

FORWARD IN CHRIST: EPHESIANS AS SOURCE FOR UNITY IN DIVERSITY
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Our Challenge

The church today faces the daunting task of how it will engage the world. People are rejecting traditions that seem disconnected from contemporary issues and lost in a blur of memories invaded by new ideas. This has led to a profound loss of identity on all levels, including within the church. There has been a strong reaction against this loss of identity, seen in the rise of nationalism and fundamentalism. Instead of embracing the growing diversity, people are retreating to what they consider safe and secure.

The church is not beyond the impact of these global movements. The church as a whole and the Church of the Nazarene in particular have come to a symbolic crossroad with the turn of the millennium. The essential challenge has become whether we should retreat to tradition and the fundamentals, risking increased isolation and animosity from global movements, or we should embrace the growing diversity, risking a loss of identity. Our identity must not be rooted in anything of human interpretation—including ethics and polity—but one that is based on relationship with Jesus Christ. Relationship with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit provides an unchanging foundation that ought to shape all the church is and does.

The challenges confronting the church today are similar to this question faced by the early Christians: “Will they be an introverted, sectarian, apocalyptic group, waiting for God’s imminent kingdom and drawing people out of society into the haven of their churches, or will they have a mission to society in accordance with the demand of the gospel?”¹ We can gain significant insight for our day by listening in to how the early church reflected on its growing faith in Jesus Christ. Hans Küng wrote that “one can only know what the church should be now if one also knows what the church was originally.”²

The Letter to the Ephesians offers one of the most developed ecclesiologies of the New Testament. In this letter, Paul (as the assumed author) brings theology to bear on the practical needs of the church, anchoring the life of the church to the foundation of relationship with Christ. He offers a radical vision of the church that compels us to mission. We cannot exist as church or

¹ J. Christiann Beker, *Paul the Apostle* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 305.

² Hans Küng, *The Church*, trans. by Ray and Rosaleen Ockenden (Kent: Burns and Oates, 1968), ix.

as individual believers outside of Christ nor outside of one another. The unity we share as Nazarenes is deeper and more profound than articles of faith or shared heritage. Any emerging ecclesiology must be grounded in Christ and experienced in Spirit-empowered love. Paul offers an alternative community that crosses ethnic barriers, is bound together in fellowship with the Triune God, and fulfills its purpose of holiness before him.

I. The Foundation in Christ

Fundamentally, the church cannot exist without being *in Christ*. Paul uses the word “church” (*ekklēsia*) to designate the holy ones (1:1) who have been adopted into God’s family (1:5). Although the word *ekklēsia* occurs only nine times in the letter, there are other expressions, images, and implicit references to the people of God.³ The meaning and origin of this word has been debated, but the more likely background comes from Judaism and the Septuagint where it refers to the gathered assembly of God’s people, the *qāhāl*.⁴ Paul uses the term in his early letters to designate the gathering of believers in a particular location (Gal 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1). The church is described by a location indicator (“of the Thessalonians”) and identified in its relationship to “God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” The church is not abstract but a specific gathered community of believers. Paul uses this same idea in Ephesians but connects the local community with the cosmic purposes of God. He consistently uses the singular “church” with the article. Through our local connection with other believers, we become participants in God’s greater purposes for humanity through our fellowship with Jesus Christ. The many gathered communities become one in purpose because of their bond with Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Ekklēsia is defined primarily in its association with and response to Jesus Christ. Paul begins this letter with a self-description, marking his calling as “an apostle of Christ Jesus through the will of God” (v 1). The letter is then addressed to “those who are holy and faithful *in Christ Jesus*.” The phrase *in Christ Jesus* specifically associates this gathered community with Christ and sets the theological tone for all that follows. This phrase and its variations are frequent

³ See the discussion by George Lyons, “Church and Holiness in Ephesians,” *Holiness and Ecclesiology in the New Testament*, eds. Kent E. Brower and Andy Johnson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 238-56.

⁴ K. L. Schmidt, “*Ekklēsia*,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), III:501-36.

in Paul's writings.⁵ The fundamental idea of this phrase centers on fellowship with God through communion with Christ. When Paul uses "in Christ," his primary meaning is a description of the new eschatological existence that the resurrection of Jesus Christ has inaugurated and in which believers become participants. The Greek preposition *en* followed by the dative case can indicate instrumentality ("by"), location ("in"), or identification ("with"). Each of these ideas is present in Paul's use of the phrase *en Christō*. Paul also uses "Christ" with other Greek prepositions to describe relationship with Christ. As John B. Nielson comments, "They are spokes of the wheel of which *en Christō* is the hub."⁶

Paul's concept of being "in Christ" is comprehensive and difficult to summarize. The linguistic evidence is quickly overshadowed by the richness of relationship with Christ to which the various phrases point. Albert Schweitzer wrote, "This 'being in Christ' is the prime enigma of the Pauline teaching: once grasped it gives the clue to the whole."⁷ Simply stated, Christ is the agent of a new existence not bound by sin or death, and he opens the way to new life for those who believe in him. Through Christ one can begin to experience the eschatological promises of God in the present life. In this new existence, Christ brings redemption from sin (Rom 3:24) and new life to believers (6:11). Through his death and resurrection he makes eternal life possible (6:23). Through him the Spirit sets us free from the law, sin, and death (8:2). God's love has been given to humanity through Christ (8:39). God's grace comes through Christ Jesus (1 Cor 1:4). All those in Christ will be made alive (15:22) and will be the first to rise from the dead (1 Thess 4:16). God's promises are fulfilled by means of Christ (2 Cor 1:19, 20). In Gal 2:4 Paul describes the freedom available in Christ from legalism and bondage to the law. Christ is the means by which the Gentiles might experience faith like Abraham (3:14). God's riches come through Christ Jesus (Phil 4:19). The separation and condemnation of sin are overcome by the resurrection life experienced in Christ. No longer do believers have to be enslaved "in Adam"

⁵ "In Christ" occurs in the Pauline corpus (disputed and undisputed letters) at least 161 times. It occurs outside Paul: John 6:5, 6; 14:20, 30; 15:2-7; 16:33; 17:21; Acts 4:2, 9, 10, 12; 13:39; 1 Pet. 3:16; 5:10, 14; 1 John 2:5, 6, 8, 24, 27, 28; 3:6, 24; 5:11, 20; Rev. 1:9; 14:13. Also it appears in 1 Clem. 32:4; 38:1; Ignatius *Eph.* 1:1; *Trall.* 9:2; and *Rom* 1:1; 2:2.

⁶ John B. Nielson, *In Christ: The Significance of the Phrase "In Christ" in the Writings of St. Paul* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1960), 52.

⁷ Albert Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1931), 3.

and bound to self-destruction but can be empowered to live a life of love. Believers move to a new realm of existence ruled by Christ as Lord through the sanctifying presence of the Holy Spirit. This transformation lies at the core of the identity of the church and is one of the key messages of Ephesians.

A. God's Will for Us in Christ

1. A Relationship Defined by Holiness and Love

In the opening section of the letter, known as the *Berakah* (the “blessing”) and famous for being one of the longest sentences in Greek literature, Paul begins with his typical statement of praise to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (1:3), setting the tone for the basis of all else in the letter. This praise springs from the fact that God is the primary source of “every spiritual blessing in heaven in Christ.” Paul does not immediately define what these spiritual blessings are. Markus Barth suggests that they involve the “decision, action, and revelation of God which has culminated and been ‘sealed’ when the ‘Holy Spirit’ was given to both Gentiles and Jews (1:13-14; 4:30).”⁸ These blessings are spiritual in nature, implying the inner work of the Holy Spirit, in accord with the eschatological life of heaven, and are experienced “in Christ.”⁹

The purpose of the blessings is given in the purpose clause in verse 4: God chose us in Christ before the world was created *in order that we might be* holy and blameless before him in love.¹⁰ God’s plan for humanity was for a certain quality of life that would enable us to be in relationship with the Holy One. In 1 Samuel 6:20, the men of Beth-shemesh asked, “Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God?” Only those with clean hands and pure hearts can come before God’s holy presence (Ps 24:3-4). Without holiness, no one can see God (Heb 12:14b). The eschatological promise of dwelling with God (Jer 31:33; Rev 21:3) comes as a direct result of being *in Christ*. This is no afterthought but God’s very purpose in creating the universe. Jesus’

⁸ Markus Barth, *Ephesians* Vol 1, Anchor Bible (New York: Double Day, 1974), 101.

⁹ Paul uses a prepositional phrase with some designation for Christ fourteen times between verses 3-14, drawing the readers’ focus to the source of all that God intends for humanity: “in Christ” v 3; “in him” vv 4, 9, 10; “in the Christ” vv 10, 12; “before him” v 4; “through Jesus Christ” v 5; “into him” v 5; “in the Beloved” v 6; “in whom” vv 7, 11, and twice in v 13.

¹⁰ The purpose specifically appears in the infinitive clause *einai hēmas*.

death and resurrection were not a solution to the sin problem that God thought up after Adam and Eve fell into sin but were the plan from the start (see 2 Tim 1:9-10; 1 Pet 1:19-20; Rev 13:8). The requirement of holiness to enter into God's presence is provided through Christ to those bonded to him by grace. This is both moral and relational. The phrase "in love" is difficult to interpret because what it modifies is unclear, whether it should be taken with the earlier purpose clause, that we will live out our holiness before him in love, or with the phrase that follows, "in love he predestined." The word order would suggest that the first is the intended meaning, which is quite significant in light of Paul's other references to love in this letter. In 4:24 he writes of being recreated in the holy image of God, and then he goes on in 5:1-2 to anchor this holiness in imitation of the love of Christ. Holiness and love are essential partners (see 1 Thess 3:12-13) that mark the quality of life of those in Christ and enable them to be in relationship with the Holy God who planned it all this way from the beginning. God's plan in Christ is that we be adopted as his children and become part of his people and family (Eph 1:6; cf. Rom 8:16). The final result of this plan is that God will be glorified for how he has planned for the salvation of the world (Eph 1:7). From the world's perspective, it is foolishness, but it will actually show how glorious, gracious, and wise God is (1 Cor 1:18-25).

2. The Goal of Knowing God

Paul offers two prayers in this letter. The first is given in 1:17-23 and has the expressed purpose that God may grant the readers "a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him" (v. 17). In the Greek, there is no article before "spirit." Many translations treat this generically, like we might use the word "attitude" or "disposition." This use is seen later in 4:23. However, there could be a more specific intention here. The change of outlook that God intends for us comes through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. The way God will give us this wisdom is through his Holy Spirit who will transform us into the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18) by teaching us the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16; cf. Rom 12:1-2). The ultimate goal of God's plan in Christ is that people will come to know God in his fullness. The word "revelation" assumes that something has been hidden, which is often described as a "mystery," a word Paul uses many times in this letter to describe God's plan for the salvation of all people through Christ (1:9; 3:3, 4, 6, 9; 5:32; 6:19). God reveals to us knowledge about himself through his Holy Spirit. We come to know more about God's eternal plan in Christ through the Spirit. Paul is praying that the

Ephesians will become more and more participants in this eternal plan of God. The object of this knowledge is God, not abstract knowledge but personal and relational knowledge (*epignōsei*) that comes “in Christ.”

The purpose for our creation is to see God for who God is: wise, gracious, and loving towards us as revealed through Jesus Christ. This revelation offers hope for eternal life, expressed in 1:18 as “the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,” and in 2:5-6 as being raised up with Christ and seated with him in the heavenly places. The more we know about God, the more our hope in his grace grows. The source of this knowledge is God’s specific revelation in Christ’s death, resurrection, and exaltation (1:20). This is powerfully expressed in Paul’s second prayer in 3:14-21 which also has the goal of knowing the love of Christ shown to us and grown in us by the Holy Spirit. Knowledge of God comes through Christ in partnership with the Holy Spirit.

B. The Cross as the Means for God’s Plan

The problem of sin, however, ensnares and keeps people from experiencing God’s perfect plan for them. At several points in the letter, Paul speaks of the “before” and “after” situation of believers. Before salvation, believers were spiritually dead because of their disobedience, evidenced in living by the passions of the flesh (2:2-3). When sin comes, death is soon to follow (Gen 2:17; Rom 7:9). In Romans 5:12-21, Paul compares the two opposite states of being “in Christ” and being “in Adam,” with Christ and Adam representing a particular way of life.¹¹ Adam serves as the archetype for sinful humanity in rebellion against God.¹² Through Adam’s disobedience, sin and death entered the world, resulting in condemnation and bondage for all people to the power of sin. This power, as James Dunn comments, “turns humankind in upon itself in preoccupation with satisfying and compensating for its own weakness as flesh.”¹³

Although Paul does not use the phrase “in Adam” in Ephesians, every person (including the “we” of 2:3) follows the pattern of disobedience begun by Adam in the Garden and ends with the same consequence of death, which comes as a result of “trespasses and sins” (2:1). These two

¹¹ Paul uses “in Adam” in 1 Cor 15:22. It is possible that Adam stands behind Phil 2:5-11.

¹² Life “in Adam” is illustrated in Rom 6:1-14 with enslavement to the power of sin and is manifested in Rom 6:15-23 in the acts of sin.

¹³ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 112.

terms are used to express the one idea of the exertion of the self-will against the divine commandments. Paul does not refer to the power of sin in Ephesians, like he does in Romans 6, but the evidence of this deeper problem shows up in the acts of sin. It is not the power of sin that leads to our personal death but the acts of disobedience. We each die like Adam when we break the commandments of God (Rom 7:9). Lincoln writes, “Trespases and sins both bring about the condition of death and characterize the existence of those who are spiritually dead.”¹⁴

Disobedience also leads to divine wrath (2:3), expressed in Romans 1:24, 26, and 28 with the terrifying words, “God gave them up.” Sin as idolatry turns one’s self inward in fulfillment of fleshly passions.¹⁵ If left unchecked, the result will be hardness of heart and callousness to the grace of God that is experienced through the drawing presence of the Holy Spirit (4:17-19, 30). This way of life characterizes the world, which is compelled by “the prince of the power of the air” (2:2) and evidenced in a futile and darkened way of thinking (4:18). Without God’s presence, the result is a fractured world full of brokenness and without any hope for community. Sin alienates us from God and from one another (2:11-14). For the Corinthian church, their fleshly living left them fractured and unable to develop the mind of Christ within them (1 Cor 2:16-3:3). Living in imitation of Adam will always erect walls of separation within the church and between the church and the world.

God’s answer for the alienation of sin is the “blood of Christ” (1:7). The way by which we can participate in God’s plan is through the redemption (*apolytrōsin*) that comes through Christ’s death and resurrection. God’s love expressed through the “Beloved” Son is the source for redemption (1:6; cf. John 3:16). The phrase “forgiveness of trespases” is used in 1:7 in apposition with the word “redemption.” The word *apolytrōsin* has the connotation of having been owned or enslaved by someone or something, and a price must be paid to buy freedom. Slavery to the power of death results from disobeying God (2:1). All people have fallen short of God’s glory, resulting in death (Rom 6:23), and so all are in need of redemption (Rom 3:23). We are bound “in Adam” to self-focused and depraved living, without any source of rescue from within this world. Dead people cannot resurrect themselves. There is only one answer: in Christ (Rom 7:25-8:1). Redemption provides the solution for the problem created by our trespases by

¹⁴ Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* WBC vol. 42 (Dallas, Word, 1990), 93.

¹⁵ Romans 8:5-8; Gal 5:19-22.

releasing us from the guilt incurred because of our sins. Thus, justification is closely linked to redemption and can be understood as the result of God's forgiveness of our sins.

The very power of God is revealed in Christ's resurrection. Paul bursts forth in praise of this essential truth in 1:19-20, declaring "the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe according to the working of the might of his strength which he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead" (2:19-20). The same power that created the world with the spoken word (Gen 1:3) is the same power that works in us through Christ (Col 1:16) to enable us to know God in relationship (Eph 1:17). Christ's sacrifice of himself in love for us (5:2) opens the way for us to become participants in the household of God (2:22). The alienation caused by sin is removed by Christ's death and resurrection and we become participants in Christ of the spiritual blessings for which we have been created. Holiness and love become possible as new creation comes in the lives of believers (4:23-24). Paul uses the key prepositional phrases *hyper hēmōn* ("for us") in 5:2 and *hyper autēs* ("for it" referring to the church) in 5:25 to speak of Christ's sacrifice and how it enables love and holiness within the church as an example and enabling power. Christ's death and resurrection make it possible for us to participate in kingdom life here on earth. Just as spiritual death is the prelude to eternal death (2:1-3), new spiritual life is a foretaste of eternal life (2:5). We are participants now in the age to come because we have been raised to newness of life (see Rom 6:4). Paul even goes as far as to say that believers are already seated with Christ in the heavenly places (2:6). Christ's own victory over sin and death guarantee our own victory which awaits the "fullness of time" (1:10) when Christ will hand over the conquered kingdom to the Father (1 Cor 15:24-28). Meanwhile, we await the total triumph of God with assurance that comes by being in Christ.

God's plan for the whole created order and its restoration was revealed through the suffering and victory of Christ at "just the right time" (Rom 5:6). In 1:9-10, Paul expands our view of who Christ is by showing that his death had cosmic significance. All things will be united in Christ by experiencing the purpose for which they were created. The word used in verse 10 for "to unite" (*anakephalaiōsasthai*) has at its root the word "head," implying that all things will be brought under one head, Christ, who is the ruler of all creation (see Col 1:15-20), resulting in perfect harmony and the completion of God's plan "that we should be holy and blameless in love" (1:4). Paul describes this plan as the mystery of God's will (v. 9). At the very core of God's being is the love shown on the cross (Rom 5:8). The word "mystery" conveys that

what needed to be revealed is God's plan that all who trust in Christ, both Jew and Gentile, will experience the promised salvation (3:3, 6).¹⁶ Paul expresses this in 1:11 with the word "inheritance," which has the idea of something that had been planned and promised and that is a gift to the next generation. What is this inheritance? 1 Peter 1:3-7 uses the word "inheritance" for eternal life. In the context of Eph 1:11-14, the word is associated with receiving the gospel of salvation. This experience of the fullness of God's plan is the reason for our creation, expressed in 1:11 with the word "predestined." The final result of our salvation in Christ is given in verse 12: that we might be to the praise of the glory of God.¹⁷

This leaves us with an expanded view of what Christ has done. Salvation is much more than walking on golden streets or living in a mansion on a hilltop, as the popular gospel songs say. It reveals the very gracious character of the Triune God. Viewing salvation as an individual union card to heaven brings no glory to God but only shows the selfish nature of humanity. The gospel is about more than "getting in." *All things* were created *in order to experience* the gospel! Christ brought change to the very core of the existence of all things. Christianity is not like other religions that are based on morals or good teachings. The church does not exist primarily to disciple people into a holy ethic but first and foremost to connect people to God's cosmic purposes of transformation in Christ. The church stands at the intersection of God's cosmic plan and a world lost in sin. Through our experience of transformation in Christ, the holy ethic will emerge as we become who we are.

C. The Experience of the Blessing through Grace

How humanity experiences God's plan in Christ is best characterized by the word "grace." Grace is one of the central themes in this letter, with the word *charis* occurring eleven strategic times.¹⁸ This word basically means a kindness, goodwill, gift, or favor shown to another person. Etymologically, it is related to "joy" (*chara*) and "thanksgiving" (*eucharisteō*). When

¹⁶ Paul refers to the gospel as mystery also in Rom 16:25-26. The prophets had a glimpse into this mystery of God's plan but it was only revealed in its fullness in Christ (cf. 1 Pet 1:10-12).

¹⁷ The antecedent for the pronoun *autou* in the phrase "his glory" is vague. The context of the verse suggests God the Father whose will is being fulfilled. The issues are similar in v 6 where the primary actor is God but the one in whom God acts is Christ.

¹⁸ 1:2, 6, 7; 2:5, 7, 8; 3:2, 7, 8; 4:7; 6:24.

one receives an undeserved gift, the response is a sense of both joy and of gratitude. Grace is a favorite word for Paul and captures in part God's response in Christ to the sinful condition of humanity.

Paul uses the imagery of death to characterize the inability of people to save themselves through human effort. Sin ensnares people and leaves them unable to fulfill God's purposes for them (Rom 7:14-20). Instead of responding to our trespasses with wrath, God shows love, which we experience as mercy when we are lost in sin (2:4-5; Rom 5:8). Both "love" and "mercy" translate the Hebrew *hesed* in the LXX. God's essential nature of love (Exod 34:6; Deut 7:7-9) is experienced on the human side as mercy and is the cause (*dia tēn pollen agapēn autou*, 2:4) of life in Christ. Grace comes through Christ's death on the cross (1:6) and leads to life with Christ. There is no other source or means by which we can experience God's purposes for us in this life and for eternity. No human means can bring reconciliation and end the alienation between us and God that profoundly affects every aspect and relationship in this world. Grace opens the door to the "riches" (1:7; 2:7) of God's love that we will share "in the saints" (1:18).

D. The Necessary Human Response

This offer is not irresistible because it comes through the open door of faith (2:8). Faith is the acceptance and appropriation of God's gift in Christ. Faith for Paul involves trust and a change of allegiance from self or anything or anyone in this world to dependence upon God. Faith acknowledges that there is no other source of life than what God provides in Christ. Because we are dead in sin and have no other alternative but self-destruction, we need someone from outside of our doomed existence to extend a helping hand. Faith itself is a result of grace. Grace is the hand extended through our hopeless darkness, and faith is the action of trusting the one who offers the hand and embracing it out of the desperation of repentance. God planned for salvation before creation (1:4) and took the initiative in Christ (1:5), but he still leaves the reception of salvation up to people. God took the initiative by predestining that the salvation of humanity would lead to his glory (1:11).

Two groups participate in this plan. The first are the believers who have already "put their hope" (*proēlpikotas*) in Christ (1:12). Hope generates faith and involves trusting for something not yet experienced. In this case, hope is expressed in a perfect participle implying that the action has already been completed with ongoing results. The second group includes

those who heard the message (*akousantes*) from the first group and believed in it (*pisteusantes*, 1:13). Believers become participants in God's purpose by offering hope to those who have not yet believed (Rom 10:14-15). This is expressed again in 1:18-19 where Paul prays that the Ephesians will become participants in this hope and God's "exceedingly great power towards us who believe." The goal of Paul's second prayer in 3:17 is that "Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." Faith is the expression of hope that leads to participation in God's plan in Christ. The destiny of the church is to believe in the message of Christ and share that message with others to the glory of God.

E. The Appropriation of the Mystery of Christ through the Spirit

Two key events unfold God's plan for humanity and give the church its identity: the death and resurrection of Christ and the gift of the promised Holy Spirit. Paul anchors all spiritual blessings in the Triune God. First, Christ sets the pattern for God's eternal plan for us by living a life of love (5:1-2). His life not only sets the pattern for living but provides the inner resource for being filled with the fullness of God (3:19). Christ is the center and focus of all we should be about because in him we experience the divine plan that leads to the praise of God's glory (1:9, 14). Second, the Spirit is the source of all blessings in Christ (1:3) with the goal of us being blameless in holiness before God (1:4).

Faith in Christ opens the floodgate of grace and all God can and wants to do in and through the church (3:17). The result is receiving the "seal" or "down payment" (*arrabōn*) of the Holy Spirit (1:14; 2 Cor 1:21-22; Gal 3:14). The purpose of this sealing is our ultimate redemption (Eph 4:30). Those who belong to this family can be assured of their salvation through the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit bears witness with our spirits that we are indeed the children of God (Rom 8:16). The Holy Spirit confirms the truth of the gospel by bringing freedom from sin (Rom 8:1-13) and transformation into the holy image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18). The Holy Spirit inaugurates and appropriates the new age in Christ for each believer in the present moment and instills a deepening desire to experience the fullness of Christ in the age to come (Eph 1:10). The presence of the Holy Spirit is the evidence that life in Christ has already begun. Though our faith may be weak now (1 Cor 13:9-12), because its object is Christ, we can be assured that it is not in vain and that our hope will certainly be fulfilled (Eph 1:18).

In addition, the Spirit brings a deeper knowledge of the holy and loving nature of God best seen in the person of Christ (1:17-18). The Holy Spirit works in our inner person with the specific goal of helping us to know better the love of Christ (3:16). The natural result of the Spirit's work is recreation into the image of Christ. Although the Spirit is not specifically mentioned in 4:23-24, the passive voice of the verb "to be made" (*ananeousthai*) indicates that someone outside of ourselves is restoring us into God's image of "true righteousness and holiness." This is not simply cognitive or intellectual but change at the core of our being (Col 1:27). In 3:20, Paul mentions a "power that works within us." This power is described in 3:16-19 as coming from the Holy Spirit who enables us to experience the love of Christ more in our inner person. In other words, the Spirit enables us to grasp and experience the gospel in ever increasing ways. Simply stated, the Spirit opens the way to experience all that God has predestined for us through Christ (1:3-4; 2:18). The imperative of 5:18, "Be filled with the Spirit," implies that we must respond to the Spirit in the obedience of faith. We must not grieve the Spirit by allowing any of the old life controlled by desires of the flesh to creep back in (4:23, 30; Gal 5:25). The significance of the work of the Spirit to implant the love of Christ deeply in our hearts cannot be overstated.

II. The Mission of the Church

Experiencing the depth of grace can only happen in community. Grace creates a new people of God that goes beyond any barrier erected within this world. New creation (2 Cor 5:17) not only opens our hearts to receive more fully God's love in Christ but also enables this love to flow out to those around us as we participate in God's purposes in this world. An agreed mission statement or list of objectives is not adequate for any group of people to be called "church." Unity results as Christ is allowed to reign supreme through obedience to the leading of the Holy Spirit. The community nurtures individuals who then participate in community by being catalysts for new creation in the lives of others. The church is the place where the new age of Christ breaks into the old age of sin. New creation involves a transformation of devotion from the objects of the world to the person of Christ.

A. The Church in Relationship with Christ

The ecclesiology of Ephesians is firmly Christologically focused but Trinitarian resourced. The church gets its identity in its relationship to Christ, and from this identity comes

its mission. The mission of the church rests solidly on the supremacy of the resurrected and exalted Christ (1:20-21) who is “head over all things for the church, his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (1:22-23). If he is not supreme over every aspect of the church, the church is not being his body.¹⁹ As the sovereign one, Christ gives the church all the resources it needs to fulfill its mission (4:11-13). The church is not a function but a communion. Anything the church does must flow out of its relationship with Christ. Anything else will have the wrong source of power and ultimately fail. Paul uses several images to describe this relationship.

1. *The Body of Christ* One of the most significant images is the church as the body of Christ (2:3, 16; 3:6, 4:4, 12; 5:23, 30). The background for this image is debated, but Paul is probably using a well-known image to illustrate how the church ought to live out its relationship with Christ especially symbolized through the Lord’s Supper and baptism.²⁰ There are two related themes stated in 1:22-23. First, Christ is described as the “head over all things.” The Greek *kephalē* often translates the Hebrew *rōš* to signify a ruler or leader, with the nuance of authority because of priority. Christ as head has supreme authority over all creation (*panta*, 1:22) since through him all things were created (Col 1:15-16). God confirmed Christ’s supremacy by raising him from the dead and exalting him to the highest place (1:20; see Phil 2:8-11). Christ’s supremacy assures the church that it has the same power available through the presence of the Holy Spirit to fulfill its mission in Christ (1 Thess 5:23-24). Christ as the head is preeminent and the source of life and growth for the body (Eph 4:15-16).

From the image of Christ as head emerges the solidarity of believers as a body. First, the church as the body is described as “the *fullness* of the one who fulfills all things in everything” (1:23). This phrase is difficult to interpret but gives the stylistic impression of the completeness that is in Christ. The meaning of *plēroma* carries the connotation of Christ as the incarnation of the glory of God (John 1:14; Eph 3:19; Col 1:19; 2:9). Ideally, the church is the embodiment of Christ, the presence of Christ on earth, and the proof of the resurrection power of Christ. The

¹⁹ Küng, *The Church*, 236.

²⁰ It has often been pointed out that Paul’s body language in 1 Cor 12:12-31 and Rom 12:4-8 resembles the fable of Aesop as used by Menenius Agrippa. The eucharastic imagery for the body can be seen in 1 Cor 10:16-17 and 11:23-24. Baptismal traditions may lie behind Romans 7:4. See A. Katherine Grieb, “People of God, Body of Christ, Koinonia of Spirit,” *Anglican Theological Review*, 87:2 (2005), 234-35.

mission of the church as the body of Christ is to incarnate the redemptive purposes of God's grace in Christ and to continue what Christ started. To be "in Christ" involves becoming participants of this "fullness" through the Holy Spirit. As the creation of God, the church exists for the mission of God so that when people see the church, they see God's love lived out in obedient faith. The church becomes the channel by which unbelievers receive the transforming grace of God in Christ. The church as the incarnation of Christ is still distinct from Christ: Christ fills the church, not the church filling Christ. Christ the exalted one becomes intimately and immanently involved with his people.

Second, union with Christ through the Spirit results in union with one another as one body. The goal of each individual believer is expressed in Paul's second prayer in 3:14-21, that each person may be strengthened by the Spirit to know and experience the fullness of the love of Christ.²¹ Interestingly, one does not experience God's fullness alone but "with all the saints" (v 18). We come to know the love of Christ together because this love must by nature be shown to others. As each person comes to know the love of Christ through the indwelling Spirit, the bond of unity within the church results.²² God provides the source of unity through the Holy Spirit but this unity must be maintained through peace (4:3). As channels of love, believers become agents of reconciliation (Gal 5:22; Rom 8:6; 14:17; 15:13; 2 Cor 5). This unity is expressed in a series of seven theological confirmations in 4:4-6: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all. The "calling" of the Ephesians (4:1) is the hope expressed in the prayer of 3:14-21, that the well of God's love in Christ will never run dry (3:20; Rom 8:38-39). Being worthy of this call creates a sense of obligation met through obedient faith.

Each member of the body is given special gifts by the Spirit to help the body grow in unity, faith, and dependence upon Christ (4:7; 1 Cor 12:7, 27). Four specific leadership positions have the special calling of equipping believers for works of service (4:11-12). Significantly, the goal of body life, both the individual gifts and leadership, is to grow "in the knowledge of the Son of God, to be made mature people to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ"

²¹ There are two parallel infinitives in vv 19-20 that imply that this knowledge is not simply cognitive but active and experiential: *katalabesthai* ("to grasp") and *gnōvai* ("to know"). The phrase *agapēn tou Christou* can be both an objective (love for Christ) or subjective (Christ's love for us) genitive. Since we love only because he first loved us (1 John 4:19), both are possible theologically in this passage.

²² This is one of the major themes of 1 Corinthians.

(4:13). What takes place within each person's life and within the gathered community ought to lead to becoming more and more participants of God's eternal plan in Christ. This relationship with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit gives strength to face the challenges of the day (4:14) and to fulfill the purpose of the church to be perfected in love (4:15-16).

Third, the church as one body is a tangible entity sustained by spiritual power. The argument of Ephesians rests upon the assumption that the church is a spiritual entity experienced in local community. Each local fellowship is part of the universal church, but life in Christ can be lived out only in a local community where love can be tangibly expressed and where holiness is visible (4:1, 4:24-6:9). Each local church is part of the universal church that spans time, culture, location, and language. What makes a particular group of people the church of God is that it shares in the essence and mission of the universal church of new life in Christ in all its fullness.

2. *The Temple* A second important image is the church as a building formed into the temple of God. The church as a building is a common comparison in the New Testament. Paul uses the image to describe a people not a place. The essential characteristic of these people is holiness, which makes them a fit dwelling for God the Holy One (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19). This image has a number of similarities with the body of Christ and addresses the same desire of unity within the church.

Two key themes emerge in Ephesians with this image. The first is the unity of believers as they become united with Christ. In Christ, a new humanity is created that bridges the separations that polarize and divide people because of sin (2:15; Gal 3:28). The problem is that the law creates division among people by allowing sin to exert itself against the sovereignty of God (2:14; Rom 7:8-9). Sin makes us enemies against God by rejecting his will for us, and it makes us enemies with other people by replacing love with selfishness and self-gratification (2:3; 4:19). This universal problem has a complete answer in God's grace in Christ (2:5) who removed the effects of sin because of the law by his death on the cross (2:15; 1 Cor 15:56). The result of what Christ has done is reconciliation, first with God (Rom 5:10; 2 Cor 5:18-19) and then with other people (5:21). With the barrier of sin removed, believers become reconciled with one another as they become united with Christ, resulting in peace. The good news of the mystery of the gospel is that this involves both Jews and Gentiles. It does not matter how "far away" one

is (2:13), all who believe become one in Christ Jesus. In a world full of ethnic division, this is powerfully good news. God calls forth through all of creation a people from every culture and economic status to create true human community based on love. Through the Spirit the promises of the new covenant are fulfilled in Pentecostal power (Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:17-21).

The other theme is that God is present in the building through the indwelling Holy Spirit (2:22). This building has the special purpose of being a house of worship, a temple, and the place where human and divine meet. It is holy because God's presence is there. The church as God's temple is built on the foundation of the gospel proclaimed by the prophets and apostles with Christ as the cornerstone (2:20). What makes the church holy and different than any community in the world is the abiding presence of the Triune God through the Holy Spirit. Christ as the cornerstone determines the quality and strength of the building. The temple exists *in Christ* with all the implications this phrase involves. The members are in the ongoing process (present tense) of being joined together through love (4:16; Col 3:14) because the Holy Spirit is recreating the image of Christ in each person with "righteousness and holiness" (4:24). The Spirit makes believers holy in order to make them fit vessels of God's love in Christ. This is the essence of what it means to be church in this world as we anticipate being in God's presence fully in eternity. The Spirit brings us into conformity with Christ's holy image of perfect love as we live in the obedience of faith, which involves total commitment to the supremacy of Christ (5:1-2; 1 Cor 2:16; 2 Cor 3:18). This has profound and tangible impact on community life.

B. The Church United in Mission

From these images emerges the mission of the church as Christ's ambassador of grace and channel of his love. The church engages the world with the grace and reconciling power of God in Christ and embodies the eschatological hope to which God purposes all creation (see 1 Pet. 2:9). The mission of the church is an extension of the Trinity. All three persons of the Godhead are mentioned numerous times throughout the epistle. The prayer of 3:14-21 is one of the most revealing passages where Paul prays that God the Father may reveal his love to humanity through Christ Jesus, and this is experienced through the Holy Spirit. God intends this love to flow through the church to the world.

The only way the church can sustain its mission is through the fellowship of love. This mission can only be fully experienced within a gathered community of believers because that is

where incarnation can take place. The broad concept of the universal church compels us to be involved in the cosmic purposes of God but we cannot do this without the local fellowship. It starts at the individual level. Individualism, isolation, and lack of integrity keep the church from fulfilling its mission. Egotism or anything that is inconsistent with life in Christ by violating the law of love will keep the church from growing and removes the vital ingredient that keeps it together. The world leaves fragmented lives in its wake, but in the church, the bond of peace in Christ brings diversity into unity (2:14-15, 17; 4:3; 6:15). With Spirit-filled leaders training the body to seek after the love of Christ, the church becomes an unstoppable force because it has tapped into the power source of the God of the universe. The church must not be interpreted with hierarchy, with the laity somehow inferior, but as a living organism with each part mutually dependent upon the other and contributing to the wellness of the whole (4:16; 1 Cor 12:14-26).

This unity does not come through human ability but only as the church is in fellowship “with Christ.” This communion begins with being crucified with Christ by “putting to death” (Rom 6:5-7) or “putting off” (Eph 4:22) the old life controlled by sin. God has promised to raise us to new life in Christ (2:5; 4:23-24; Rom 6:4, 8-11). These images summarize the moment of entire sanctification when a person changes allegiance from sin as master to Jesus as Lord. This change happens when one opens oneself totally in faith to God’s transforming grace (Gal 2:20). Transformation in Christ is the only sustaining power for the church to carry out its mission. If individuals within a local church are not being remade into the image of Christ, not only are they not fulfilling God’s purposes for them, but collectively, they keep that church from fulfilling its mission and are missing out on what God is doing on the cosmic level in bringing all things together in unity under Christ (1:10).

The church is reminded of its relationship with Christ through the sacraments. The gathered church is a worshipping community filled with the Spirit where music rises from the heart to the Lord (5:19-20), prayers are offered for all people (1 Cor 1:2; 1 Tim 2:1-7), the Scriptures are read (1 Tim 4:13), and the saints are trained up in the Lord (Eph 4:12). The sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper engage the church in its purpose and bring the community together in unity.

Baptism is specifically mentioned only once, in Eph 4:5, as one of the elements that unites the church. The common baptismal confession, “Jesus Christ is Lord,” unites all believers together in a common faith (1 Cor 12:3, 13), but this is deeper than simply a verbal confession. It

is the initiation into the body of Christ but also marks the commitment of faith necessary for life in Christ. Baptism serves as the visible testimony of the inner transformation that the Spirit makes within the believer. The early Christians had the practice at least as early as the second century of putting on new clothing after baptism.²³ Though it is impossible to know when this started, all the elements for this can be found in Paul's letters and offer some important theological insights for the church. In Gal 3:27, Paul mentions that those baptized into Christ are clothed with Christ. Rom 13:14 also exhorts believers to be clothed with Christ as a mark of their life in Christ. Rom 6:1-11 uses the image of old and new in the context of baptism and provides an important synthesis for Ephesians. Baptism serves as the visible act of dying to the old way of life controlled by the power of sin (6:4). As one comes out of the water, one assumes a new life marked by freedom from sin and commitment to the lordship of Christ (6:4). Thus, baptism serves at the initial symbol of new life in Christ and the mark of the sanctifying process of the Holy Spirit.

There are two allusions to baptism in Ephesians that support this idea. In 4:22-24, Paul again refers to the change from the old self to the new self in a similar way to Rom 6:3-4. God recreates the new believer into his image of "true righteousness and holiness." The new life is visibly marked with holiness and a separation from sin (see also Col 2:12). This new life comes in the total commitment that baptism ought to mark. Baptism is not only the mark of initiation but should mark the committed faith of entire sanctification, which should be the identifying lifestyle of one in Christ. In 5:25-27 Paul uses the relationship of Christ and the church as an illustration of marriage. Christ "loved the church and gave himself up for her in order to make her holy by cleansing her by the washing with water through the word." It is impossible to tell if Paul means here water baptism or a spiritual baptism through the Holy Spirit. This verse draws us back to the vicarious love of Christ (*hyper autēs*) on the cross as the source of sanctification, and this is experienced through the washing away of the old life and the renewal of the Holy Spirit in making the church holy (1 Cor 6:11). Christ continues to show love to the church by caring for it as his body (Eph 5:29).

The Lord's Supper continues the symbolism of new life in Christ found in baptism. Although there is no specific mention of the Lord's Supper in this letter, the theme of the unity

²³ W. A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 155.

of the church through Christ's sacrificial giving of himself on the cross (2:13; 5:1-2, 25) provides an important theological connection. The Lord's Supper is more than a memorial; it is a means of grace and cause for unity on a far deeper level than humanly possible. The Supper brings believers together in unity because all share in the same cup and loaf (1 Cor 10:16-17). This means more than everyone dipping from the same cup of wine or breaking apart one loaf of bread. The physical elements represent the choice one makes to be united with Christ (*koinōnia*) in one's will and purpose through agreement with the conviction of the Holy Spirit. When believers come together at the Supper, they commit as the body of Christ to the mission of his death. It is the opportunity for love to be renewed among the individuals within the community. Individualism, selfishness, or a lack of love stops the grace of the Supper from sanctifying the church. The Supper is a celebration of the love and unity that Christ enables through the indwelling Holy Spirit. To eat it in a worthy manner (1 Cor 11:27) begins with total allegiance to Christ (and not sharing this loyalty with any other being, such as demons, 1 Cor 10:21) and must be shown by the renewed commitment of total submission to him by dying to self in sanctification. Each time the Supper is eaten, the church is given opportunity to renew the commitment of total consecration involved in putting on the new person (Eph 4:24) and fulfilling its purpose of being holy and blameless (1:4).

III. The Proclamation of Good News

As the church lives out resurrection life as an extension of its relationship with Christ, it must become engaged in the mission of incarnation that compels it in love to embrace every movement of God in this world. Our identity cannot be determined by this mission, but the mission must be a result of the identity. The response in faith to the work of the Spirit impacts how the church acts both internally and externally.

A. Ethics: Living Out the New Life in Christ

Because believers have been transformed into new people in Christ (4:23-24), they follow two driving standards for their conduct. First, they imitate the love of God that Christ showed on the cross (5:1-2), and second, they do what pleases God by living consistently with his holy character (5:10). Paul gives many examples in 4:25-6:9 in response to specific needs of the first century context. It is possible to keep these two standards in cooperation with the

indwelling Spirit who enables believers to bear fruit consistent with the character of Christ (Gal 5:24-25) and to live in victory over the temptations of the flesh (Rom 8:9-13; 1 Cor 10:13).

Alfred Wikenhauser comments that “the Spirit is the vital influence which gives the new life its quality.”²⁴ Without the transforming assistance of the Spirit, any effort to live by these standards eventually degenerates into legalism, which poisons the unity and mission of the church (Gal 5:1-15). These standards are successfully fulfilled not simply between the Spirit and each individual believer but in community where edification, worship, and accountability take place. Only as “church” is new life fully possible.

B. Eschatology: Participating in Something Greater

The church exists in the tension of the already and not yet. The church is called to embody in the present age the new creation in Christ promised in the eschaton, but yet it still lives with a sense of not having arrived because of the ongoing battle with the forces of evil. The church participates in the eternal, spiritual sphere of existence in its relationship with Christ (1:21-22), but this connection does not isolate the church from the need to be the people through whom God brings about his purpose in this world. This engagement can be messy as new people are incorporated into the church and their growth from sin to new life is enabled. Lincoln writes, “Yet the distinctive behavior required of the new humanity, of the children of light, is not achieved by flight from the world but by living responsibly in the world, in the ordinary structures of human life—husband-wife, parent-children, and master-slave relationships (cf. 5:21-6:9).”²⁵ The church is constantly drawn towards eschatological life in Christ because Christ gave himself to make the church radiant, pure, holy, and blameless (5:27). This happens as believers embrace Christ’s way of thinking (Rom 12:1-2; 1 Cor 2:16) because he dwells within them through the Holy Spirit, not over-powering their personhood, but recreating it in the image it was meant to be. Paul was confident that he “who began a good work in you, will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6; 1 Thess 5:23-24).

²⁴ Alfred Wikenhauser, *Pauline Mysticism: Christ in the Mystical Teaching of St. Paul*, trans. Joseph Cunningham (New York: Herder and Herder, 1960), 55.

²⁵ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, xciv.

C. Enemies: Victorious Living

Although the church is in the process of being made holy in Christ as each person embraces the movement of the Spirit, it still lives in conflict with “the ruler of the power of the air” who, with his evil forces, wages war against people, enticing them into disobedience against God (2:2; 6:11-12). The church as an alternative community finds itself at odds against a world decaying because of sin and death and dominated by evil. Because the power of sin has been broken by the death and resurrection of Christ, believers can have victory over these evil powers (1:19-23; 4:8-10). Through the church God is progressively reordering the cosmos against these forces. The church represents a new order that counters the divisiveness of the devil. God has provided the church spiritual armor to battle these forces. The list of the armor in 6:13-20 is a summary of life in Christ: truth which is found in Christ (4:21), righteousness (4:24), the gospel of peace (2:14), faith (3:17), salvation (2:8), the word of God (4:13), and prayer in the Spirit (3:14-21). Each believer must keep awake and connected to Christ through prayer. Believers are already seated with Christ (2:6) and are assured victory because of Christ’s resurrection (Rom 6:5, 8).

Conclusion

The ramifications of this study in Ephesians are far reaching. The epistle sets forth the ideal for the church: living entirely sanctified by the Holy Spirit in total commitment to the lordship of Jesus Christ. In Christ the temporal and the eternal are joined at the juncture of the church. This begins on the individual level as each believer finds victory over sin and new life in Christ. The result is an ever increasing love for God and for other people that is shown in a holy ethic consistent with the character of Christ. God provides the resources for this victory, first and foremost through the Holy Spirit, but also by means of spiritual disciplines that help us embrace the leading of the Spirit (6:13-18). New life is then best lived out with other believers where each person is equipped with the teachings of Christ, worship is supported by the sacraments, and love is learned to be expressed. This corporate life lived in holiness and love is God’s ideal for humanity and a foretaste of what heaven will be like. Every local fellowship becomes part of this heavenly vision and finds itself part of the cosmic people of God.

The Church of the Nazarene is poised to make a significant contribution to ecclesiology by wedding holiness theology to ecclesiology. As a denomination, clinging to the core

theological claims of Ephesians and other biblical books will help us find our identity in someone who can truly change the world. Our optimism in God's grace for total transformation in Christ can compel us forward through the gifts and opportunities we are given. This identity is not dependent on anything human but does require the commitment of faith. This gospel is needed in the world and should drive us to prayer and fellowship with the Almighty God.