

# The Church: A Theological Foundation

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## Ephesians 4:1-16 as Church Paradigm

When the last moments of life drained out of Jesus' tortured body, a new covenant was forever sealed with his blood. After he rose from his tomb in glory and ascended into heaven, he poured out his Spirit upon his followers, and into that covenant a new community was born: the church, the community of the redeemed. We write about this gospel and this community, because one can hardly talk about the one without also talking about the other.

The twofold theme of cross and community is spelled out in several places of the New Testament. In Titus 2:14, for example, the apostle Paul writes of Jesus Christ,

*... who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good (NIV).*

Christ died not only to save us from our sins as individuals, but also to create a holy community in which we as individuals can better resist the harmful ravages of sin. That is why, for Paul, the doctrine of church itself is bound up in the gospel message: "Paul develops his account of the new community in Christ as a fundamental theological theme in his proclamation of the gospel."<sup>1</sup>

In what way does the church grow out of the cross? What is it about church that protects us from sin, leads us to purity, helps us to become more like Christ in his death and in his life? In short, what is the theology of church? To consider these questions we will turn to Paul's epistle to the Ephesians.

## A Starting Point

Why start with Paul, and why Ephesians? After all, Paul isn't the only New Testament writer to consider the topic of church, and Ephesians isn't the only epistle in which he writes about it. We could just as well start with Jesus' words in Matthew 16:13-20, or with Hebrews' teaching about the new covenant. Why Ephesians?

For the present study, Paul is a fine place to start because he wrote more about this topic than anyone else in the New Testament, and because he grappled with the theory of church as much as its reality. Ephesians is ideal because unlike most of his other epistles, like Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Colossians, and a host of others, Paul isn't dealing with immediate church crises. Rather, Ephesians recapitulates in a more measured way what Paul's vision was all about. In a telling chapter entitled "The Quintessence of Paulinism," F. F. Bruce writes that Ephesians "in large measure sums up the leading themes of the Pauline letters, and sets forth the cosmic implications of Paul's ministry as apostle to the Gentiles."<sup>2</sup>

This brings us to another reason why Ephesians is ideal for our purpose. Other Pauline epistles, like 1 Corinthians, may contain more detailed information about church order and practice, but those writings largely address local churches. The epistle before us was also written to a specific congregation ("To the saints in Ephesus"), but it lacks the local concerns of most of his other epistles. Paul doesn't include greetings to specific people in the Ephesian church at the end of his epistle, and he doesn't address issues of specific concern to the Ephesians. Many scholars believe Ephesians was intended to be a circular letter, carried and read to Ephesus and then to other churches as well. As such its teachings articulate basic, fundamental church issues, rather than grappling with specific issues in light of these basics.

The structure of Ephesians is also helpful. Of the six chapters, the first three outline the basic theory of church, and the last three spell out the practical implications. The primary theme of the first half revolves around "the mystery of Christ, which

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (Harper, San Francisco), p. 1996, p. 32.

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<sup>2</sup>F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.), 1977, reprint 1989, p. 424.

was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets" (3:5, NIV). The content of the mystery is spelled out in the following verse:

*This mystery is that through the gospel Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus (Eph. 3:6, NIV).*

These two groups of people, basically Israelites (people of the promise) and non-Israelites (Gentiles), were united into one body when Jesus died on the cross (2:11-18) to be formed into a spiritual household (2:19-22), the church. In our key text, Ephesians 4:1-16, Paul draws out the implications of Christ's death and resurrection for the overall structure of the church.

### **Local or Universal?**

Before considering our text, however, it will be necessary to reconsider an even more basic question. Is Paul describing individual, local churches, or the "cosmic, universal" church - that is, the collective sum of all churches together? In other words, are the teachings of Ephesians intended as the blueprint of each individual church, or the blueprint of the abstract, collective church? Since it is very hard to conceive and practice these teachings on an abstract level, some have suggested that what Paul writes here applies only to each local congregation as a separate entity. This approach certainly brings Ephesians' goals into our reach.

However, this approach can hardly be sustained. Paul writes here, not of many churches, but of a single church, a single spiritual body whose head is Christ (1:10; 5:23). After describing Christ's resurrection and ascension in 1:20,21, Paul writes that

*God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way (Eph. 1:22-23).*

It is difficult to see how this "church" could be a single congregation. The scope is cosmic; the "church" in view is the entire church, the sum of every individual church.

This is not the end of the story, however. As we read through the final chapters of Ephesians we see that Paul does indeed place these principles within our grasp. Certainly his description of the church's activities in 5:18-21 are to be carried out in each congregation's individual assembly. We are to "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" (5:19) and "Submit to one another" (5:21). I can sing and submit to the brothers and sisters across the room, but it's a little more difficult to practice this in relation to my brothers and sisters in China. We are led to the conclusion, then, that the ecclesiology of Ephesians reflects both the universal church and the local church. Though Paul writes about the cosmic church as a single, universal entity, every local church represents, acts on behalf of, the universal church. How can this be?

### **The Unity of the Spirit**

The dual tension between the cosmic church and the local church is reflected in Ephesians 4:1-16. The tension is compounded by Paul's apparent inconsistency as he writes about church unity. In the beginning of the passage, he urges us to "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit" (v. 3, NIV), as if this unity is already a reality. On the other hand, by the time he completes the passage he writes about our active ministry "until we all reach unity" (v. 13). How can these two ideas stand together?

Commenting on verse 13, Francis W. Beare points out that:

**The unity** is here presented as the goal toward which we strive, whereas in v. 3 it is a possession to be guarded. The two aspects are complementary. That which is given us by God must be made our own by progressive appropriation .... What was before described objectively **as the unity of the Spirit**, in terms of its source and sphere, is now described subjectively, in terms of its content of thought and experience - **of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God.**<sup>1</sup>

There is another way to describe this dual reality. As in so many other aspects of Paul's theology, so here there is an "already" and a "not

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<sup>1</sup>Francis W. Beare, "The Epistle to the Ephesians," in George Arthur Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York, NY: Abingdon Press), 1953, p. 692.

yet." On the one hand, there is only one church in the cosmos (1:22); this is:

*God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone (Eph. 2:19b-20, NIV).*

This is the church which Christ has built which will never be overcome (Matt. 16:18). This unity already exists in the spiritual realm. On the other hand, however, this household has not yet been perfected. In many respects it is in a state of disarray; the body has not yet fully matured (vv. 13); we have yet to "grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ" (v. 15, NIV). There is unity in the church, yet there is disunity. Commenting on the disunity in Christendom, Beare writes:

It is a mark of incompleteness, of spiritual immaturity, that we are still disunited; and the remedy is by no means to be found in a *reduced* Christianity, in a lowest common denominator of agreement; but in advance to the higher levels where the fullness of truth will overcome all our deficiencies.<sup>1</sup>

These points will prove to be crucial later. For now, let's consider the positive side, the unity which we as a church already possess. This spiritual unity is communicated forcefully in verses 4 through 6 by an enumeration of seven "ones":

*There is one body and one Spirit - just as you were called to one hope when you were called - one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (NIV).*

This intense description of unity, though unique to Ephesians, nevertheless reflects many of Paul's arguments in earlier letters. In his letters to both the Galatians and the Romans, Paul cites the truth of one God to argue for his doctrine of justification - Gentiles and Jews alike are united on one ground by one and the same God (Rom. 3:29,30; Gal. 3:20). Paul also invokes the truth of one God and one Lord when writing to the Corinthians about the knotty issue of whether it is permissible to eat food sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 8:4-6). In chapter 12, Paul argues from the Corinthians' baptism "by one Spirit into one body" for unity in the church. Just two

paragraphs earlier, however, Paul had described "different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit....different kinds of service [ministry], but the same Lord....different kinds of working, but the same God" (vv. 4-6). Here we begin to see a critical aspect of the church's unity: The aspect of diversity.

This same dual aspect is present in Ephesians 4:1-16. Paul takes us from our unity in verses 3 through 6 to the diversity of our giftedness in verses 7 through 11. For unity does not mean uniformity; it means rather complementarity. That is to say, the strength of the church's unity is to be found precisely in the diversity which makes it up - a common theme in Paul's epistles, particularly as he develops his analogy of the human body (cf. Rom. 12:4-8; 1 Cor. 12:12-31). The members of the human body are not identical, nor should they (or could they) be if the body is to function properly.

What is the basis for this diversity? It is not at all founded in sheer disagreement or division, but rather in God's provision through Christ: "But to each of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it" (v. 7, NIV). What is the basis of this distribution of grace? The death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ (vv. 8-10). The diverse gifting of the body is rooted in the Christ-event; that is to say, it grows directly out of the cross.

### **Works of Ministry**

In 4:11 Paul begins to specify some of the gifts which Christ has given to the church. Unlike Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:8-11, however, Ephesians 4:11 lists gifts not as abstract abilities but as the people to whom the abilities are given. Four gifts are enumerated (not five, as is commonly believed):

*It was he who gave some to be [1] apostles, some to be [2] prophets, some to be [3] evangelists, and some to be [4] pastors and teachers [or, "pastors-teachers"] (Eph. 4:11, NIV).*

The leaders of the church, then, are themselves gifts to the church.

Notice, however, the crucial function which these leaders play in verse 12. Their task is not to minister to "God's people," but:

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 693.

*to prepare God's people for works of service [ministry] so that the body of Christ may be built up (Eph. 4:12 NIV).*

Preparing God's people for ministry in turn enables the body of Christ to build itself up toward full unity (v. 13). The body's ability to minister, then, is a necessary requirement for the body to achieve maturity and concrete unity. Why? Because, as verse 16 puts it, from Christ,

*the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work (Eph. 4:16 NIV).*

If *not* every member supports the others - if each part does *not* work - then the body is stunted in its growth toward perfect maturity in Christ.

### **Conclusions**

If we are to consider church doctrine and practice in the context of this paradigm, we must ask some very basic but very important questions. How do we conform to God's blueprint of unity in

diversity? What is it that equips each member of the body to function? We believe the answer is to be found in the open house church. The local church must be open in two ways: First, open in its relation to other churches, recognizing the cosmic "unity of the Spirit" of the overall church (Eph. 4:3, NIV); and, second, open to the participation of each of its members, not only allowing them but *enabling* them to perform their part (4:12,16). The open house church, we believe, best facilitates the type of body life described by Paul. And that's why we actively support and promote the concept of the house church.

[This article, along with many other interesting and challenging articles, appears in the "The Open House Church" website of *Christian Perspectives* at: [www.mindspring.com/~mmattison](http://www.mindspring.com/~mmattison) Those who are able to access this website are encouraged to do so - but, be ready to think for yourself ! i.e. Acts 17:11]

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