

## **Another Prayer for the Church** Ephesians 3:14-21

The June-July, 2000 issue of *Presbyterians Today*, cites this exchange from a church meeting: As annual statistical reports were reviewed, the pastor noted that out of 111 members, 73 were female. He observed, "It seems the women outweigh the men in this church." Those women present quickly insisted he amend his remarks, noting that the correct word was OUTNUMBER.

There are probably better uses of a local church's time anyway. Two wonderful prayers of Paul that the church might be equal to a greater purpose appear in *Ephesians*. We explored one last week. Today, we examine the other. I developed how general is the content of *Ephesians*. There are no greetings to individuals and no insights into any unique problems or virtues of the Ephesian church itself. In fact, many scholars believe that the letter was actually intended for circulation among several churches in the vicinity of Ephesus and not intended solely for one church in one city.

The generality of the content of *Ephesians* makes its teachings easily applicable to any church in any age. Paul's two prayers do not reflect needs unique to ancient Ephesus. On the contrary, we can be assured that Paul's petitions also reflect God's will for each of us. But, to fully appreciate these prayers, we need to consider them in the light of the overall theme of the letter of *Ephesians*.

The theme of *Ephesians* is God's work to restore this bitterly divided world under His divine rule. He accomplished the potential for this cosmic healing when Jesus died for sin and was raised from the dead, proving God's power over sin. It is sin, after all, that causes people who would benefit from living in community to fly apart from one another. Paul's world was bitterly divided. The most intense division was the mutual hatred between Jews and Gentiles. *Ephesians*, in fact, was written primarily to Gentile Christians about their new status, along with Jewish Christians, as God's people.

... <sup>13</sup>But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

<sup>14</sup>For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility ...

<sup>19</sup>Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, <sup>20</sup>built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. – Ephesians 2:13, 14; 19, 20

Where Jesus truly reigns, the bitterness that divides people melts away – Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, rich and poor, young and old. But the most amazing aspect of this work of reconciliation is how God chooses to get His message out. Those God reconciles to Himself He places in His church. Together, they become God's instrument for reconciling the world to Himself.

<sup>10</sup>His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, <sup>11</sup>according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. – Ephesians 3:10, 11

Our cosmic assignment as the church is to be God's instrument for uniting the world under His rule. What a case that makes for individual believers to visibly be one in the local church! How can we be instrumental in uniting a fallen world under the rule of Christ if we are still as careless about flying apart as the world at large? No wonder Paul writes, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). If Christians cannot be united in the presence of a bitterly divided world, how can the church be the messenger of God's reconciliation to the world?

Have you any doubt this world is bitterly torn? Races and classes of people tend to be divided in the best of circumstances, but exacerbating the division, class and racial warfare are exploited by our leaders in order to secure voting blocks that keep them in power. In other words, we cannot be sure that those who lead the world even want unity. There is outward division everywhere, but there is even internal conflict going on within us – a conflict against a tendency to live ambitiously and selfishly as opposed to a nobler desire to live for some higher cause that benefits others.

God has provided great and precious gifts to help His children in a difficult world. But, because we still struggle with an old sinful nature, we have a tendency to consider these precious gifts solely as they touch us. Sin causes us to see all things, even the things of God, through a narrow filter of self.

In matters of the Spirit, we are prone to competitiveness. It's just neat whenever we can convince ourselves that we are a little more mature, a little more in tune, a little more insightful – a little more spiritual than others around us. When in conflict with other Christians, some believers are prone to delusions of martyrdom. They convince themselves that we are the only ones truly faithful to God. All sorts of strange things swirl about in our heads that cause us to think in terms of "You and me, God, against the world!" when the proper view of God's blessings to us should cause us to think in terms of "You and me and my brothers and sisters working together to rescue this world!"

When Paul prays for the might and power of heaven to be known by believers, it is not so that they might become more and more independent of and isolated from one another. It is so that they might come together as the church, the Body of Christ. We could say that Paul's prayer is that the church might receive all she needs from the glorious riches of God to actually function as the church.

<sup>14</sup>For this reason I kneel before the Father, <sup>15</sup>from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. <sup>16</sup>I pray that out of his glorious riches ... – verses 14-16a

We are part of a family that transcends heaven and earth, centuries, languages and cultures. We are all stewards in the family business and heirs to the family fortune, what Paul calls the Father's "glorious riches". The resources of heaven are at our disposal for the work of the church, but as the Body of Christ and not as a bunch of free agents. Paul's second prayer for the Ephesians is that they might draw from God's resources, not for selfish reasons, but for being a church that accomplishes the Father's work.

"For this reason ..." Paul is referring to the fact that his readers had been rendered "God's people" by grace. But to be God's people in any real sense and to be the church that exists in the mind of God, a community of believers must know the resources of God's glorious riches that are at their disposal. To the end that we might live up to our calling as believers and as the church, Paul prays ...

## **I. That We May Be Empowered in the Strength of the Spirit (16, 17a)**

<sup>16</sup>I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, <sup>17</sup>so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

## **A. Does Your Inner Man Need Power?**

Our inner man is where pride deceives us, anger poisons us, worry blinds us, guilt attacks us and various lusts undermine us. The inner man is the seat of conscience, reason and will. It is not the same thing as the fleshly nature. Rather, it is the battlefield where our fleshly nature contends with our spiritual yearning to please Christ. The Holy Spirit empowers us to that end in our inner man.

To live fruitful lives for Christ in this world, one must walk in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. That's pretty ethereal rhetoric for flesh and blood creatures like us. What does it really mean to be in fellowship with the Holy Spirit to keep in step with Him? When we think about learning from the Spirit, we likely think first of our personal devotional disciplines such as Bible reading and personal prayer. These are vitally important, but fellowship with God also has some very social dimensions.

The fellowship you share with brothers and sisters in Christ *IS* the fellowship of the Holy Spirit for they are indwelt by the same Spirit as you are. We think of fellowship as so many dinners a year. One writer on church life pondered, "How in the world did the early church fellowship without coffee and donuts?" We rob ourselves of much spiritual power when we see the issue of fellowship in such narrow and trivial terms. We tend to equate the Spirit's work with electric and highly personal moments of insight. Never dismiss the Spirit's work through the people of your church.

The Holy Spirit reminds us of Jesus' words when we are troubled. He can do so in private moments, but more often, He does so through a brother. The Spirit enlightens us so that we can understand God's Word. He can do that in a private devotional setting, but more often, He does through a solid teacher. In fact, when a believer embraces a fondness for subjective moments of enlightenment over the teaching ministry of a sound church, that is when he is most prone to error. The Spirit brings us under conviction when we sin. He can do that privately, but it is likely that He does so more quickly, steering us away from greater heartache, when He does so through fellow-Christians who love us.

Don't always hunger for the sensational experience with the Holy Spirit. That may only be masking the fact that you want to be an unaccountable isolationist. The fellowship of the Holy Spirit is not just you and Him. It is you, Him and every Christian that He has ever filled. Be open and submissive to the work of the Holy Spirit through brothers, sisters, leaders and fellow servants in the church.

## **B. The Holy Spirit Renovates the Human Heart to Become a Suitable Home for Jesus**

"Dwell" in verse 17, is a compound word meaning "to dwell down" emphasizing permanence. It is the ministry of the Holy Spirit to indwell a believer and to transform the heart of that believer in such a way that the heart becomes a suitable abode for Jesus. Christ wants our hearts as a home, not as a bed for the night. Were early Christians that much like us? Were they only responsive to occasional influences from Jesus when their lives had hit rock bottom because they had ignored Him? We fall, and Jesus picks us up. It happens again and again. But Christ's desire is that we will walk with Him so that we will learn to fall down less and learn to cease forging chains for ourselves.

## **II. That We May Be Enraptured by the Love of Christ (17b-19a)**

### **A. We Begin Our New Lives in Christ's Love verse 17b**

... And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love ...

God's love is the only reason any of us are Christians. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son ..." Paul uses two metaphors, one from agriculture and one from construction. We are rooted in God's love as a tree is rooted in the earth. God's love is the starting point of our relationship with Him as well as the nurturing soil that causes that relationship to prosper and bear fruit. We are established on God's love as a building is established on its foundation. God's love is what supports us. God's love is what holds us up through the storms and trials of life.

It was time for the Ephesians to move on in their service to God. Perhaps, it is times for you to make a little progress as well. Belonging to a heavenly family means you have a stake in the family business. Is its time to get down to kingdom business? Is its time to venture by faith beyond the comfortable for the sake of Christ? The adventure won't seem so daring if you can remember that you are "rooted and established" already in God's love. Paul wrote these words from prison. He knew the cost of loyalty to Christ. His circumstances authenticated his faith in the power of relying on God's love.

### **B. We Grow In Christ's Love verse 18**

... <sup>18</sup>may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ ...

I have heard many nice thoughts on Paul's reference to God's love as "wide and long and high and deep" - the width of humanity, the length of dying, the height of heaven, the depth of sin. Jerome saw the sign of the cross in this description of Christ's love. I don't know that Paul had anything in mind other than wanting to describe Christ's love as limitless. The more we yield to Christ, the more we discover the reality of His love. His love touches us deeply in our own personal lives. But again, Ephesians is about the church and our shared riches. The love of Christ is something to be revered "together with all the saints" for it is in fellowship that love is made known in truly practical ways.

### **C. Love Teaches Us to Know the Unknowable verse 19**

... <sup>19</sup>and to know this love that surpasses knowledge ...

"Knowledge" is *gnosis*, which refers to any body of knowledge that is taken in through our study and our seeking. The notion of Christ's love can be grasped on an intellectual level. When we study themes like the atoning death of Christ that satisfies the Father's sense of justice against our sin, we can put two and two together and conclude, "How great is the love of this Jesus for those in whose place He died!" But the love of Christ eventually becomes more than just a doctrinal proposition.

You have heard students of foreign languages observe that years of study never helped them to master the tongue like a few months abroad, where the language is spoken. So it is with Christ's love. We can study it, but it is only as we experience it that we begin to truly understand it. As we begin to taste victory in areas that were typically marked by defeat, as we sense peace filling our lives on occasions that once produced terror, as we abide in Jesus and He proves His faithfulness - only then do we grasp His love on a level that transcends the coldly intellectual.

### **III. That We May Be Expanded by the Fullness of God (19b)**

... that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

This is an amazing request. We are to become like God! Jesus once said, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). He means as much like God as a creature can be. We can never be like God in His deity, but we must be holy, as He is holy if we hope to be with Him in eternity. That process will be complete only when Christ returns. The dead in Christ will be raised to new resurrection bodies. Those who are alive will be changed. But, the work has already begun, and it is not a private work just between "God and you", but with the Body as well. Paul sees a variety of God-gifted "equippers" in the Body leading God's people to maturity.

... <sup>11</sup>It was he (Christ) who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, <sup>12</sup>to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up <sup>13</sup>until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. – Ephesians 4:11-13

## **Conclusion (20, 21)**

<sup>20</sup>Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, <sup>21</sup>to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

This is among the most oft-quoted words in the New Testament, but in context, they draw to a conclusion a prayer for the maturing of believers for the work of the church, which is the work of reconciling the world to God. This is not a text to be claimed for the selfish ambitions of individuals or for every hair-brained, neat thing a church might wish to try in God's Name without really consulting Him. It is a powerful encouragement for that church, which is tuned in to its divine mission.

The greatest calling in the world is the work of reconciling the world to God – to proclaim the Gospel but also to mold the souls of men into conformity to God. Sometimes, it does seem overwhelming. The world is steeped in sin and hatred. Know that it is God's power that changes the world, not ours. Christ is the Vine. We are the branches. Ours is not the burden for winning the world to Christ, but our aim can be nothing less, for we were not called to this task because God could not find a way to accomplish it without us. The Father called us into His work to demonstrate that we are His own. The family business is not our burden. It is our blessing. Its accomplishment is not dependent on our meager resources. We have been invited to draw from the family fortune, God's glorious riches.

© 2004, by R. Karl Crouch, 2183 Veumont Drive, Lancaster, PA 17601