

How A Church, and a Believer, Starts and Stays

By Steve Burchett



You might find this surprising, but the greetings that begin Ephesians help us to think about the birth of the church in Ephesus, about church planting today, and even about our individual conversions. Here are those verses: “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God. To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus. Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1-2).

How was the church in Ephesus established?

First, *a man was sent*. I’m talking about the apostle Paul. When the Lord saved him around 33 or 34 A.D., Jesus commissioned Paul to take the gospel to the nations. He was a man under the authority and sovereign will of God, unlike some “self-appointed” missionaries and evangelists I’ve come across around the world. About 18 years after his conversion, Paul arrived in Ephesus on his second missionary journey for a brief stop that included proclaiming the gospel (Acts 18:19). “Please stay longer!” some Jews in the synagogue said (v. 20). “I will return to you if God wills,” Paul replied. God willed it, so he returned on his third journey and was in that very pagan city of approximately 200,000 people for three years, preaching the gospel, baptizing and instructing new converts, and organizing them into churches with elders over them.

Second, *people were saved*. We know of the conversion of lost people in Ephesus because the letter is addressed like this: “To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 1:1b; cf. Acts 19:20). Paul made it undeniably clear in Ephesians 2:1-3 that the Ephesians were not always “saints.” On contrary, they were dead in sin and destined for God’s wrath. Yet by grace through faith in Jesus (v. 8), they became “saints.” Try that out on your spouse tomorrow when he or she is unhappy with something you’ve said or done, “Remember, honey, I’m a saint!” Of course, Paul does not mean to imply we act like saints all the time. Not even close! Also, this is not a title given for some achievement, but a designation that describes what has happened to a person — God has set him apart to be faithful to him in this dark world that he once loved.

Third, *the church was sustained*. To be more precise, it was sustained *by God*. This body of believers wasn’t formed into a living church just to be irrelevant or gone within a few years, like some buildings I’ve observed in a third-world country that were glorious at first but terribly run down or abandoned within a generation or two. Though the church in Ephesus had its problems, Paul could say of this decade-old church, “I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints” (1:15).

How was that possible?

It took the ongoing presence and help of God. This answer is deduced from the second verse: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” This was Paul’s wish for the Ephesian believers moving forward because he knew it was what fueled their faithfulness up to that point. Ephesus was full of paganism, superstitious ideas, fleshly pursuits, worldly thinking, and materialistic emphases. It was not easy to be a follower of Jesus in that environment. Even worse, they did “not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (6:12). And internally, it was difficult to remain a unified, loving church because of the diversity of backgrounds among the body (e.g., between Jews and Gentiles). How did they keep going? How were they sustained all those years after the church was born? It was only by the “grace . . . and peace” that came “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

An Ongoing Pattern: Sent, Saved, Sustained

When it comes to starting and establishing churches, nothing has changed. Someone must be sent. Sinners must hear the gospel if they are going to be saved. And once they are saints — once they believe and are gathered into churches — every hour of their lives, every day that their churches exist, they will remain faithful only if God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ *sustains* them with grace and peace. This is a refreshingly simple picture of the work of missions. God uses means, and he backs those efforts with his love and power.

This even speaks to us as individual Christians. The Ephesians’ story is *our* story. A man (or woman, or mom, or co-worker, or preacher, etc.) was *sent* to us and told us about Jesus. Recognizing our rebellion against the Lord and our need of this Savior, we repented, believed in him, and were *saved*. And now we are saints (it is true!) who keep going, keep believing, keep repenting, keep growing, because we are *sustained* by grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.