

“Jesus-The Chief Cornerstone”

Ephesians 2: 19-22

September 18, 2011

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Ephesians 2:19-22 (NIV) ¹⁹ Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

One thing about the Apostle Paul that no one can ever doubt, he was committed with all his heart and soul to the Lord Jesus Christ! Here he reminds the young church in Ephesus that nothing else matters as much as this one thing that must be kept in mind: **Christ Jesus himself [is] the chief cornerstone.** God be praised! Let us pray.

When I was a kid, my father used to buy properties as investments. I've spoken of my many memories of working at those sites over the years. The other day, I was recalling an old colonial house in Upper Saddle River, New Jersey. A house built around the American Revolution...late 1700's. It was just about standing with a barn that was just about to fall down at any moment. Both were so old that they had done their part, one might say! One Saturday morning, my brother and I were on clean up duty as the carpenters moved about. The big task that day was to finally pull down that old barn. It was leaning and yet it had stood so long it was not about to come down easily...I thought. It was big. Two stories and with a classic loft area still holding hay from a hundred years ago probably. But how to bring it down and clear the area?

Well... I recall the guys attaching a very heavy rope to a front corner beam that was set upon a giant field stone. Then they wrapped the rope onto the hitch of an old Jeep...got everyone out of the way...put that vehicle in low gear and gunned it! The corner pulled loose in a moment and the entire barn came tumbling down gasping out clouds of dust and giving an awful cracking groan. They had pulled it out by removing the one thing that was necessary to keep it standing: they had removed its corner brace or, in a sense, its cornerstone! Other beams helped to hold up that big old barn, but without that corner brace it could not stand!

This concept, of a cornerstone, goes back ever further than ancient Rome. For thousands of years, people have understood its importance. So, when Paul wrote to the Ephesians, he was using a well-known figure of speech. He spoke of Christ as the “cornerstone” ... the indispensable part of any building. The one thing they all knew was that without that angle stone or cornerstone being properly in place, eventually the building would be unsteady.

In my mind's eye, I can see some very impressive old beams in that barn. Most of us have looked at the way things were built in colonial days. Huge wooden braces twenty by twenty, shaved and hand-hewn and then notched into one another. The barn had a stairway and an upper level and much of it was more visible and impressive than the

single beam pressed into that critical corner. If all of those other parts of the building were removed it would have been less of a barn. But when they pulled out the cornerstone and main beam, the whole edifice came crashing down.

I was asked the other day in an interview exactly what, in my opinion, makes the church...the church? The answer is simply what the Word of God is telling us:

Ephesians 2:20 (ESV) ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.

In this instance, the adjective “chief” is not clearly in the text. Some versions leave it out. But the translators seem to want to highlight the primacy of Christ. However, in any case, there can only be one cornerstone.

This is an important REALITY because too often the church ceases to be the church when it starts to see Jesus as just an important “part” of its life. And in our modern day of inclusiveness, more and more people who label themselves “Christian” are embarrassed at the exclusive claims of Christ! A “church” not centered on Jesus Christ and his Lordship may be a lot of things...it may be a social center and it may be a provider of assistance to the needy...but it is not a true church. The test of a true church is simply this: if you removed Christ...if you removed any preaching that came from his lips ...if you remove his word that one must be born again in order to ever see Heaven...if you removed those kinds of things...and if that institution was still standing...then it was never a true church. We are nothing and I am nothing and Christ is all! He alone is what makes the church the church!

So often Christ is removed or minimized. Each year, there are hundreds of church growth conferences all over America. They ask the same question, namely: “What can we do to increase our attendance? What is the secret?” Then they discuss everything from marketing and advertising to music and the color of the carpets. But I have not seen any evidence in twenty years that God has struggled to save His elect because of sanctuary colors! In fact, the walls could be plaid and the pews done in gold leather and if the Holy Spirit is at work, those being called will come! That might look a little gross but we must never ever forget that the only thing that really matters...the only thing that makes the church the church...the only thing that Heaven even cares about is Christ being exalted as Lord! He is the cornerstone and when liberal churches make the mistake of setting him to the side because he is offensive or too demanding they are making themselves useless! The liberal church in America and around the world is little more than a spiritual eunuch that cannot reproduce because they it has ceased to have meaning! It is Christ and Christ alone who makes the true church...the true church! Again, Paul says this:

Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.

There is absolutely no secret to church growth! Preach Christ and teach Christ and lift up Christ and call others to Christ and watch what the Holy Spirit does! Years ago, an older clergyman stopped to in to chat. He had heard about Cornerstone and he wanted to see what we were “doing.” He was a fine and gentle man who was the Associate

Pastor at a very liberal church in the area. And I knew that he had been raised in an evangelical home and that his father had been a Bible-preaching Pastor, but he had drifted away from his roots. He had embraced that meaningless theology that says we cannot know what God is really about...and Jesus was certainly someone...but we can't be sure exactly who he was. Jesus. A mystery. That kind of drivel is still being preached in dead churches all over America and in Europe where the lights are out!

The unbelieving church cannot see Jesus as the chief Cornerstone. No way. They see him as a great leader or teacher and the best of all men. But not the Son of God...not the one without whom the whole building collapses. So anyway...this older liberal Pastor visited us. [Please pardon the touch of necessary vanity here.] At that time, we were really expanding and we had extra chairs across the back of the Sanctuary and God was really blessing! And he said to me...pointing to the extra chairs..."What is this all about? These chairs?" And I said "Oh...well...that's just some extra seating for Sundays." And he said "Well, I know that but why? Why so much growth?" I was not expecting that question. So I said "We ah...we just preach Christ and point to him alone in all that we do." And he smiled gently and said "Yeah...that's it...I know. Well, good for you." I never saw him after that. I remember thinking that I had just seen an older man who had tried to serve God but who was filled with regret at the turn he had taken. If I could only serve in a liberal church where Jesus was not lifted up, I would quit the ministry before lunch! Again, Paul says:

Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.

In his mind, God is building something! The whole of what God is building is leaning directly down on Jesus! And as we celebrate our twenty fifth anniversary, I we want to give God the Glory! Amen? For God has been faithful to us because we have kept the Lord Jesus Christ the main thing.

Allow me to tell you the Cornerstone story for a little while this morning. I do this especially for those of you who have not been with us thru the years. But please understand, as I speak about Cornerstone and people and decisions let God be praised! This parcel of land has been Holy Ground in that we've seen a Heaven-sent load of miracles. And it all began well before I arrived. Donna and I were called to Cornerstone in October of 1991 and it has been our greatest ministry privilege. But consider the faithful Saints who heard from the Lord and who followed obediently.

What began in the mid-eighties as a small group Bible study became a church planting project of the Ward Presbyterian Church in Livonia. They soon grew large enough to call Tim Brewer as their first pastor. They met at the Maltby Middle School in Brighton. Week after week for several years, they carted in chairs and equipment in order to worship. After their morning service and classes, they packed it all up and headed home. They sent out mailings and knocked on doors. And they began to get lift. I was invited occasionally to fill in and preach if the Pastor was away. On the way home from one of those visits, I prayed that if Pastor Brewer were to move on someday, perhaps it might please the Lord for us to come out to Brighton.

We had moved to Michigan in 1988 to join the staff at Ward. A move that was totally puzzling to Donna because she wanted to move to a warm climate. I can still hear her

saying “Michigan? That’s as bad as New York!” But we were blessed with the move and by the grace of God we were eventually invited to join this ministry. We showed up with our four sons and it wasn’t long before we felt right at home. The boys fit in and we were treated like we’d been family forever. In fact, after we were here for a couple of years, I was asked to take another opportunity away from Cornerstone. I just tell you this because I believe God gives us men wives who make us complete. I reviewed it with Donna and the boys and everyone just fell silent. Then she said “These people at Cornerstone have been so good to us...would you really be willing to hurt them by moving on?” So...that was that. I had told the Lord I would take her response as from Him and He could not have been more clear! And we have never regretted it!

Although there were some growing pains. The staff at first was really just three people. Our custodian was a delightful older lady who came once a week with an old broken down Hoover vacuum cleaner that shot out sparks! I finally went up to Meijer’s and bought one for her to use. Our sound system was purchased on sale at Radio Shack and had enough watts to fill up your kitchen! The first few weeks I preached I thought “What is wrong with these people? They are totally unfazed. They all look like they are in a trance!” I found out later that none of them could hear a word I was saying. They were just being polite!

But we grew in spite of our weak spots. We were blessed from the start with wonderful Godly Elders who put Christ first. We had five building programs by the grace of God in the nineties and one in 2002. We went from one service to two to three and God answered prayer by giving us the funding for a school. We ramped our missions giving up to where many millions of dollars have gone out to hundreds of missionaries around the world. God provided tremendous staff and leadership and I have been mightily blessed to be here as the Senior Pastor. But I must tell you, that it is all to the glory of God because...I am by nature totally unsuited to do what I do. Just as the Lord Jesus Christ has been and is the cornerstone of his church, he has been and is the cornerstone of my life! And true cornerstones are very well set in place and extremely hard to move. Permit me to share one great story of how the Lord Jesus Christ worked in my little life. First...

The Word of God says:

1 Corinthians 1:25-30 (NIV) ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength. ²⁶ Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸ He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things--and the things that are not--to nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no one may boast before him. ³⁰ It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God--that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption

I was raised by a lapsed Catholic father who never went to Mass. And my mother was raised in Christian Science but rejected it in her adulthood. We were an unchurched family. By the time I was a junior in college I was a declared atheist having seen my

parents divorce. My mother struggled with heavy emotional problems, I lost a few friends who died in Vietnam, and the world was a coming apart. It made sense to me to dis-believe in God. The only good thing was Donna agreed to marry me and so we went to work as career people.

After seven years of marriage, she conceived our son Chris and we were saved not long after his birth. Although we did not know the Lord, he prompted us to name our first son "Christopher" simply because we liked the name. Only later did we come to know that "Christopher" means "Christ-bearer!" The birth of this child was used by God to bring us to the Risen Christ, first me and in a couple of weeks Donna. Six months later, after an amazing anointing by the Holy Spirit, we began to plan our move to Massachusetts and seminary. All those years were marked by God's faith and provisions for us.

Yet, I know firsthand that God really did "choose the weak things of this world" to serve him. In doing that, he is glorified. I say that because although he made it very clear to me that my calling was to preach, he did not let me know that I would have to spend years working through a case a full-blown panic disorder. In my fourth year of seminary, with three small children including a newborn...uncertain of where we were going after graduation...and with thirty five cents in our account, I experienced the worst moments of my life. I was speaking before a church group of about two hundred when I had my first episode of genuine panic. Suddenly I was engulfed in fear...my heart was racing and my whole body swimming in adrenaline overload. About to faint and unable to say another word, I excused myself and walked quickly out of the chapel and into the men's room. Completely stunned...it got worse in the next few days as I wondered what I would do with my life now that I was trained to preach but I panicked every time I even spoke with someone. It was truly horrible and I was truly angry with the Lord.

A few days later, I made up my mind. As I drove home I said to the Lord "I will never, ever again stand up to preach! I'm not doing it! I am taking my name off that list and I'm not doing it! So Lord...the only way I will ever preach again is if you personally have someone phone me and invite me to do so! Otherwise, I'm finished and that's that!" I really told the Lord a few things that day.

Satisfied that I had God clearly informed, I walked into our apartment. Took of my jacket, greeted my little family...and the phone rang. I answered it and all I heard was "Mr. Alberta? My name is Gladys somebody-or-other and I was given your name. Our Pastor retired and went to Shady Rest and we were told to ask you if you would come to our church and preach every week for the next twelve weeks. Now...we are a very old group of people and we can only pay you \$ 20 each Sunday...but will you come to Manchester by the Sea beginning this Sunday?" And I looked up to Heaven and rolled my eyes...and said "Oh yes...I'd love to come to your little church mam!" It turned out to be the perfect place to work thru panic disorder. Donna said the youth group at that church started at eighty five! The whole group was asleep in the front row before the call to worship. One old guy used to walk around handing out candy while I was speaking! I can still see my wife in the back of the church nursing a baby and giggling! I could have read them the comics!

God definitely **"...chose the weak things of the world!"** For reasons of his own, Jesus chose me not only for salvation but to serve him and suffering was included. But it is a sweet suffering and when our little grandson Henry died I told the Lord I would continue to serve him even though we had broken hearts. And he surrounded us with so much certainly and grace that we able to move forward.

Take Jesus out of the life of the Christian and he cannot live. Job never knew Jesus but he knew God the Father. That is why Job's wife said to him in his suffering:

Job 2:9 (NIV) ⁹ His wife said to him, "Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!"

To curse God is to renounce him. She understood that cursing him and dying go together. If Job had renounced his faith, because it was a real faith, he could not have lived. He would have died. The same as when Jesus asked his disciples "Are you going to leave me too?" And we read:

John 6:68-69 ⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹ We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

This church...this flock...this Pastor...we have nowhere else to go except to Jesus. Put a rope on him and pull him out of our lives and we will come crashing down! As Paul said:

²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Let us pray.