

Ephesians

**R e c o v e r i n g t h e V i s i o n
o f a S u s t a i n a b l e C h u r c h
I n C h r i s t**

by

Phillip A. Ross



Marietta, Ohio

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*“I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first
... Yet, I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient
endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first” (Revelation 2:4, 19).*

*for Christ’s church
scattered and gathered
in the 21st Century*

BOOKS BY PHILLIP A. ROSS

The Work At Zion—A Reckoning, Two-volume set, 1996.

Practically Christian—Applying James Today, 2006.

The Wisdom of Jesus Christ in the Book of Proverbs, 2006.

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INTRODUCTION

The kingdom of God is the environment in which Christ's church exists. It is the environment in which humanity exists, and Christ's church is manifest in God's kingdom, in the environment, as the body of Christ. The Bible is actually a very Green book.

Green became the color of a number of European political parties in the 1980s that were organized around environmental issues. The color green was chosen because of its association with nature, health, and growth. Green Parties are concerned about ecology, health, wholeness, grassroots democracy, nonviolence, and social justice; and are found in over one hundred countries.

However, in the current political landscape the Green Movement and Christianity, broadly conceived, both believe themselves to be in opposition to one another. Thus, contrary to popular opinion, to say that the Bible is Green means that the human environment or habitat is a central biblical concern. The concerns of the Green Movement are, in fact, central to the Bible's concerns about salvation. Making this argument is the intention of this book.

The burden of proof is the responsibility of the greater truth to edify the lesser truths, if only because a lesser truth cannot successfully persuade a greater truth that its perspective is superior. And in every case, the greater truth is always God's truth. As much as I'd like to persuade the Green community about the environmental perspective of the Bible, this is more an effort to persuade the Christian community about God's reality and the reality of Christ's salvation in the twenty-first century. The argument is that Christian salvation is God's effort toward human sustainability on earth, as it is in heaven.

It is not an argument that the twenty-first century has suddenly discovered some lost biblical truth that has been obscured in previous

centuries. Rather, it is the argument that human sustainability has always been God's central concern, and the failure to receive God's message of salvation by too many people is coming to a head in the twenty-first century. The argument here is that God's message of salvation is not opposed to science or technology, but that science and technology are part of God's gifts to humanity, and as such they have an important role to play in God's kingdom. The effort of this book is to reignite the Bible's grand vision of the role of humanity through the body of Christ in the world, and in the world's environment—the universe. Indeed, the scope, scale, and vision of the Bible are necessarily grand, and that vision must be freed from its captivity by the narrow-minded and self-centered perspective of modern individualism that infects too many Christians and their churches.

Consequently, this book also presents a challenge to the new atheism movement—people who think that history has outgrown Christianity. For the most part, atheists misunderstand the Bible, and they learned most of what they know from Christians who don't understand the Bible or the faith. The god that most atheists reject is not the God of the Bible, but is a god of their own imaginations. And because so many Christians don't understand the grand view of Christianity, much of this book will appear to be foreign to them, as well.

Christians in the emergent/emerging camps will find some familiar themes in these pages, but they might be shocked by the expression of biblical fidelity to historic doctrine and rejection of the tenets of liberal progressive Christianity as being far too slippery and weak to support the gravitas of the biblical gospel. The perspective of these pages is not so much a call for the church to do something new, as it is for the church to continue doing what she has always done—make the gospel speak to the genuine spiritual needs of the age. Or course, there must be doctrinal continuity with the past, but that continuity must not become grounds for a retreat from the future. Christians are not chained to the rotten corpse of past genius, nor addicted to the passion of some imaginary future. Rather, Christians must be appropriately adapted, in the light of Christ, to the moment in which they actually live.

Regardless of what you think about Rick Warren, the opening words of his mega-successful book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, are spot on: "It's not about you." God is not here to satisfy our personal desires

and purposes, we are here to serve His. The success of modernity through the development of science and technology has proven to be an Achilles' heel, in the same way that ancient Israel's success, its wealth and prosperity during Isaiah's time, worked to undermine their faith in God, which in turn corrupted the foundations of Isaiah's society. The lack of familiarity with Isaiah's story stands as an accusation of contemporary biblical illiteracy.

The problem in Isaiah's society was not its success or its wealth, but the lapse of faithfulness to the God of the Bible. And the same thing is true today. Our problem is not American success, or capitalism, or science, or technology, or Western wealth. Our problems stem from our lapses of faithfulness to Jesus Christ, who is the God of the Bible. As such, our problems cannot be blamed on unbelievers, or governments, or Wall Street, or education. Rather, the blame for a lack of faithfulness can only be applied to those who *ought* to be faithful. The blame falls to the church(es), to both leaders and followers because you can't have one without the other. The church as a whole is at fault, and so this book is directed at the church as a whole.

The purpose of this book is neither dogmatic nor academic, but is systemic in that it endeavors to provide a reading of Ephesians and a biblical perspective that issue out of the wholeness of the Bible. It labors to hold various themes, lessons, and aspects together in order to display the Bible's sustainable depth and breadth in the light of Christ in the twenty-first century. Elsewhere I have argued for the progressive revelation of Christ in history,¹ and here I apply that argument to produce a twenty-first century reading of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. We must remember that the Holy Spirit accused the Ephesian church of having "abandoned the love you had at first" (Revelation 2:4), and charged them to "do the works you did at first" (Revelation 2:5).

This is a very interesting charge in the light of Protestantism's understanding of works-righteousness. Of course the Ephesian church was not charged to *achieve* salvation by *doing* various things, but was charged to manifest the love—agape, or the deeds of love—as a *consequence* of salvation, in the sense discussed in the book of James. So, while Protestantism's argument against works-righteousness is justi-

1 For a discussion of the progressive revelation of Christ see: Ross, Phillip A. *Peter's Vision of Christ's Purpose in First Peter*, 2011; and *Peter's Vision of The End in Second Peter*, Pilgrim Platform, Marietta, Ohio, 2012.

fied, it is not complete. It's not the whole truth of salvation. But neither is this admission an attack on the doctrine of *Sola fide*. No doctrine stands alone in the sense of being all by itself. There are five solas, all of which testify to the multi-centrality of various Christian doctrines: *Sola scriptura* (by Scripture alone), *Sola fide* (by faith alone), *Sola gratia* (by grace alone), *Solus Christus* or *Solo Christo* (Christ alone or through Christ alone), and *Soli Deo gloria* (glory to God alone)—all are necessary. This concern will come up in the text in several places.

The central idea of this book follows Paul's letter to the Ephesians, and his effort to explicate the nature and character of Christ's church. An early question that inspired this book was whether Abraham Lincoln was a Christian. Would Christ count him a member of His church? It's a more difficult question than might be first supposed. From what the historians know about Lincoln, his parents were Hardshell Baptists who joined Little Pigeon Baptist Church near Lincoln City, Indiana, in 1823. That means that Abraham would not have been baptized as an infant. Historian Mark Noll reports that "Lincoln never joined a church nor ever made a clear profession of standard Christian belief."² Yet, Lincoln's religious concerns and attitude are legendary.

Noll argues that Lincoln was disgusted with organized Christianity as a young man because of the excessive emotion and bitter sectarian quarrels of various camp meetings and traveling preachers. Lincoln enjoyed the work of deists, such as Thomas Paine. And he wrote a lot that would be considered to be religious. But because people thought he was hostile to Christianity, which almost cost him a congressional bid, he mostly kept his religious beliefs to himself. The guiding religious tenet that Lincoln seemed to hold throughout his life was the doctrine of necessity, also known as predestination, which informed his understanding of the Civil War, and shaped his mature religious thinking.

Col. John G. Nicolay, a close friend of Lincoln in Washington, said of him,

"Mr. Lincoln did not, to my knowledge, in any way change his religious ideas, opinions, or beliefs from the time he left Springfield to the day of his death."

2 Noll, Mark A. *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992.

Judge David Davis, a lifelong friend and the executor of Lincoln's will, said the same thing: "He had no faith in the Christian sense of the term." Colonel Lamon, a contemporary Lincoln biographer, said:

"Never in all that time did he let fall from his lips or his pen an expression which remotely implied the slightest faith in Jesus as the son of God and the Savior of men."

Yet, the question remains: Was Lincoln a Christian? Did the Lord count him a friend? Was he saved? Did Lincoln contribute positively to the church of Jesus Christ? No particular church claimed him as a member, nor did he claim membership in any particular church. Yet, nine out of ten people I informally polled answered immediately in the affirmative. *Of course he was!* He was a great American. But what was his relationship to Christ's church?

Keep that question in mind as you read because the deeper question is not about Lincoln, but is about the church. Another way to ask the question is: Was the church at that time in such a state of confusion and apostasy that it chased Lincoln away? Was the fault of Lincoln's failure to become a church member a matter of his faithlessness? Or the faithlessness of the churches he knew? And if that was true then, what is the condition of the churches today? This is the theme of this book. And I commend it to you with fear and trepidation, knowing that many of the questions and issues it raises will be difficult to grasp—not because they are hard to understand, but because they run against the grain of contemporary Evangelical Christianity of nearly every stripe. So, I pray for your patience. I'm not saying that I have all the answers, or any answers. But I do have some important questions for your consideration.

Semper Reformanda!

I am grateful for those who have contributed directly or indirectly to the completion of this book. First on the list, as always, is my wife, Stephanie, without whom I could not do what I do. I'm grateful for her endurance. My sons, Adam, Austin, and Justin—now all theologians in their own right, have also contributed in many ways, most of which are unknown to them—various discussions, prayers, etc. Special thanks to Austin for reading an early version and providing some editing ideas. Other readers of an earlier manuscript include Scott Craig

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Phillip A. Ross
Marietta, Ohio
February 2014

I. FAITHFUL SAINTS

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus.

—Ephesians 1:1

Truer to the form for ancient letters of this sort Paul identified himself as the author of the letter to the Ephesians. Whether Paul was claiming formal apostleship is difficult to know because we have transliterated the Greek word ἀπόστολος directly into English as *apostle*. But it could also be translated as *delegate* or *ambassador*, referring to Paul's function rather than his office. Regardless, Paul was simply re-presenting Jesus Christ to the saints.

His authority to represent Jesus Christ was given to him by the will of God. Several of his letters contain this mention. Paul's history as a persecutor of Christians probably made him sensitive to various concerns about his authority in the church. So, he addressed the issue of church authority in order to clarify it. Unlike civil government, the church does not have the power of coercion—force. Rather, the authority of the church is moral declaration and persuasion.

Paul was answering the question that could be raised by those who would not honor his authority. *Who made you the boss of me?* False apostles could simply dismiss Paul's self-claimed authority for a variety of reasons, unless it came directly from God—which it did. Paul made this claim because of his Damascus Road conversion where he was drafted into the service of Jesus Christ. Paul was not engaged in self-service. He was not doing what he had always wanted to do with his life. He had been drafted by the Lord Himself into a life of service, sacrifice, and suffering.

There is no question that Paul was writing to the *saints* (ἅγιος). However, in Greek the word is more like an adjective than a noun. It

could be read as *saintly*. Though again, the word means sacred, pure, consecrated or set apart. This phrase might also be read as *to the consecrated* or *separated unto God*, though Paul was not suggesting a special category of Christians called *saints*, as if some Christians are specially consecrated and some aren't. We know this because Paul argued everywhere for Christian unity and the elimination of all subgroup identity politics in the church. The distinction was between Christians and non-Christians, not between Christians and special Christians.

BAPTISM

He was writing to Christians, so the consecration would be baptism. The thing that separates Christians from non-Christians is not what they say they believe, though there are significant differences. Nor is it some sort of personal testimony about God or Jesus or the Holy Spirit, though testimonies are important. It's too easy to say all sorts of things that might be true or not, with no way of proving that people mean what they say. Indeed, self-delusion is all too common. Rather, actions speak louder than words. What sets Christians apart from the world, in the eyes of the world, is baptism. The best evidence to unbelievers for Christianity is the sacrament (sacred act) of baptism. The unbaptized are not Christian, and the baptized are—regardless of their stated beliefs or behaviors.

Please don't let your mind wander into wild speculations about what this means before I'm finished with it. I'm not suggesting that all Christians are faithful Christians, only that being baptized puts one's name on a list over which Christ's church has jurisdiction. Paul was writing to the saints in Ephesus, to those who were under the authority of Christ's church. And he was using moral and persuasive authority, not coercion.

Of course, being under the authority of the church does not necessarily mean that one is obedient to that authority, which ought to be obvious. Therefore, Paul further identified the people he was writing to. He narrowed the list by adding the qualification of faithfulness. Paul used two terms to describe those he was addressing: the *saints*, separating the baptized from the unbaptized, and the *faithful*, separating intentional believers from nonbelievers. Such a distinction reflects Paul's understanding of the character of the church he discussed in Romans, where he observed that "not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel" (Romans 9:6).

The church is a mixed bag because it is a dynamic institution of growth and maturity in Christ. The purity of the church is relative in the same sense that the perfection of any individual Christian is relative. Paul acknowledged this in Romans 7:19 where he admitted that he could not always accomplish what he intended, where his own sin continued to dog his walk. Even Paul could not claim perfection this side of the grave. And if Paul couldn't personally perfect his own Christianity, there is no reason to expect that any church will contain only perfectly faithful members.

PERFECTION

This insight ought not to be used as an excuse for faithlessness, and where it is so used it is contrary to the teaching of Scripture. The fact that people cannot be perfectly faithful is not an excuse for not making every effort to strive for such perfection. Everything that excuses or interferes with the pursuit of Christian perfection is sinful and should be avoided. Jesus calls us to “be perfect (τέλειος), as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). We are called to the perfection of God Almighty, and we must not deny this high calling.

However, some idea about this perfection to which we are called is needed. The Greek word (τέλειος) doesn't mean flawless or sinless, it means complete or whole. We are not called to some sort of Gnostic, abstract idea of mathematical flawlessness, but to completion and wholeness. We are to become complete, mature or fully grown—even ripe. The Greek word literally means *brought to its end*, or *finished*. And we cannot be at the end when we are still in the middle. We cannot be perfect until our purpose is fulfilled. We cannot be finished while we are still running the race. The call for perfection is actually a call for endurance to the end—perseverance. We are not called to be perfectly sinless, but we are called to sin less over time.

The fact that perfection or completeness is not immediately attainable is immaterial to the call itself. The fact of its instant unattainability is central to the gospel of Jesus Christ because it provides for the reality that salvation is by grace alone, but not by grace exclusively. We are called to seek perfection with every fiber of our being, and to know that *we* cannot fully achieve it—and yet we are to trust that God will provide what we cannot achieve. That trust is ours because He sent the Holy Spirit to inhabit the lives of His people, to lead, to guide, to

provide, and to comfort. Were we able to attain perfection on our own, there would be no need for Christ or His Holy Spirit.

Because the church is a dynamic institution of growth and maturity in Christ it is filled with people on such a journey. People are always coming into her and going out from her, being born and dying, joining and leaving. And the people who comprise the church are not static, either. They are continually growing and changing. And, indeed, such personal growth is an essential element of Christian character, supplied by the Holy Spirit through regeneration.

Conversely, those who are not growing and maturing in faithfulness ought not to be church members, at least not voting members. Growth and maturity are evidence of faithfulness. Just as stagnation and immaturity are evidence of faithlessness.

FAITH

Our contemporary world speaks about faith quite a bit, but it speaks about it generically as if having faith in something—anything—is the main thing. The popular ideas of faith speak in ways that are foreign to Scripture. For instance, people speak about the Baptist faith, the Methodist faith, the Presbyterian faith, etc. Scripture doesn't do this, but it could have. It could have mentioned the Pharisee faith, the Sadducee faith, priestly faith, levitical faith, Matthean faith, Pauline faith, Johananine faith, etc. But it doesn't.

Scripture doesn't speak of faith in this way because doing so creates false ideas about faith. It is not that the faith of Baptists is different from the faith of Methodists, but their emphasis about what's most important, their practice or choreography of what they do in worship and how they are organized that is different. For instance, the Baptists don't baptize infants, but Methodists (some of them, anyway) and Presbyterians do. The Presbyterians may celebrate communion with wine, but Baptists generally don't. Baptists generally don't have elders, but Presbyterians do. Such things, while important in some ways, have little to do with having Christ as the object of faith. All Christians have Christ as the object of their faith, which is the basis of Christian unity.

In addition, things like justification, love, hope, satisfaction, etc., are found in Christ, not only in the sense that these things belong to Christ as His possessions, but in the sense that we have access to them

only by being *in Christ* ourselves. Our access to His possessions comes from being in Him.

IN CHRIST

The phrase *in Christ* is used seventy-eight times in the New Testament, making it an important concept. Sometimes it means that Christ is the object of faith, sometimes it suggests that something is available in or through Christ, and sometimes it suggests that Christians inhere or dwell in Christ. Of course, all of these are always true, but it is instructive to understand where the emphasis of a particular verse is placed.

Being *in Christ* can be understood literally. Jesus said, “I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you” (John 14:20), like Russian nesting dolls. This is not magic or mysterious, but is quite ordinary. John later clarified this idea:

“Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us” (1 John 3:24).

We note three things from this: first, that abidance is a function of obedience; second, that knowledge of abiding in Christ comes from the Holy Spirit; and third, being in Christ is an identity matter.

Of course, obedience is not the only element of abiding in Christ. In fact, it’s the last element because obedience is the result. Abiding begins in the heart of God because He has provided the means. God provides it because of His love, grace, and mercy, and not because of anything in us or anything that can be done by us apart from Him. It is His idea, not ours. Our faithfulness does not mean that we initiate the idea, but that we simply agree with God and His ideas. It means that we receive what He provides.

First, He provided His Son, Jesus Christ, to atone for our sin. And second, Christ has dispatched the Holy Spirit as the means or way for redeemed and repentant sinners to have union with God. That union involves the *touch* of the Master’s hand that heals our brokenness and restores our wholeness. Salvation and the restoration of human wholeness in Christ are different ways to say the same thing.

RESTORATION OF WHOLENESS

Christ provides the wholeness of humanity in three ways. First, He restores our broken relationship with God the Father so that God

can play His proper role in our lives and we can play our proper roles in His life. Second, Jesus Christ restores God's covenant with humanity by providing the covenantal archetype for the human manifestation of a new humanity, a new human identity in Christ. And third, Christ has sent His Holy Spirit to inhabit His people and provide for the unity, guidance, and function of His church.

The restoration of the human/divine relationship involves both our identity (who we *think* we are) and our being (who we *actually* are). First, with regard to identity, there are three possible ways that the human/divine gulf can be bridged. The human side can be absorbed into the divine such that the healing of the relationship implies the divination of humanity. This is the ancient desire for mystical unity where human ego or identity is fused with God.¹ Here man becomes God, or he *thinks* that he does, because it is actually not possible for what is finite to be infinite.

The second way that the human/divine relationship is bridged takes the opposite approach by absorbing the divine into the human, such that the divine is seen as both illusory and imaginary.² Here the divine is absorbed into the human such that the bridging of the relationship implies the complete humanization of the divine. What is divine is thought to be an illusion. This is the Modern humanistic desire for the absence, unreality, and/or denial of the divine, and is usually called *atheism*. Here man denies God. But the denial of God has no effect on God, other than breaking His heart and confirming that the person who does the denying is not a believer and, therefore, cannot inherit the blessings of God.

The third way to approach the broken human/divine relationship is provided by Jesus Christ alone as the only mediator between God and man. Here both the divine and the human are gathered together in Christ, which then constitutes the needed healing. The Christian healing of the human/divine relationship is neither the absorption of man into God (mysticism) nor the absorption of God into man (atheism), but is the union of God and man *in Christ*. Union with Christ allows God to be God and man to be man by acknowledging the Trinitarian character of God-in-Christ through the Holy Spirit as the archetype of humanity in Christ. Here both human and divine

1 Meister Eckhart (1260-1327) was one of the most famous Christians of this type.

2 Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) was one of the most famous atheists of this type.

identities are not only preserved but God's cause is enhanced by the product of the union.³

Paul points to this Christian union by his use of the phrase "in Christ" (v. 1). Thus, we see that Paul was writing to those who were already in Christ, and to those who would at some future point find themselves *in union* in Christ. Consequently, we see that union with Christ is not a simple relationship between the individual believer and Christ, but is the complex relationship between all believers and Christ, such that there is both a human/divine dimension and a human/human dimension to the relationship.

The human/divine dimension of the relationship involves what is traditionally understood as the Christian's personal relationship with Jesus Christ and all of the various aspects of personal Christian spirituality that are therein implied. The human/human dimension of the relationship is not simply the relationship of one person to another person, but involves the moral relationship of one person to another person *in Christ*.

Christians share more than their humanity with one another, they share a primary and common relationship with Jesus Christ, which means that they share the light or wisdom of Jesus Christ.⁴ This sharing is necessarily a corporate or community thing, and not simply a personal or individual thing. The wisdom of Christ is available to those who gather in His name, and not simply to isolated individuals. Part and parcel of that wisdom comes from its corporate character. The wisdom of Christ emerges as faithful Christians engage Scripture and one another faithfully.

BEING & MORALITY

Consequently, Christianity has both ontological (physical) and moral (behavioral) elements. It involves the being or identity of humanity, both individually and corporately. And it is because of this simultaneous individual and corporate character or dimension that Christianity involves the manifestation or incarnation of biblical morality, both personally and socially. Christianity has a unique individual element that is usually called a *personal relationship with Jesus*

3 Ross, Phillip A. & Nevin, John Williamson, in *The True Mystery of the Mystical Presence*, Pilgrim Platform, Marietta, Ohio, 2011.

4 Ross, Phillip A. *The Wisdom of Jesus Christ in the Book of Proverbs*, Pilgrim Platform, Marietta, Ohio, 2006.

Christ. It is this relationship that provides for individual conscience and sanctification, or maturity in Christ.

Alongside of this personal, individual dimension is a social, corporate dimension that is usually called *fellowship* or *the church*. The definite article (the) belongs with the name because it indicates that the church is one, a whole or indivisible unity. One cannot be Christian apart from being *in Christ*, and being in Christ brings individuals into personal, spiritual intimacy with Jesus Christ and with one another in a way that involves the union of the finite individual with the infinite God-in-Christ. It is *one* because Christ has only one body and *the church* is His body. Furthermore, this union exists only *in Christ* because Christ is the only mediator between man and God. There can only be one mediator because the function of the mediator is the restoration and maintenance of the wholeness of humanity, and such wholeness cannot be divided. Wholeness or oneness means the lack of division into parts. The mediator—Jesus Christ—is one because the wholeness of humanity is one *in Christ*.

In addition, the fact of being in union with God-in-Christ also brings the individual into unity with other individuals who are similarly—but not identically—in union with God-in-Christ. This corporate union in Christ is a manifestation of *the church*. And the church, being a product of the union of trinitarian individuals with the Trinitarian God-in-Christ or the Trinity, also has a trinitarian character. The church or body of Christ is manifest wherever two or three are gathered in the name of Jesus Christ (Matthew 18:20). The many gatherings do not destroy the unity of the body.

The fact that the Lord provided specific numbers is important because those particular numbers provide description and instruction regarding the constitution of the church. The minimum gathering that can be defined as an instance of the church is *two*. *One* cannot gather with himself, so while a solitary person can most certainly be a Christian in union with God-in-Christ, one person does not constitute an instance of the church. But two people can gather together. Of course, two people do not constitute the whole church. But in fact, the whole church cannot ever be gathered in one place. It's too big for that. But because of its unity, wherever two or three are gathered, the wholeness of the church is represented.

In order to constitute an instance of the church, such a gathering must be in the name of Jesus Christ. It must be an intentional and con-

scious coming together in the explicit name of Jesus Christ. Jesus' name is not a magic talisman, but it does have power. To do something in the name of Jesus Christ means doing it in the character of Jesus Christ, and doing it for the purpose of Jesus Christ. Acting in the character of Christ means taking on the character qualities of Jesus Christ, imitating Him (2 Thessalonians 3:9). It means becoming the character that God created you to be, becoming who God wants you to be *in Christ*. Serving the purpose of Jesus Christ means serving the purpose of God, because Christ is God by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Christians are baptized "in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of ... sins, and ... receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Those who gather must first be baptized because baptism functions as the initiating ceremony of church membership or inclusion in Christ. It is not that the ceremony of baptism does something magical or mystical, but that the ceremony of baptism provides a public and legal acknowledgment that the person being baptized is to be considered to be a member of the body of Christ from that point forward. It is legal because it is public.

The baptism is not a private concern merely for the individual or even for the church. From the time of John the Baptist it has been a public confession of Christ's ownership. Both the individual and corporate elements are important, and should not be separated. Baptism functions as a kind of public marking of the person being baptized. The whole community in which the person resides is put on notice that the baptized person now belongs to Jesus Christ first and foremost. Baptism is a public declaration and recognition of inclusion *in Christ*.

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