

Identity Crisis

From the Epistle: Ephesians iii. 13. ff.

*I desire that ye faint not at my tribulations for you, which is your glory. **14** For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, **15** Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, **16** That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; **17** That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, **18** May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; **19** And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God. **20** Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, **21** Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.*

In the Epistle of St. Paul to the Ephesians, there are some extraordinary statements made about the Church. We will find that studying Paul's ecclesiology —his commentary upon the Church— to be not merely interesting, but absolutely critical to our self-understanding.

One might easily say that among the many crises this age can boast of, that of “identity” rates high. It is a crisis lived out on every level, whether at the individual, or family, or group, and even national: “Who am I? Who are *we*? How am I to understand myself? What are we supposed to be doing? What is my purpose?”

I recall that as a young man, there was far more awareness generally of what everyone sensed was the increasing loss of identity. As college students, we scorned the idea of just being another computer card, merely a number among millions of others. It led to riots and demonstrations. But it is astonishing, is it not, how easily one trades one's hard held virtues for convenience. When it became obvious that the system could not be bucked successfully —unless one could locate somewhere on the globe a few square feet of absolute isolation— and even more, that being a mere number was a small price compared to the pleasure and joy of having everything at one's fingertips, the struggle was over with barely a whimper. And how great the trade-off that resulted! For everyone, indeed, today, is at everyone else's fingertips, and privacy is an ever-shrinking space that is basically reduced to nothing, and none of us really has any idea of just how much someone, somewhere, really knows about us. So much has been taken from us and placed in the hands of others that, if we could but admit it, we sit about waiting for what must be the inevitable consequence to such a state of affairs.

A people without identity are restless. They cast about seeking for someone to tell them who they are. But they are also prime targets for others wishing to redefine them. Americans — or, for that matter, the citizens of any nation— who have not a shred of an idea what it means to be who they are will be unable to withstand the slandering of their heritage. If they are told that their national identity is to be subsumed by by a superior, transnational one that exists only in theory, how will they resist?

But the Church is also subject to the same influences. A Church which doesn't know what it is, or is of a thousand opinions about the question, is absolutely ripe for disunity and ineffectiveness.

Are the Scriptures short of information on this subject? Certainly not. Consider just a sampling from Ephesians:

And [God] hath put all things under [Christ's] feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all. 1:22, 23

...now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God, according to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord. 3:10, 11

So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. (5:29, 30)

In these short verses we have already learned a great deal about the Church: It is Christ's body, His very flesh and bones. Christ loves the Church as a husband loves his wife. The Church has a ministry of proclamation of such significance that it even includes the audience of a vast number of invisible spiritual beings.

But the Church struggles nonetheless with its identity. Centuries of division that remains as thornily unresolvable and painfully persistent to this very day make progress appear hopeless: "Who are we? *What* are we? If we are indeed 'one holy, catholic, apostolic, orthodox church', should we expect that the visible manifestation of such a church as we witness it represents the extent of what we can expect? Should we redefine our worship and practice according to the tastes of the times? Do we have any distinctives, and are they worth adhering to, at the price of marginalization and rejection?" Our own dedication to Traditional Anglicanism is an attempt to forge an answer to this question of identity.

In today's Epistle, St. Paul assists us in this search for self definition by focusing our collective eyes upon something so glorious that we will begin to find rest from, and even resolution to, our struggles. Throughout this letter to the Ephesians, he has been striving to fill this new Gentile Church with a knowledge of the magnificent treasure they have received through Christ. The superlative terms he employs in doing so reveal his earnestness: "If only you could apprehend what you actually have been given," he seems to be saying, "your joy, triumph, and victory would know no end!".

And so he prays for the Church:

...that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height...

His implication, in including the four dimensions of space, is that there are no bounds to the love of Christ. He invites the Church to immerse itself wholeheartedly in an endeavor of absolutely impossible proportions, that can barely be begun in this life, and surely will require an eternity to fulfill: comprehending what they have received in Christ. To his Greek audience —proud of their intellectual heritage— to be forcefully redirected in their focus to this lowly, unlettered Jewish Savior, considered of no account and scorned by their pagan peers, finding such wealth in Christ would only be through His *dwelling in their hearts by faith*.

Paul's prayer proceeds: that they might *know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that [they] might be filled with all the fulness of God*. Because the apostle is attempting to put into words things that are beyond words, he prays paradoxically that the Ephesians will come to know something that cannot be known. It is precisely here, at the limits of the ability of human comprehension, that worship supplants knowledge. If we thoroughly knew everything there was to be known about the God, we would have no inducement to worship, and this is precisely the pitfall of religious practice that always assumes that nothing rests outside of the realms of reason. Perhaps this is why the word *mystery* appears no less than six times in this book.

The superlatives continue: *that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God*. How can this even begin to be realized? Which of us has the capacity for such a thing? But it is presented here as an aspiration for the Church, for if it were not to be desired, and if it were not possible, it would never have been suggested.

The last two verses of the Epistle are a doxology —a hymn of praise—:

Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.

I've always wondered about the first of these verses. It implies potential of the likes I've never seen. Do we await its realization? Is it lack of faith that has prevented the manifestation of the power spoken of? Perhaps it has already been greatly proven in ways that our blindness and imprisonment to the present moment have prevented us from beholding: the greatness of our salvation: the enormity of our deliverance; the ongoing, never-ceasing yet invisible work of God among men; the spread of the Gospel that continues apace throughout the world.

The Church certainly doesn't suffer from too little enablement, as St. Paul clearly shows us. There is far more available to us than we could ever possible utilize. But we turn elsewhere, in spite of all of this, to establish our identity. Under attack, subject perpetually to criticism, distracted by an increasingly demanding world, fleeing to the oblivion of entertainment to escape the conflict, we find the vision of our spiritual heritage fading so much that we barely perceive it.

Turn with me one last time to that closing phrase: *Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen. ...In the church!* This is our identity: first, to willfully reject the world's intent to remake us in its image, or to redefine our mission according to the pressures it places upon us; and then, to behold with eyes of faith those gifts that are our spiritual legacy because of Him who died and rose again on our behalf.

Will this indeed be the key to *glory in the church*? Oh, how desperately we need it!

I must close with an important observation. The church of Ephesus itself seems to have come very close to completely losing its grasp of these things in succeeding years, as we learn from the Revelation of St. John, where Christ speaks directly to them:

...I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.

Is our candlestick indeed lit and burning bright? And will we keep it alight?

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.