



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

Diligent Service: Advancement

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

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

Text: Ephesians 3:8-21.

INTRODUCTION—The Christian must never cease to grow. The church must never cease to advance. Yet, if one happens the other will happen also. Each member of a Baptist church contributes to the growth (or lack of growth) of that particular church. As he grows in spirit, knowledge, faith, dedication, and ability, the church also grows. As he fails to grow and falls into a back-slidden condition the church also follows. I Corinthians 12 describes the church from an analogy of the human body. As a well-balanced body needs sight, hearing, power of motivation, etc., so the church needs each member God has added to her, I Corinthians 12:18. All the body is affected (whether by suffering or by honor) by what happens to each single member, I Corinthians 12:26-27. Thus there is no such thing as an “unimportant” church member.

The member of a Baptist church agrees “to strive for the advancement of this church, in knowledge, holiness, and comfort.” This means he will seek to cultivate these things in his own life and in the life of his fellows. It involves spiritual growth, careful study, support of the church's educational ministry, and even aiding the building program! This is not an insignificant part of the member's obligation. Before God he has agreed to aid the church to grow. This will demand time, patience, energy, and money if this promise is kept. This lesson will be more profitable if it is studied with the prayer

that God would help us be qualified and willing to so aid the ministry of our church to advance.

EXPOSITION

I. The Importance of Advancement, 3:8-13.

1. God called His ministers to advance the work of His churches, verse 8. The riches of Christ are such that they cannot be traced out and understood. They are unsearchable. Yet, God has selected Paul (and all other ministers) to bear witness to these wonderful truths. The purpose of the ministry is to win men to Christ and then to build them up in the things of the Lord. God has given the churches men of various ability so that each phase of the work may receive due attention, I Corinthians 12:28. When the pastor of a church delivers the sermon it should be received as a message from God and the church honestly seek to conform their lives to it. The worthy pastor has no personal advantage for which he is working. His whole soul is bound up in the consuming purpose of glorifying God through the church. To this end he was called. To this end he serves.

2. The work of the ministry advances the church by aiding individual believers, verses 9-12. Preaching the unsearchable riches of Christ will not only win sinners, but will also build up God's people in the faith. This Gospel is no mere ethical code nor expression of human sentiment. It is nothing less than a direct unfolding of Divine resources of love and power! This suggests three basic truths.

(1) The ministry makes known the mystery, verse 9. Like the dawning of light so the preaching makes men know that which has been hidden from the beginning of the world. (Note: Paul use "mystery" in the sense of something formerly known but now revealed through Jesus Christ.) It is God's purpose that bright light should be cast upon the wonderful Gospel which is universal in scope. Truths once in the shadow have now been brought out into the sun through the Gospel. God intends the worldwide distribution, through the stewards of God of the news and blessings now available to men through Jesus Christ. Missionaries tell of how amazed and thrilled men are when the truth of the Gospel actually dawns upon those who have never heard. God's servants share that work! The mystery is that salvation is freely offered to all men through Jesus Christ.

(2) The ministry aids the church to know the wisdom of God, verses 10. God pleases to use angels ("principalities and powers in heavenly places") and men to make the church to know His wisdom. Men are to know

this wisdom because the church is made to know it and shares its message with others. The church can know the wisdom of God in measurement possible for other men nor even in other times. The wisdom of God is designated as “manifold” (or, “the much variegated wisdom”). The complicated problem of man's redemption is met and solved by the “unsearchable riches” of the work of Christ. The wisdom of God surpasses that of men (I Corinthians 1:25) and is expressed in the planning and fulfillment of His eternal purposes.

(3) The ministry presents Christ as the center of God's plan and work, verses 11-12. God's work is not a temporary expedient. He is working according to a purpose which has reached through all time. Thus has He planned to carry into effect a work which is now made manifest through Jesus Christ. Christ is the center of the work of God. He was the center of creation, John 1:3. He is the center of salvation, Acts 4:12. He will be the one in whom all creation finds its highest fulfillment, Colossians 1:16-17. Those who reject Jesus Christ close the only door of hope upon reconciliation with God. Through Him we have the right of approach to God, freedom of speech (confidence) before God, and faith in God as Heavenly Father. The purpose of the minister (and teacher) is to present Jesus Christ as the center of all God's dealings with men.

3. The suffering of the ministry is endured to promote the work, verse 13. The Gospel messenger is willing to suffer for the sake of the converts. This is because of the dignity of his office, the significance of its performance, and the expression of the love of God, I John 4:11. The suffering of one of God's children should not discourage others from the work, but rather inspire them to greater loyalty. The greater the office the more trials are attendant upon faithful performance of its duties. Let one find trials an occasion for joy instead of discouragement, James 1:2-4. Future glory is more wonderful than present trials, Romans 8:18. Besides, the church is well worth more than any temporary inconvenience which may be incurred in seeking its advancement.

II. The Area of Advancement, 3:14-19.

1. The Church should grow in spiritual strength, verses 14-16. Paul prays for the welfare of the Ephesian church. The first petition of his prayer is for the church's growth in her spiritual life. He uses a grammatical construction which means the strengthening was to take place by means of power which the Spirit of God made a part of the inner man. This is another way of praying that they may have the fulness of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had

promised this blessed experience would come as He and the Father (along with the Spirit) took up residence in the believer, John 14:16, 18, 23. This spiritual strength will qualify for service, fortify against Satan and multiply the effectiveness of service rendered unto the Lord. Surely the churches would do well to grow in this area.

2. The church should grow in consciousness of the indwelling Christ, verse 17a. Again, prayer is offered that Christ may dwell in the hearts of the church. The word “dwell” means “to settle down and be at home.” This reminds one that if one yields to the Holy Spirit his life will be cleansed from the things of evil. Thus room will be made for the Lord Jesus and He will be completely at home in the consecrated heart of the believer. Faith led to the saving of the soul. So also, faith leads to the consecration of the life and Christ dwells in the heart (life) through faith. The church which is conscious of this indwelling of the Lord will be more thoughtful to do His will and more lovingly considerate of one another. As Christ is the head of the church it is only proper that He be given a place of preeminence in the life of each member of the church. Blessed is the church with members in whose life Christ feels perfectly at home!

3. The church should be settled in love, verse 17b. As a consequence of the Spirit's strengthening and the Lord's at-home-ness, the believer will be “rooted” (securely settled) and “grounded” (deeply founded) to love. This is the love which God manifested in Jesus Christ (I John 4:9) and which challenges love one to another, I John 4:11. It is love which is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, Romans 5:5. It is God loving others through us and he who does not have this love does not truly know God, I John 4:7-8. The church that pleases God is the church which is characterized by personal expression of God's love to men.

4. The church should increase in knowledge, verses 18-19a. Those who are strengthened with the Spirit, conscious of the indwelling Christ, and settled in love, are then capable of increasing in knowledge. The Christian is to “comprehend” the truth in the sense of laying hold on it and making it one's own. Every saint has the power of spiritual knowledge. This knowledge qualifies one to understand the vastness of the love of Christ — the length, and breadth, and depth, and height of it! There is more than intellectual knowledge here, however. “To know the love of Christ” means to have an experiential knowledge of it. No matter how much one knows of the love of God in Christ, there are still oceans of the divine love which have not yet been fathomed! No wonder Peter admonishes, “But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ,” II Peter 3:18. No church member should be satisfied to remain in ignorance of the things

of God, II Timothy 2:15.

5. The church should be filled with the Divine fulness, verse 19b. Again, the result of having an experiential knowledge of the love of God in Christ is to be filled with the fulness of God. The reader will remember that all the fulness dwelt in Christ, Colossians 1:19. In fact, all the fulness of the Godhead dwelt bodily in Him, Colossians 2:9. This filling began in the reception of the Divine nature in redemption, II Peter 1:4. The closer one walks to Christ and the more humble he is before Him, the more the fulness of God is revealed in him. This growing sanctification is to result in a man being filled full of God so that there is room for nothing else. The proper church has no room for petty differences and idle time, being filled to the full by the sense of the Divine!

III. The Purpose of Advancement, 3:20-21.

1. The church is to advance so that God will be glorified, verses 20-21a. The remembrance of the indescribable ability of God (verse 20) will sufficiently demonstrate that He is worthy of all praise man can render. The use of superlatives in describing God demonstrates how impossible it is to describe the grandeur of His person! When the redeemed render glory to Him it is the glory properly due Him as the Father of the Saviour, and of the saints in Him. The church exists to glorify God through evangelism, missions, and Christian education. The more the church advances the more capable she is to glorify God.

2. The church is to advance that she may glorify God within herself, verse 21b. God is to be glorified, “in the church!” The church is the domain in which the praise that belongs to Him is rendered Him. The church has been chosen, redeemed, commissioned, and glorified by Him. It is only right that she should return glory to Him. The man who professes loyalty to God but ignores the church is missing the witness of this passage. It clearly says that the one who wishes to best serve God must seek to do it through the Lord's church. The happiest Christians in the world are those who are faithfully serving the Lord through the ministry of their local church. Herein has the Father ordained glory to Himself!

3. The church is to advance that she may glorify God by Jesus Christ, verse 21c. Just as God is to be glorified in the church, He is to be glorified in the Head of the church, even Jesus Christ. Christ was sent, raised, and exalted by Him. Now that the churches have resulted from the work of Christ, it is only proper that through Him the churches will glorify God. Jesus can never be separated from the church. Her life and existence is His

work. Just so, through Him, God is to receive glory in the church. The church member who glorifies God through Jesus Christ must have been born again by His redemption, guided by His Spirit, dedicated to His purpose, and loyal to His precepts. How well does the reader measure up here?

4. The church is to advance that she may glorify God perpetually, verse 21d. The words, “throughout all ages, world without end,” simply mean, “unto all the generations of the age of the ages.” It is an impressive manner of saying that God is to be glorified in the church “forever,” or, “forever and forever,” or “eternally.” It is a comprehensive phrase in which Paul seeks to say the church will retain her identity and serve as the glorifier of God eternally. Oh, blessed privilege to be a part of that holy fellowship! May no member prove himself unworthy.

CONCLUSION—God is glorified in the church only as He is glorified in the members of the church. The church is able to advance only as the individual members advance. It never behooves a member to complain of his church. If it fails it is because the members fail. Each day must be made a stepping stone to the future if God's purposes in the church are to be realized. Oh, to be a help rather than a hindrance! This will be the topic of study for next Sunday. Study your lesson and be in class.

QUESTIONS

1. Read and explain the portion of the Church Covenant studied today.
2. What is the “mystery” which Paul made known?
3. Discuss: Christ is the center of God's work among men.
4. What is the Christian response to sufferings?
5. List the five areas in which the church should advance.
6. Let various members discuss the five areas listed above.
7. What are the purposes for advancing the church?
8. Discuss Ephesians 8:20.
9. Discuss Ephesians 3:21.
10. How does today's lesson relate to next Sunday's lesson?