glad to serve in a place of “followership.” Your church needs you in her work.

(1) The church needs to understand the “mystery” of Christ, verse 9. This is not a thing hidden to all but the initiated. The “mystery” is blessed truth that lay hidden in the bosom of God until the Gospel became clear but is now clearly revealed. The “mystery” is that God offers a redemption of worldwide application; when the church sees this, she will become a missionary-evangelist. The scope of the divine way of redemption is an imperative for its worldwide proclamation. He gave the commission to the church to **“Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching**

them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you . . .”

Matthew 28:19-20. When the church understands the outreach of God's love, she will reach out in missionary enterprises. This is the will of God.

(2) The church needs to reveal the wisdom of God, verses 10-11. This is an amazing verse. Observe that the recipients of this new knowledge are “the principalities and powers in heavenly places.” That angelic beings are intensely interested in human redemption is clear from 1 Peter 1:12. When they see the exhibition of the wisdom of God in redeeming men by the death of His Son, joining diverse men in a perfect unity in His churches, and enlisting men in the task of world evangelism, they marvel and glorify God. It is surprising to say, yet true in fact, that God is glorified by the angels of heaven as you are faithful in your church on earth! The complicated problem of man's redemption is solved by the “unsearchable riches” of the Lord Christ. This agrees with His eternal purpose. The church is the visible materialization of God's purpose for the universe.

(3) The church needs to experience the fulness of blessings which is hers in Christ, verse 12. “Boldness,” “access,” “confidence” mark the church's relationship with God in Christ. “Boldness” suggests absence of fear or restraint. It is used in secular usage to mean “the freedom of speech which is the right of every citizen of a democratic state.” It here signifies the liberty of believers to approach God directly through Christ with no danger of being rejected. “Access” refers to the right of approach to God. “Confidence” suggests assurance of acceptance. Put together, these three words mean that in Christ the believer has free, unrestricted, and confident access to God.

We who by faith in Christ are one in the unity of the Spirit and the body of the church are brought into accord with a divine purpose which spans the ages. That “purpose of the ages” is the preaching of the gospel for the redemption of men for the glory of God. What are you doing to advance the part your church has in this ministry?

II. THE AREAS OF ADVANCEMENT, 3:14-19.

Because he was deeply interested in the growth of the believers to spiritual maturity and the evangelization of the lost, Paul gave himself much to prayer. The common manner of prayer among the Jews was while standing, Mark 11:25; Luke 18:11, 13. A kneeling posture denoted special solemnity or unusual urgency, Luke 22:41; Acts 7:60. So urgent is it that the church advance in spiritual matters that Paul was irresistibly driven to his knees to pray for it. Are you often on your knees before the Father in behalf

of your church? Could this be included in the “striving for the advancement of this church,” which we have promised to do?

1. Advance in spiritual strength, verse 16. The apostle piles synonyms one upon another to drive home his thought. He prays, “May they be empowered with power.” How can this be? Paul answers, “through his Spirit in the inward man.” This power, divine in kind, is communicated by the Spirit and realized by the inner man. This is no reference to Christ coming to dwell in the heart in conversion. It is a prayer that the believers might know the fullness of the Spirit. It is realized when believers claim by faith the full blessing secured for them in redemption.

Graham Scroggie has well said, “A life may be truly Christian without being fully Christian. It is this which distinguishes one Christian from another . . . In some, Christ is just present, in others He is prominent, and in others again, He is pre-eminent.” Paul prays that the believers might be filled with all the fullness of God by living the abundant lives in the divine resources mediated by the Spirit from Christ. No more worthy prayer could be offered. Read Acts 1:8 in the light of this thought.

2. Advance in consciousness of the indwelling Christ, verse 17a. There is a distinction between Christ dwelling in one's heart by faith and in Christ's dwelling in one's heart in all His fullness. Often a lack of faith keeps the Christian stunted in growth and limits effective service. When God came to us in Christ, taking up permanent residence in us, He brought all the divine resources with Him. He made us to have all we need for effective service. **“For in him (Christ) dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him . . .”** Colossians 2:9-10. We have no need to ask God for more. God has no more to give than what is already given in Christ Jesus. What we need is faith to claim these divine resources. Paul prays that the believers may know the full implications of the constant victory available through the indwelling Christ and so be filled with all the fullness of God.

3. Advance in a life of love, verse 17:11. A habitation of God in the Spirit must grow out of a rock-foundation of love. Paul used two figures — “rooted and grounded” — to emphasize his point. Plants are rooted, while buildings are grounded. So the biological and architectural figures are employed to show the importance of love in the Christian's life. Read I John 4:7-11 and I Corinthians 13 in view of this emphasis.

Love between Christian brethren is based upon the gift of the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5), the command of Christ (John 13:34), and their common relationship with the Father, I John 4:7; 5:1-2. Love exercises a most blessed ministry by creating a unique oneness between Christian brethren, “being

knit together in love, unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding,” Colossians 2:2. Love for the brethren will be love for the church. Likewise, it is impossible to love the church without loving the brethren who compose her body.

4. Advance in spiritual knowledge, verses 18-19. “With all the saints” there is an increasing awareness of the implications of the love of God in Christ. This is better understood in Christian relationships. Fullness of spiritual maturity is difficult to attain if one isolates himself from fellow believers. There is no special sanctity to be found in remote monasteries or withdrawn believers.

But there is so much to know about God that we can never attain fullness of knowledge. More is involved here than intellectual apprehension. God desires that we “know by experience” the depths of His person as taught by the Spirit, I Corinthians 2:6-16. See II Peter 3:18, **“But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”** Each believer should know more about Jesus today than he knew yesterday. Such advancement in personal relationship with Him will cause the advancement of the church.

5. Advance in experiencing the Divine fullness, verse 19. Only by personal knowledge of Christ is spiritual maturity possible. Growth in grace does not mean increase of intellect but increasing fellowship with a Person. There is no limit to the spiritual infilling which Paul recommends, short of the fullness of God Himself. In Christ that divine fullness already belongs to the Christian ideally, but his earnest desire is that it may increasingly be realized in personal experience. Nothing can exceed the blessed condition of being “filled with all the fullness of God.” Here every other blessing is comprehended and crowned. This blessed experience is available to you.

III. THE PURPOSE OF ADVANCEMENT, 3:20-21.

There is but one purpose underlying all creation and all work of redemption—the glory of God. See Isaiah 43:7 and Ephesians 1:12. No life could have a worthier objective than to dedicate itself to glorify God. Paul is here saying, “In the church, which is the body of Christ, and in Christ Jesus, who is the Head of the church, let God be glorified.” True, God is glorified in heavenly places where believers are raised up in Him, Ephesians 2:6. But God may also be glorified here upon the earth where the people of Christ live in mortal bodies. It is wonderful to sing about “when we all get to heaven,” but until that time comes the believer's theme must be “we’ll work ‘till Jesus comes”!

1. God is worthy to be glorified, verse 20. Examine the indescribable ability of God. The use of superlatives (“exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think”) demonstrates the impossibility of describing God aright. He is worthy of all the glory which could come to Him. It is no surprise that the Psalms, the Book of Praises, concludes with the statements, **“Let every thing that hath breath praise the Lord. Praise ye the Lord,”** Psalm 150:6.

2. God is worthy to be glorified in the church, verse 21. The church is the domain in which the praise that belongs to Him is to be rendered. She has been chosen, redeemed, commissioned, indwelt, and glorified by Him. It is only right that she return glory to Him.

The man who professes loyalty to God but ignores the church is missing the heart of this scripture. It clearly states that God is best served through His church. The happiest Christians in the world are those who are faithfully serving God in one of His local congregations. Herein has the Father ordained glory to Himself. Man cannot improve on that plan.

3. God is worthy to be glorified by Jesus Christ, verse 21. Just as God is to be glorified in the church, He is to be glorified through the Head of the church. There is no glory given to the Father which bypasses the Son. He who believes not the Son has made God a liar (I John 5:10) and has closed the way of access to the Father, John 14:6. Even so, they who would serve God must do so through Jesus Christ.

Jesus can never be separated from the church. He is her Head; she is His body. It would seem strange that one would try to glorify God through Jesus Christ apart from the church. The church member is in an ideal place to honor the Lord. Being born again by His redemption being guided by His Spirit, dedicated to His service, loyal to His precepts, and a member of His body, the church member can honor the Lord as God intends. How well does this describe your relationship to your church?

4. God is worthy of being glorified perpetually, verse 21. How long is God to be glorified in the church by Christ Jesus? “Throughout all ages, world without end!” This statement means, “unto all the generations of the age of the ages,” that is, “forever and forever,” “eternally.” If God is to be glorified in the church in eternity, then she will retain her identity eternally. After the rapture “the churches” will become “the Church” since there will then be only one assembly of believers. As God has been glorified in her by her service on earth, then He will be glorified in her by her praises in heaven. It is a blessed privilege to be a member of this holy fellowship. Each member should strive daily to prove himself worthy.

CONSLUSION—God is glorified in the church only as He is glorified

in the members of the church. The church will advance only as the individual members advance. If any church fails in her duty it is because the members have failed. In very truth, the church is the membership. Oh, to be a helper rather than a hinderer!

In uniting with a Baptist church each member enters into a solemn covenant concerning Christian living. He pledges himself “to strive for the advancement of this church, in knowledge, holiness, and comfort.” This includes personal growth and help to others. Look over your church relationships for the past year. How much has your own congregation grown in “knowledge, holiness, and comfort” because of you? What can you do to make a more significant contribution to glorifying God through your church? Next week’s study should give some guidance to answer to this challenge.

QUESTIONS

1. What part of the Church Covenant is considered today?
2. How does I Corinthians 12:12-31 show the importance of church membership?
3. Why is it imperative that the church advance?
4. How does the church glorify God both on earth and in heaven?
5. What encouragement is there in Ephesians 3:12?
6. How can the church increase spiritual strength?
7. What blessings come by the indwelling of Christ?
8. Why is love important in church relationships?
9. What is the great purpose behind church advancement?
10. How does next week’s study relate to this study?