



CONVERGENCE CHURCH AND THE DEMONIC FORCES IN HEAVENLY PLACES EPHESIANS 3:7-10

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Just a few miles north of Dallas, Texas, in a suburb known as Plano, is Prestonwood Baptist Church. The lead pastor there is Jack Graham. The church was planted on February 6, 1977. The main facility is a massive structure that sits on 140 acres of land. It has expanded to three campuses and claims to have 49,000 members. Its second campus in Prosper, Texas, sits on nearly 128 acres of land. The auditorium in Plano will seat in excess of 7,000 people. Its annual budget is approximately \$52 million. The church employs more than 65 full time staff at its Plano campus alone.

The Plano campus hosts a school from kindergarten through the 12th grade. It meets in a three-story education building, alongside a large recording studio. It has a football stadium, a baseball field, and a fieldhouse for basketball and volleyball. It also has a fitness center, a café, a library, and a large bookstore.

The entire facility has in excess of 1,000,000 square feet.

Just a stone's throw down the street from Prestonwood Baptist Church is Sojourn Church, pastored by Chris McRae. It has a full and part-time staff of 14 and an auditorium that will seat around 300 people. I've preached in Sojourn Church in the past. The size of its campus is probably 1/15th that of Prestonwood Baptist. Everyone has heard of Prestonwood Baptist, especially since Jack Graham's sermons are broadcast each week on television. Few people, outside of Sojourn Church, have ever heard of it.

You may wonder: what in the world do these two churches have in common? In any number of ways they differ massively. In terms of the size of membership, budget, acreage, facilities, they couldn't be more different. When Jesus said in Matthew 16 that he would build his church and the gates of hell would not prevail against it, which of these two did he have in mind? Prestonwood Baptist or Sojourn? Or could it be both?

It moves me to ask the question: "What is God doing at Prestonwood Baptist? What is he doing at Sojourn Church? Is he equally pleased with both churches? Why is there such a difference between them and does it even matter to God? For what reason do they both exist?"

I could as easily ask the same question about Convergence Church here in OKC, and compare us with Crossings on the other side of town. I hardly need remind you of the vast differences between the two. The facilities at Crossings are mindboggling. Ours, well, look around. And we don't even own this place!

So, why are *we* here? Why does Crossings exist? What is our reason for being and what is theirs? Is God pleased with us? I'm not asking that question so that you might compare Convergence with Crossings, nor do I want you to compare Prestonwood Baptist with Sojourn. To compare and contrast churches all too often leads to either arrogance or embarrassment. I'm not concerned with who we are at Convergence in comparison with any other local church, be it here in Oklahoma City or in Dallas, Texas. I'm concerned with who we are in comparison with what God wants us to be.

As you know, the Bible says a lot about what the church is and why it exists. The New Testament provides us with a lot of answers to questions about governance and worship and mission and a number of other issues. But my concern today is what the apostle Paul tells us here in Ephesians 3:10 about why the church exists. Here Paul is talking about both the universal body of Christ as well as the many local embodiments of it. Here we are told what God has in mind for us to be and to do.

I believe this one verse will broaden and expand our perspective on why Convergence exists. Who we are, indeed, the mere fact *that* we are, has ***cosmic implications***. The reason for our existence extends far beyond any influence we might exert in Oklahoma City. And the same is true for Crossings and Prestonwood Baptist and Sojourn. Both the mega church and the mini church ultimately exist for the same reason.

The cosmic purpose of God is to awaken the whole universe to recognize that God is infinitely wise! One day all principalities and powers, all demons and Satan himself, as they are cast in the lake of fire, will be forced to say: God is infinitely wise.

As I think about Ephesians 3:10, I'm convinced that our outlook at Convergence is much, much too narrow, too restricted, too provincial, too shortsighted. We are far too limited in our understanding of why we exist as a local body of believers. We tend to think solely in terms of our influence and impact here in OKC. We should most definitely be concerned about how our existence affects our city. But Paul is telling us that who we are and what we do has an impact far beyond this city, far beyond this state, far beyond this country, indeed, *far beyond earth itself*. If you think I'm being melodramatic or excessively hyperbolic, I suggest you haven't considered the words of Paul in Ephesians 3:10.

But before I go any further, let me make two important observations. First, as I'm sure you already know, the word "church" in the NT never refers to a building or a program or a budget. It never refers to a physical structure or a place of worship. "Church" always has in view God's people, the corporate body of Christ. That is why we read in texts such as Colossians 4:15 and Romans 16:3-5 that a "church" might exist in the complete absence of a building or temple and instead be found in a person's private home. The word "church" simply means assembly, in this case, an assembly or gathering of the bride of Christ.

My second observation is a confession. I often struggle with the feeling of *ecclesiastical insignificance*. I get weighed down by thoughts that we are too small, too inconspicuous, too obscure, too poor to do anything of lasting importance. That is especially the case when we begin to compare ourselves to the many mega churches in our city and state. But Ephesians 3:10 has completely changed my perspective. If it does nothing else for you today, I hope it will eliminate all fears or doubts you might have had about the eternal and cosmic significance of why we exist and what we are doing.

Context

Let me briefly remind you of the context in which Ephesians 3:10 is found. You may recall that Paul began to pray back in Ephesians 3:1. But he immediately breaks off from his prayer and doesn't return to it until v. 14. In Ephesians 3:2-13 he describes the ministry to which God has called him and its purpose. In summary, he reminds us that grace was given to Paul to equip him to tell everyone about how God has chosen to work out his divine purpose in history through Jesus Christ.

The Cosmic Purpose of the Church

In order to help us understand Paul's argument, I want to describe it in terms of four questions.

First, what is God's purpose or goal or desire when it comes to the church? It is to make known or to reveal or to publicize universally his "manifold wisdom." Those two words appear together only here in the NT. The word "manifold" was often used to describe the intricacies and design of flowers. It was also used to describe the jewels and precious gems that were found in a royal crown. When someone wanted to explain the beauty of an embroidered cloth or woven carpet they would make use of this term.

It could easily be translated, "richly diversified," "exquisitely multifaceted," or "highly variegated." But here Paul is talking about the gloriously intricate design of God's purpose in human history. God is a lot of things, but bland or boring isn't one of them. Simply put, God's ultimate goal in all that he does is to glorify and magnify his name and character before the watching eye of the entire universe that he has created. He wants everything and everyone to see just how indescribably great and awesome he is and how magnificent and perfect are his plans for human history.

"The church as a multi-racial, multi-cultural community is like a beautiful tapestry. Its members come from a wide range of colorful backgrounds. No other human community resembles it. Its diversity and harmony are unique. It is God's new society. And the many-coloured fellowship of the church is a reflection of the many-coloured . . . wisdom of God" (Stott, 123).

Second, to whom in particular does God want this made known? To be sure, he intends for everyone everywhere to see and behold the majesty of his creativity. But is there anyone in particular that God wants to see this? Yes.

"the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places"

Who is he talking about? Does he have in mind Russia and Vladimir Putin or the United States Congress or the King of England? No. Paul's particular choice of terms here is of the utmost importance. We find this language elsewhere in his letters.

"far above all rule and authority and power and dominion" (Eph. 1:21).

"the rulers . . . the authorities . . . the cosmic powers . . . the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12).

"thrones . . . dominions . . . rulers . . . authorities" (Col. 1:16).

"rule and authority" (Col. 2:10).

"rulers and authorities" (Col. 2:15).

"angels . . . rulers . . . powers" (Rom. 8:38).

"rulers of this age" (1 Cor. 2:6, 8).

These terms are always a reference to angelic beings who rebelled against God. They are demons who defied his command and are now everywhere present to disrupt and to thwart God's purposes, all to no avail, of course.

Paul says here that the principalities and powers are "in the heavenly places" (3:10; 6:12). Literally this is simply "the heavens," everything and everywhere that is above the earth. The word is used in Ephesians 1:3 where Paul says God has "blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." And it is used in 1:20 where he says God "raised Christ from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places." And yet, these demonic forces exert a devastating influence on the earth. In spite of their pervasive presence and destructive influence, it is our task to provide a cosmic showcase of God's mercy and wisdom that will both humiliate and eventually utterly destroy all spiritual and physical enemies of God.

I often hear people ask the question: "Why doesn't God do something about the demonic forces that wage war against him and against us?" Of course, he already has. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus he has defeated them and stripped them of power. Or to use the words of Paul in Colossians 2:15, he has "disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him [i.e., in Christ]." But why doesn't he do something now? He is! As we will shortly see. That brings us to our third of four questions.

Third, when does or when will God do this? Paul's answer is decisive. In v. 10 he says this is something God is doing right "now"! It is not only a past accomplished fact but is a present and ever continuous act of subduing all demonic forces and demonstrating to them his manifold wisdom.

Fourth, our most important question is: "How does God display or demonstrate his manifold wisdom and glorious purpose to the demonic hosts of heaven?" He is doing it *"through the church"* (v. 10).

Consider the incredibly awesome honor and privilege that God has bestowed on us, the church. In order to make known his infinite wisdom he didn't choose to employ other angels. He didn't point to the beauty and majesty of nature. He didn't direct everyone's attention to the trillions and trillions of stars in the heavens. He could have chosen to make use of the multitude of animal species on both land and in the sea. But he didn't.

He chose us, the church of Jesus Christ! Let the force of that sink in.

"The church of Jesus Christ is the most important institution in the world. The assembly of the redeemed, the company of the saints, the children of God are more significant in world history than any other group, organization, or nation. The United States of America compares to the church of Jesus Christ like a speck of dust compares to the sun. The drama of international relations compares to the mission of the church like a kindergarten riddle compares to Hamlet or King Lear. And all pomp of May Day in Red Square and the pageantry of New Year's in Pasadena fade into a formless grey against the splendor of the bride of Christ" (John Piper).

On the surface, it's hard to imagine anything more ridiculous than the suggestion that the church is God's primary instrument through which he makes known his incomparable wisdom and his blinding, breathtaking glory. On the surface, if this is indeed God's aim, he appears to be guilty of having made a colossal mistake and error in judgment. I'm almost tempted to push back on the Lord and say, "Would you like to reconsider your decision?"

The amazing thing is that he doesn't just say it here in v. 10, but also in Ephesians 3:21 – "to him be glory *in the church* and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever, Amen." That the Father would seek to make known his glory through the Son makes perfectly good sense. But through the church? Are you serious?

It isn't just secular, atheistic non-Christians who think this way. A growing number of professing Christians also now question God's wisdom in staking his reputation and the fame of his name on the church. I can't help but think of the many ways that the church has failed in this regard. Look around the world and much of what we see is infighting, doctrinal drift, divisiveness, apathy, and quibbling over all manner of comparatively insignificant issues. Are we really to believe that God is intent on pointing to *us* as the expression of his wisdom?

But just when I start thinking that way, I remember what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:26-29.

"For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."

It doesn't capture anyone's attention when a professional football team destroys a college team by 40 points. Do you remember the 1980 Olympics when the United States won the gold medal in hockey. The event took place during the Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, New York. The U.S. men's team was composed mainly of amateur players. When our team faced off against the heavily favored Soviet Union team, no one gave us a snowball's chance in you know where. The so-called "Miracle on Ice" occurred when the U.S. team defeated the Soviets 4-3 in a stunning upset. This victory is celebrated as one of the greatest moments in sports history, symbolizing American resilience during the Cold War. The U.S. team went on to win the gold medal by defeating Finland in the final match.

Hardly anyone would have blinked twice had the Russian team beat us. But our victory was all the more stunning given the incredibly high odds against our being able to compete with them. That was what made it so remarkable. Likewise, hardly anyone would think twice about the success of the church in bringing glory to God. And yet that is precisely what Paul is saying.

What we are being told here in v. 10 is that our purpose as the bride of Christ, the church, extends far beyond the saving of souls, beyond the mutual edification of one another, beyond faithful and careful teaching of the Scriptures. Our existence has an almost inconceivable impact on principalities and powers! And to think that God could have so easily done it directly, without us. He needed only to speak the word and he could have blasted every demonic spirit into the far reaches of the most distant galaxy.

But he chose us to accomplish his goals. Nothing even remotely like this is ever said about anything else or anyone else. No other group or organization or movement or institution is ever spoken of in the Bible like this. God didn't choose the country club or the civic organization or the U.S. Congress or some ladies club or the YMCA of the Chamber of Commerce or the Republican party or the Democrat party. No university or grad school or country anywhere on earth is said to have been used by God in this way. Only us.

The lordship of Jesus Christ and the wisdom of our great Triune God is made known to Satan and demonic spirits through US! You heard me right. You read Paul right. It is the church that provides hostile cosmic powers with a tangible reminder that their authority and power have been broken and that all things are subject to Jesus.

As strange as it may sound, the key to understanding the unfolding and ever-changing course of human history isn't the United Nations or NATO or the European Union or events in Israel. It is the church! I want you to listen closely to the words of John Stott, former pastor of All Souls, Langham Place, in London, England.

"Secular history concentrates its attention on kings, queens and presidents, on politicians and generals, in fact on 'VIPs'. The Bible concentrates rather on a group it calls 'the saints', often little people, insignificant

people, unimportant people, who are however at the same time God's people – and for that reason are both 'unknown (to the world) and yet well-known (to God)'.

Secular history concentrates on wars, battles and peace-treaties, followed by yet more wars, battles and peace-treaties. The Bible concentrates rather on the war between good and evil, on the decisive victory won by Jesus Christ over the powers of darkness, on the peace-treaty ratified by his blood, and on the sovereign proclamation of an amnesty for all rebels who will repent and believe.

Again, secular history concentrates on the changing map of the world, as one nation defeats another and annexes its territory, and on the rise and fall of empires. The Bible concentrates rather on a multi-national community called 'the church', which has no territorial frontiers, which claims nothing less than the whole world for Christ, and whose empire will never come to an end.

No doubt I have painted the contrast between the secular and the biblical views of history too starkly. For the Bible does not ignore the great empires of Babylon, Egypt, Greece and Rome; and a true secular history cannot ignore the fact of the church. Yet it is a question of perspective, of priorities. The living God is the God of all the nations of the world, yet within the universal human community there exists a 'covenant community', his own new society, the beginning of his new creation. It is to this people only that he has pledged himself with the everlasting promise: 'I will be their God, and they shall be my people'" (127-28).

Paul doesn't give us an answer in this one verse to how God actually pulls this off. But we find it everywhere else in his letters and in the writings of other NT authors.

The church, by virtue of its very existence, testifies to the greatness of God's wisdom. Need I remind you that Satan and demons thought that by killing Jesus they had thwarted God's plan. But Paul declares this in 1 Cor. 2:6-8,

"Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory."

The church, composed of both believing Jews and Gentiles, once vicious enemies of each other, testifies to the greatness of God's wisdom.

The church, filled with male and female, young and old, slave and free, testifies to the amazing grace and incomparable wisdom of God.

The church, composed of formerly hell-deserving sinners, but now blood-bought children of God, testifies to the greatness of God's wisdom.

The church, filled with humble men and women who refuse to recant their faith in the face of torture and death, testifies to the greatness of God's wisdom.

The church is the grand theater of God's works, and the audience who are compelled to watch in amazement, are the 'rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.' Listen again to Stott:

"It is as if a great drama is being enacted. History is the theatre, the world is the stage, and church members in every land are the actors. God himself has written the play, and he directs and produces it. Act by act, scene by scene, the story continues to unfold. But who are the audience? They are the cosmic intelligences, the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. We are to think of them as spectators of the drama of salvation. Thus 'the history of the Christian church becomes a graduate school for angels'" (Stott, 123-24).

The church, comprised of men and women who continue to obey and worship the Lord even when it appears that he has abandoned them, testifies to his amazing wisdom. In the absence of any tangible reward here on earth, the church continues to praise its Lord and Savior.

The church, when seen on its knees, seeking God in prayer and petition, testifies to God's remarkable wisdom.

The church, by virtue of its submission to the authority of Scripture and its commitment to serve the poor and needy, testifies to God's unparalleled wisdom.

The church, when it stands defiant of Satan's schemes and nefarious plans, points to the glory of God's wisdom.

Paul's point is that God's purpose in human history is not merely the salvation of the Jewish people or the inclusion of the Gentiles into the commonwealth of Israel, nor is it restricted to the salvation of individual souls in Christ and the bestowal on us of all spiritual blessings (chp. 1). His concern reaches beyond the earthly realm and extends to the entire universe and every spiritual being in it.

Conclusion

My prayer is that you will never again think of the church in the same way, but think of it as God does, and happily embrace the purpose for which he has created it. If nothing else, this places upon us a great responsibility. Simply put, God has entrusted the church, Convergence Church among countless others, with the awesome task of bearing witness to the demonic hosts of his unbeatable and unshakeable wisdom.

This is one reason why there is no such thing as a "churchless Christian." It is simply not a freedom given to us to opt out of life and ministry in the local church. If you choose to abandon the God-ordained means by which he displays his wisdom and thus his glory, you will have to do so in defiance of the Holy Spirit and the Holy Scriptures in which he talks.



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