The Magnitude of Love in Ephesians 3

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Introduction

It doesn't take long as you begin to read the letter of the Apostle Paul to the Ephesians, to see that there is a central theme of love that is interwoven throughout the book. The love of God in Christ is on full display in the first half and the church is called to exhibit that love towards one another in the second half. However, if you want to find out just how great the love of Christ is, you need not look any further than Ephesians 3:17-19. But as clear as love is to be a theme and emphasis of these verses, there are still a list of questions that the Greek text proposes that concern themselves with love. One of these questions is: Is the love Paul has in view in the phrase, "being rooted and grounded in love", the love of Christ or the love of the saints towards one another? Another question that arises is: What is the subject of the dimensions, "breadth, and length, and height, and depth", in verse 18? Is it the love of Christ? Or is it something else? In the first part of this essay I will be dealing with these questions in particular and attempting to use context to determine the most likely answer. In the second part of the essay however, I want to circle back around to highlight the priority of love in Paul's letter to the Ephesians and look at how these verses in particular prove to more clearly expand the love of Christ and also make the love of Christ the starting point for Christian ethics and behavior. I will be looking to the theme of love running from Ephesians 1 to chapter 6 and showing how our passage in consideration serves as a lynchpin in which the first half of the book builds toward and the back half of the book builds from.

Being Rooted and Grounded in Which "Love"?

Before we can answer the question at hand we must address some of the preliminary ambiguities in this passage. There are two minor technical questions which arise from this passage.

The first is whether or not ἐν ἀγάπη belongs with previous clause or the following clause. The clause leading up to this prepositional phrase is κατοικήσαι τὸν Χριστὸν διὰ τής πίστεως ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν. The clause following the prepositional phrase is ἐρριζωμένοι καὶ τεθεμελιωμένοι. Let us first translate it both ways to begin to see if there is already a clear answer contextually. If attached to the preceding clause, it would read "Christ dwelling through faith in your hearts in love, being rooted and grounded." If attached to the succeeding clause it would read, "Christ dwelling through faith in your hearts, being rooted and grounded in love." Already, it seems that the latter reading is more favorable than the former. The former would seem to leave the following participles without any kind of direction or conclusion. Lincoln says, "Most commentators have preferred [to include εν αγαπη in the succeeding clause] because the participles appear in need of qualification." For Paul to say, "being rooted and grounded" begs the question, "In what? Where?". It leaves an incomplete thought. The Expositor's Greek Testament expresses, "But the ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν seems a proper and adequate conclusion and completion of the idea of indwelling." Another reason to favor εν αγαπη belonging to the following phrase is because while the exact phrase διὰ τῆς πίστεως shows up quite often in Paul (7 times), the phrase διὰ τῆς πίστεως ἐν ἀγάπη never shows up anywhere else in Paul. It is normal for Paul to say "through faith" but to say "through faith in love" seems out of place in Paul's writings. Abbott shares this sentiment saying, "to say Christ dwells in the heart in love is a strange expression." It seems best to conclude that ἐν ἀγάπη should be connected to the idea of being rooted and grounded.

Lincoln, Word Biblical Commentary p. 196

² W. Robertson Nicoll, 314

³ Abbott, 98

The second minor question is whether the perfect, passive, participles ἐροιζωμένοι καὶ τεθεμελιωμένοι are acting independently or whether they are attached to a particular surrounding finite verb. The general rule in Wallace is that whenever we can attach a participle to a finite verb we should. Only when it is not possible contextually to do so should we begin to explain a participle as functioning independently. However, a quick scan of the text does not find an easily connecting verb before the "va" which follows. In fact, there are no masculine, plural, finite verbs after v.12 preceding these participles. There are a few options here however. First, and normally understood, these two participles are functioning independently with a result function. In other words, it is to be understood that "Christ dwelling in our hearts through faith" is to result in the saints "being rooted and grounded in love". Abbott says, "These words seem best taken as an irregular nominative, a construction of which there are frequent examples." Another way to interpret these participles is to jump over the $\ddot{\nu}\alpha$ clause (or bump the $\ddot{\nu}\alpha$ clause forward) and include these two participles as a part of that clause. This would be read, "in order that, being rooted and grounded in love, you might be able to..." Although this doesn't change the meaning of the text in any dramatic way, it is unlikely that this was Paul's intention. Ϊνα is a relatively strong break in clauses and normally does not include words preceding it within its contents. A third option, which is closely related to the previously stated option, is to make them causal participles. Wallace notes that "adverbial, perfect, participles almost always belong to this category" These participles normally precede the verb they modify which could give cause to jump the ϊνα and attach them to ἐξισχύσητε. This verb does match in gender and number with the participles which would give some supporting evidence for this translation. The way it would

Wallace, p 650

⁵ Abbott, p. 96

Wallace, 631

translated would be, "Because you have been rooted and grounded in love, you might be able to grasp..." This could make sense but one must ask the question why place the $iv\alpha$ followed by the subjunctive instead of leaving out the $iv\alpha$ and choosing the active? If this were causal, it would make more sense for it to read, "Because you have been rooted and grounded in love you *are* able to grasp..." Given that it is not likely for a participle to attach to a verb separated from it by a $iv\alpha$, it is best to conclude that these are acting independently and should be read according to our first option.

Now that we have covered some of the minor details surrounding our verse of discussion let us go into the more important question, "Whose love are the saints being rooted and grounded in?" Is it the believers' love? Is it the love of Christ? Or is it just the general Christian idea of love? All three of these have been taken by commentators so we must examine each one briefly. The case for the believers' love is twofold. First, there is mention both before and after our verse clearly talking about the believers' love. Back in Eph 1:15 Paul highlights that he is thankful for the Ephesians on account of their "τὴν ἀγάπην τὴν εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἀγίους". And then immediately following our verse in view in Eph 4:2 Paul exhorts the believers to "ἀνεχόμενοι ἀλλήλων ἐν ἀγάπη." So, we see both before and after our verse there is reference to believers' love for one another. Hodge takes this view and says, "The love in which we are to be rooted is not the love of God or of Christ toward us, but either brotherly love or love as a Christian grace without determining its object." Second, commentators in favor of this position argue that is the love of Christ were in view it would have been more clearly defined by a genitive. FB Meyer writes, "the

⁷ Hodge, 187.

absence of a genitival definition is decisive". But does the simple lack of the genitive really mean that this couldn't possibly be talking about the love of Christ? Let's consider the second option. In favor of this being Christ's love is Pauline thought, primarily coming from Romans 8, and the immediate context. Paul's point in Romans 8 is that we are made secure to withstand anything because of the love of God in Christ Jesus. There is no doubt in this passage that Paul has the love of God in Christ in view because in v. 35 he says, "τῆς ἀγάπης τοῦ Χριστοῦ" using the defining genitive and then in v. 39, "τῆς ἀγάπης τοῦ θεοῦ τῆς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ τῷ κυρίῳ ἡμῶν" making it even more specific. Borrowing this thought and bringing it into our current context, Paul is discussing being "rooted and grounded in love". Both of these seem to be getting at a similar point and it is not too big of a leap to connect these two thoughts together seeing as how the ideas of rootedness and groundedness both seem to cause us to think about being securely fastened or firmed up. Secondly, although the defining genitive is not mentioned in v. 17, it is mentioned in v. 19 immediately following. Paul's prayer for the Ephesians in v. 19 is for them "γνῶναί... ἀγάπην τοῦ Χριστοῦ". It could be that these two verses are talking about the same love but that Paul doesn't feel it's necessary to define it the first time since it will become more than obvious in the second use. It could even be that Paul leaves this undefined in v. 17 on purpose, in order to cause the reader to ask the question we are dealing with now in order to create anticipation and suspense leading up to v. 19. Lastly, on this point, it would seem theologically that this reading would be most sound. As one commentator states, "In Ephesians, stress has been placed on salvation's having its origin in God's great love (cf. 2:4, 5:2, 5:25)." To this point it would seem fit to say that only those rooted and grounded in the love of Christ would be able to have Christ dwelling in

⁸ Meyer, 182

⁹ Lincoln, 207

their hearts. And only those rooted and grounded *in* the love of Christ would be able to understand and comprehend the surpassing greatness *of* the love of Christ.

While both of these options have fair points to consider, still other scholars and commentators do not want to choose either of these but rather take a third approach in favor that this does not specifically have believers' love or Christ's love in view but rather love in general. For the sake of brevity, so that we might move into our second highly debated phrase, we will not venture into an exhaustive exegetical argument for this point but rather hear from one commentator concerning this and then make a few comments. Lincoln says after viewing both of our first two points, "It may well be a mistake, however, to draw such a sharp distinction between these two aspects of love. Love is the fundamental principle of the new age, of Christian existence in general and not just of Christian character...love is to be seen as God's love embodied in Christ and mediated by the Spirit, but also as the power that moves believers to love others with no expectation of reward." This is a beautiful conclusion that actually fits our context neatly. As v. 14-21 serve as a transition point of Paul's letter between the *content* of our faith to the *practice* of our faith this general idea of love in the middle makes clear sense. Paul may have left this love undefined purposefully as to have a broader category in mind that includes both believers' love and the love of Christ because in actuality, it is impossible to separate these two in the life of the believer. Regardless of our decision regarding which love Paul has in mind, when considering the letter of Ephesians in its entirety, Christ's love in us and our love for one another are inextricably linked together.

What is the Breadth, Length, Height, Depth of...

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¹⁰ Lincoln, 207

Without a doubt, one of the biggest debates throughout the history of the church regarding this passage is the object of the four dimensions Paul lists in v. 18. There are a large number of speculations concerning this section but before we get into them, let us observe the reason for the debate in the first place. Paul states that his prayer for the Ephesians is for them to be able to comprehend with all the saints, "τί τὸ πλάτος καὶ μῆκος καὶ ὕψος καὶ βάθος". We have this clause beginning with the interrogative pronoun τi and then followed by 4 nouns. Despite this being an interrogative pronoun, Paul is not hear randomly inserting a question. Even if he were, it would only make more sense for him to clearly have identified the object of these four dimensions because when translated it would leave us with, "What is the breadth, and length, and height, and depth?" This would only further cause confusion so it is right to translate this not as a question but a statement. The heart of the confusion lies in the fact that we have four neuter, singular nouns here but there is no clear genitive or anything of the like surrounding it that would tell us what these dimensions are referring to. Throughout history many have attempted to get into the writer's mind in order to understand this. Many views have been taken in an allegorical sense when discussing what might be the object Paul has in view. Origen and others thought that these dimensions were referring to the cross of Christ. This doesn't seem to hold much weight as there is only one other place in all of the letter of Ephesians in which the word for cross, σταυρός, is mentioned. It takes place in Ephesians 2:16 but here it is not used symbolically in any ay but is clear meant to be take very literally as Paul is making his point about God reconciling both Jews and Gentiles through what took place on the literal cross of Christ's death. For Paul to be alluding back to this would be a stretch to say the least. Estius takes the view saying that the divinity of Christ is the height, the humanity of Christ is the depth, and the Apostolic commission is the

breadth and length." Augustine takes the view that the breadth is love, the height is hope, the length is patience, and the depth is humility." Although these would sound good in a sermon and would be serve to be powerfully poetic, they are exegetically unwarranted speculations. There is nothing in the immediate context here that would warrant such a broad leap towards thinking that this is what Paul had in mind. These allegorical or symbolic readings are fanciful and creative, but they are unlikely to come from Paul. As Calvin comments, readings like this are "very ingenious and entertaining...but what have they to do with Paul's meaning?" ¹³

One view of the object of these dimensions is that of the wisdom of God. Some commentators have looked to Job to find the only other place in scripture where all four of these dimensions are mentioned near one another. In Job 11, these are mentioned but they are not mentioned in the same construction. Also, those of this position claim the connection to immediate

¹¹ Abbott, 100

¹² Calvin, 263

¹³ Calvin, 263

¹⁴ Lincoln, 209

context of v. 10 which Paul says that he preaches in order that $\dot{\eta}$ πολυποίκιλος σοφία τοῦ θεοῦ might be made known. The use of πολυποίκιλος an adjective meaning many-sided or manifold could be a reference to the "multi-dimensional" wisdom of God. They also claim that would fit Paul's doxology in Romans 11:33-36 in which he cries out, $\dot{\Omega}$ βάθος πλούτου καὶ σοφίας καὶ γνώσεως θεοῦ. We find similarities between this and our context both in the use of βάθος and in the mentioning of πλούτου which is used in v. 16, just before our verse in question. This very well could be what Paul has in mind. If it is indeed what Paul has in mind however does that actually exclude us from concluding that he has the love of Christ in mind? As one commentator mentions, "the wisdom of God comes to focus in his uniting love in Christ." Even if it is the wisdom of God that is the object here, 1 Cor 1:23 says that "Christ crucified is the wisdom of God." And Christ crucified is no doubt the climax and the greatest expression of God's love. We do not have to separate these two ideas because it would seem that in the gospel we find both the wisdom and love of God extraordinarily on display.

The conclusion that most commentators come to is that the object that is in view here is in fact the love of Christ. Calvin states definitively, "by these dimensions Paul means nothing else than the love of Christ." Salmond agrees saying, "The terms length, breadth, depth, and height are introduced with no other purpose than the simple and consistent one of setting forth the surpassing magnitude of Christ's love for us. The power to comprehend that love in its utmost conceivable grandeur." Abbott after observing all other options concludes, "However, we need not travel beyond the immediate context to find a suitable object; it is given to us in ἀγάπην τοῦ

¹⁵ Turner, 1236.

¹⁶ Calvin, 264

¹⁷ Nicoll, 315

Χοιστοῦ." Hodge and others note that it seems clear that the object is what follows and not anything that precedes. He says, "It is more natural to look for [the object] in the following clause, where one is found which makes further search unnecessary. It is the love of Christ." This may be one reason why the τέ is used and not καὶ between the mention of the four dimensions and the love of Christ; in order to show an internal connection of the two ideas. Many object to this conclusion by stating that if Paul were wanting to connect it to the love of Christ then he would have made it more clear through the use of the genitive. But as one commentator states, "Paul may simply have missed out 'of the love of Christ' in v 18 because it would become explicit through the elaboration provided by v 19a."20 It seems clear to that as you logically move through Paul's argument in this section, the surpassing-knowledge love of Christ becomes the central thing in which Paul desires his readers to know. Paul may have left it vague intentionally because he thought that his following verse would make it abundantly clear to his readers what he had in mind as the object of these dimensions.

There is really no way grammatically or theologically to precisely nail down what Paul has in view here. And even though we have covered a wide variety of suggestions, there are many more that were not mentioned such as the temple, or the body of Christ. But as we conclude this technical consideration, Darrell Bock offers incredible wisdom and insight in dealing with this text. After considering the wisdom of God or the love of Christ as answers to the object in view, Bock says, "However, it may be that making this choice gets too specific. One could rightfully suspect that the writer has written exactly what he intended here. It is the vastness of God's programme in all of its depth—the boundless vastness of salvation, pictured in many dimensions, and the things

¹⁸ Abbott, 100

¹⁹ Hodge, 189

²⁰ Turner, 1236

tied to it—that is being praised here." Although one might say this is a cop-out of sorts, this could well be what Paul intentioned. Paul could have left it mysteriously vague in order to simply point out that God in all ways is incomprehensible.

Love at the Core and as the Crescendo of Ephesians

As I have revealed, I believe there is great cause to consider Christ's love as being in the focus of Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:17-19. However, it is not as though this comes into the book of Ephesians for the first time in this chapter nor is it the last time it occurs. The entire book of Ephesians has a thread of love running throughout it. In fact, the root $\alpha\gamma\alpha\pi$ is used 5 times before our passage, twice inside the contents of the passage, and 15 times after the passage. I want to briefly look at some of the usage leading up to our passage, talk about the importance of love in 3:17-19, examine why it appears so much after chapter 3, and close with some brief application.

The first time that love is mentioned in the book of Ephesians is in 1:4. ἐν ἀγάπη προορίσας ἡμᾶς εἰς νἱοθεσίαν διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς αὐτόν. Although there may be some debate as to what clause ἐν ἀγάπη belongs to, it doesn't have any major theological implications. Whether God "chose us before the foundation of the world ἐν ἀγάπη" (KJV, CSB) or whether "ἐν ἀγάπη He predestined us to adoption" (NASB, ESV) it is still making a point that the motivating factor in God initiating towards us is love. In other words, when answering the question, "Why did God predestine us to adoption?" Paul's answer is love! Without doing in depth exegesis on this passage, if we include ἐν ἀγάπη on the front of this clause, it would help Paul show the priority of love in the action of God by its positioning. After a short greeting and doxology, Paul immediately brings the love of God into focus in this letter.

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²¹ Bock, 110

The second time we see the ἀγάπ root is in 2:4. "But God being rich in mercy, because of τὴν πολλὴν ἀγάπην αὐτοῦ ἢν ἡγάπησεν ἡμᾶς." This time we have love attributed to God but not by itself. This time God's love takes the adjective τὴν πολλὴν which means "great". So now Paul has begun to expand the reader's idea of God's love. And if that wasn't emphatic enough, Paul adds in a clause using a relative pronoun ἢν ἡγάπησεν ἡμᾶς. ἡγάπησεν is αγαπη in verbal form, having the same αγαπ root but because it is in the aorist, the α has been lengthen to an η . making love not just something that God has, but something that God does. This phrase translated says, "because of His great love with which He loved us." It is completely unnecessary for Paul to add in this relative clause because it is clear from the context that God has love for us. But adding this in seems to suggest that Paul does not want us to miss the foundation and motivation for what God is about to do in the next verse. In what follows, God is said to have made us alive together with Christ. He does this because of $(\delta i\alpha + accusative)$ His great love. Again, we see just as we did in chapter 1 that love is the foundation and motivation for God's action.

Now we arrive at the third use of αγαπ in Ephesians which is in 3:17. This, as we have already covered, is when Paul says ἐν ἀγάπη ἐροιζωμένοι καὶ τεθεμελιωμένοι. Paul is praying that we would be rooted and grounded in love. It is not surprising from what we have examined, that Paul would pray this for us, seeing as how God roots and grounds His actions towards us in His love. But as we approach the next couple verses, we reach the crescendo of Paul's expansive category of the love of God. In chapter one it was just love. In chapter two it was His "great love". But by chapter three v. 18, Paul prays that we would be able to comprehend the breadth, and length, and height, and depth (taking the view that these dimensions have the love of God as their object) of this love. What kind of love? τὴν

ύπεοβάλλουσαν της γνώσεως ἀγάπην τοῦ Χριστοῦ. This phrase literally describes this love as the "surpassing-of-knowledge" love of Christ. Paul's description of God's love continues to expand as not just being great, but so great that it is not possible to know it in its fullness! WBC says, "It is simply that the supreme object of Christian knowledge, Christ's love, is so profound that its depths will never be sounded and so vast that its extent will never be encompassed by the human mind"²² Hendricksen says so beautifully that I must quote him at length, "Just as Abraham was told to look toward heaven and number the stars, so that he might see that numbering them was impossible; and just as we today are being urged by means of a hymn to count our many blessings, and to name them one by one, so that their uncountable multitude may increase our gratitude and astonishment, so also the apostle prays that the addressed may concentrate so intensely and exhaustively on the immensity and glory of Christ's love that they will come to understand that this love ever surpasses knowledge."23 Paul has so expanded God's love by this point in the letter that it is impossible to be contained! But where can you go from here? How can this love get any greater? Because it cannot be expounded upon any further, Paul seems to quickly move into showing us the application of grasping, with God's help, this incomprehensible love.

There are two ways of looking at the rest of the book in relation to the fundamental idea of love. First, that it is only through knowing the vast and deep love of Christ that a person can live out the expectation of the Christian life. Second, that in the same way that love was the motivation and foundation of God's action toward us, our actions and attitude toward one another must be motivated and grounded in love. The first point comes naturally as one logically

²² WBC, 213

²³ Hendriksen, 173

reads through Ephesians. Why else would Paul pray unpack God's love for us, and then pray that the Ephesians would know the love of Christ, if it was unimportant to the imperatives which followed? As Marius Victorinus said, "The one who knows the love that passes all understanding will better express the full measure of love for Christ. Paul prays that they may first know the love of Christ rather than do some-thing. Doing comes from this knowing." If Christians want to love their brothers and sisters better, if we want to serve like Christ, live sacrificially like Christ, and do as Christ did, then we must center our lives around plumbing the depths of the love of Christ!

Secondly, Paul uses the same prepositional phrase ἐν ἀγάπη (which was used in Eph 1:4, 3:17) three more times in the next two chapters. He calls the Ephesians in 4:15 to speak the truth ἐν ἀγάπη. In 4:16 Paul states that the way the body of Christ is to build itself up is ἐν ἀγάπη. And then in 5:1-2 Paul calls them to imitate God as beloved children by walking ἐν ἀγάπη. The point here is so clear. We are not simply to imitate what God does, but we are to imitate why God does what He does! This is absolutely beautiful and yet at the same time much harder than simply "acting like Jesus" (as if that wasn't hard enough). Paul seems to be calling us just like Jesus to consider the attitude of our hearts toward our brothers and sisters. And as Paul goes on to demonstrate, love is the foundation for every human relationship. It is not surprising that in chapters 4-6 Paul would go on to mention love 15 times as he deals with the relationships between slaves and masters, husbands and wives, children and parents, etc. All of these relationships must find their foundation and motivation ἐν ἀγάπη! Love is at the core of Paul's letter to the Ephesians because love is at the core of the Christian life. And just to wrap up his letter with a bow of love, Paul closes Ephesians with this. "Grace be with all who love our Lord

²⁴ Oden, 155

Jesus Christ with love incorruptible." May we always look to the unfathomable love of God so that our love for Him and for others might be incorruptible and never ending!

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