

REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
ATLANTA

FILLED WITH ALL THE FULLNESS OF GOD  
A STUDY OF EPHESIANS 3:14 – 4:16

SUBMITTED TO: THOMAS CHALMERS EXEGETICAL SCHOLARSHIP

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*5/3/2022*

## **Introduction**

Ephesians 3:14-21 is an extraordinary passage, possibly concluding Paul's prayer begun in Ephesians 1:17-23. In these verses, Paul asks that God would give the church at Ephesus the power to deeply and wholeheartedly know the incredible love of Christ. He concludes his prayer with a peculiar request, asking that the church at Ephesus would "be filled with all the fullness of God." This essay will explore Paul's desire in Ephesians 3:19 for the church to "be filled with all the fullness of God."

While at first glance Paul's request for God's fullness seems unclear, I will seek to bring definition to his words through a study of Ephesians 3:14 – 4:16. Paul makes sure to offer clear vision and instruction for what fullness looks like within a church. I will argue that Jesus himself is the fullness of God, and therefore, the person of Jesus Christ must be alive and active in his body at Ephesus. I will show why no singular believer should expect to be filled with all the fullness of God. Instead, the Holy Spirit fills God's church with all the fullness of God. I will present the centrality of the Spirit, the necessity of unity and the importance of healthy church leadership as a body of believers grows to maturity and fullness. After our analysis of Ephesians 3:14 – 4:16 is complete, I will conclude with a few practical implications for churches today.

## **Overview of Ephesians 3:14 – 4:16**

Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus is broken into two primary sections – the doctrinal and the practical. The doctrinal portion of Ephesians, spanning from chapters 1-3, unpacks the spiritual blessings that believers enjoy 'in Christ Jesus' while including two extended prayers for the church at Ephesus. The practical portion of Ephesians, spanning from chapters 4-6, exhorts believers with how they are to live in light of these spiritual realities.

The passage we are studying throughout this essay falls directly in the center of this letter. Ephesians 3:14 – 4:16 marks the shift from the doctrinal section (chapters 1-3) into the practical section (chapters 4-6). Within this amazing portion of Ephesians we see how the theology should be lived out in the life of the local church. As J.I. Packer says in the Preface to his work, *Concise Theology*, "Theology is for doxology and devotion—that is, the

praise of God and the practice of godliness.”<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, Paul’s theological portion of Ephesians finishes with a doxology in Ephesians 3:20-21 then moves directly into the practice of godliness in Ephesians 4:1-16.

### **Fullness in Ephesians and Colossians**

Πλήρωμα, pleroma, meaning fullness, is used 17 times in the New Testament. The word ‘pleroma’ ranges in meaning from completion to fulfillment to fullness. For this essay we will primarily focus on Paul’s use of ‘pleroma’ in Ephesians, as well as its two appearances in Colossians.

Ephesians 1:9b-10 – “Which he set forth in Christ, *as a plan for the fullness (Πλήρωμα) of time*, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.”

Ephesians 1:22-23 – “And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, *the fullness (Πλήρωμα) of him who fills all in all.*”

Ephesians 3:19 – “And to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be *filled with all the fullness (Πλήρωμα) of God.*”

Ephesians 4:13 – “Until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the *stature of the fullness (Πλήρωμα) of Christ.*”

Colossians 1:19 – “For in him all the *fullness (Πλήρωμα) of God was pleased to dwell...*”

Colossians 2:9-10 – “For in him the *whole fullness (Πλήρωμα) of deity dwells bodily*, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.”

Within these six passages we find a few different meanings. Firstly, in Ephesians 1:9b-10, Paul uses ‘pleroma’ in reference to the “fullness of time”, or the correct and proper time. This is the only time in Ephesians or Colossians that Paul uses ‘pleroma’ in this way and we will not be exploring this verse any further. Next, Paul uses ‘pleroma’ in 1:23, 3:19 and 4:13 to refer to the “fullness of God” or the “fullness of Christ.” These passages all carry a similar meaning, which we will explore throughout the essay. Finally, Colossians 1:19 and

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<sup>1</sup> J.I. Packer. *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs*. Preface.

2:9 use 'pleroma' in reference to Jesus being the dwelling place for the "fullness of God" or the "fullness of deity." We will also touch on these references.

It is worth noting that theologians, both heretics and orthodox Christians, have spilled much ink in their attempts to make sense of this phrase. In fact, St. Irenaeus as early 180 AD addressed Gnostic uses of the word "pleroma" in his writings. Chapter 5 of his work *Against Heresies* is titled "Formation of the Demiurge; description of him. He is the creator of everything outside of the Pleroma."<sup>2</sup> Understandably so, the phrase "fullness of God" has been used as a central concept in Christian and non-Christian mysticism. Therefore, it is vital that we look at Scripture in order to ground our study in truth.

### **Overview of Ephesians 3:14-21 – The Inner Work of the Spirit Precedes Fullness**

God is the source of all life. This is clear through the whole of Scripture. Genesis 2:7 says, "Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature." Later, Elihu correctly reminds Job in Job 33:4, "The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life." John teaches us in John 1:2-4 that Jesus "was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men." While in Athens, Paul declared in Acts 17:28, "in him we live and move and have our being." This is Paul's understanding of where all life, physical and spiritual, comes from. Throughout the book of Ephesians, Paul consistently reminds the church where all blessing and all life come from. Most notably, in Ephesians 2:4-5, he says, "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ." His consistent reminders of God's life-giving power are appropriate given the makeup of first-century Ephesus. In AD 62, the city of Ephesus was known for its fascination with magic and occult practices. Paul knew that the Ephesians needed to be reminded of God's majesty "in order to remain resolute in their allegiance to Christ as the supreme power in the world and in their lives."<sup>3</sup> It should be no surprise, then, that this eight-verse prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21 is packed with language celebrating God's

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<sup>2</sup> Irenaeus. *Against Heresies*. Chapter 5.

<sup>3</sup> Crossway Bibles. *ESV: Study Bible*. 2258

glorious, life-giving power. God's riches, God's glory, God's strength, God's power, God's ability, and God's abundance are on full display.

"For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father..." Paul bows his knees before the Father on behalf of the church at Ephesus because the Father alone can give the inner strength this church needs to grow. If these believers are going to be strengthened with power, it is going to happen through the Spirit of God working in the inner being. He knows of the secret, inner work of the Spirit that precedes and sustains the health of any church. His desire is that Christ may dwell in their hearts through faith (3:17). His prayer is that they may be rooted and grounded in love (3:17). His longing is that this church may be given the "strength to comprehend" more of the dimensions of love of Christ (3:18). The Greek work for "comprehend" is καταλαμβάνω, which means "to lay hold of, to seize upon, to take possession of." In other words, Paul is asking for the Spirit of God to give these believers the strength to seize and take possession of the breadth, length, height and depth of Christ's love – that they would know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge (3:19).

As I read this passage, I can feel Paul's prayer building and building upon itself. John Stott refers to this prayer as a "staircase by which he climbs higher and higher in his aspiration for his readers."<sup>4</sup> Father, make them strong. Father, dwell within them. Father, give them deep roots and firm foundations. Father, give them the ability to comprehend your love. Father, fill them with all the fullness of God. Finally, he finishes his prayer with beautiful, climactic doxology, "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen."

Before we attempt to define Paul's request for the church to be filled with God's fullness, we must first acknowledge the necessity of God's Spirit in enabling spiritual life. There is an inner work of rooting and grounding that must take place. The roots must grow deep; the foundation must be laid. John Stott comments on the rooting and grounding work of the Spirit, "Love is to be the soil in which their life is to be rooted; love is to be the

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<sup>4</sup> Stott, John R W. *The Message of Ephesians : God's New Society*. 134.

foundation on which their life is built.”<sup>5</sup> As the roots grow deeper and the foundation solidifies, a church can begin to be filled with all the fullness of God.

### **The Fullness of God as Displayed in the Life of a Church**

At first glance, Paul’s request for the Ephesian church to be “filled with all the fullness of God” is easy to move past, possibly in response to its shapeless and undefined nature. This portion of the essay will attempt to bring clarity to this request.

What would it look like for this prayer to be answered? Within Ephesians 3:14 – 4:16, Paul gives a clear picture of what it means for God to fill a church with himself. I will briefly list the attributes Paul desires to characterize the church at Ephesus within this section. He desires for the church to be strong (3:16), faithful (3:17), loving (3:17), knowledgeable (3:19), humble (4:2), gentle (4:2), patient (4:2), unified (4:3), bonded in peace (4:3), equipped (4:12), and mature (4:13) as it speaks the truth in love (4:15) and makes the body grow (4:16). The church is growing up into “mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” Notice how Paul uses the same word “fullness” in Ephesians 4:13 to describe a mature church displaying the attributes listed above. This should bring more clarity to his request in Ephesians 3:19 for God to fill the church with “all the fullness of God.” We need not form mystical guesses as to what Paul means when he prays this, because he tells us.

This gives us some insight as to what Paul has in mind when he prays for fullness. These characteristics should call to mind another passage in which Paul lists these same attributes. In Galatians chapter 5 Paul lists the fruits of the Spirit, “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control”, as fruits which grow in a church that keeps in step with the Spirit. Notice the overlap between Ephesians 3:14 – 4:16 and Galatians 5. In both cases, Paul lists love, peace, patience, faithfulness, and gentleness as Christ-like attributes that will be displayed as a church is empowered by the Holy Spirit.

In Colossians 3:12-15, Paul shares a similar list. “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness and patience... And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let

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<sup>5</sup> Stott, John R W. *The Message of Ephesians : God’s New Society*. 136.

the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which you were indeed called in one body.” Kindness, humility, patience, love, peace – these are the things the believers at Colossae are called to ‘put on’. Then in Romans 12:9-21, Paul lists genuine love, steadfastness in what is good, joy, hope, patience in tribulation, generosity, living peaceably with all, and more. In comparing these passages we gain more clarity as to what the fullness of God looks like within the Ephesian church.

Therefore, perhaps a tangible way for us to think about “the fullness of God” as displayed in the church is the communicable attributes of God. The communicable attributes of God are, as Wayne Grudem defines in his *Systematic Theology*, “those attributes God shares or ‘communicates’ with us.”<sup>6</sup> Louis Berkhof refers to them as, “The attributes of which we find some resemblance in man. It should be borne in mind, however, that what we see in man is only a finite (limited) and imperfect likeness of that which is infinite (unlimited) and perfect in God.”<sup>7</sup> Richard Pratt lists the incommunicable attributes of God as his holiness, wisdom, truthfulness, love, goodness, faithfulness, mercy, kindness, patience, justice, righteousness, wrath, jealousy and grace.<sup>8</sup> While a corporate body of believers will never express the incommunicable attributes of God, such as his independence, immutability, infinity and simplicity, a corporate body should express the communicable attributes of God to the surrounding world.

Ultimately, we know that Christ is the expression of the communicable attributes of God in human form. He is the fullness of God. A key text that supports our interpretation of Ephesians 3:19 is Colossians 2:9-10, which says, “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him...” Jesus is the fullness of deity in bodily form. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ now fills his church with the communicable attributes that he himself displayed on earth. The “you” in Colossians 2:10 is ‘eimi’, which is second person plural. This would suggest that Paul has the church at Colossae in mind when he writes the incredible claim “you have been filled in him.” We will explore the importance of realizing the corporate nature of this filling later in the essay.

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<sup>6</sup> Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology*.

<sup>7</sup> Berkhof, Louis. *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*. 18.

<sup>8</sup> Pratt, Richard. “*Communicable & Incommunicable Attributes of God | Monergism*.”

Markus Barth, in his *Introduction, Translation and Commentary on Chapters 1-3*, says in reference to 'pleroma', "Ephesians and Colossians speak of a fullness of God, of Christ, or of the church, which seems to have but one NT parallel, John 1:16: 'From his fullness we have taken grace upon grace.'" <sup>9</sup> Barth continues, "Indeed, the inhabitation of the *plērōma* in Christ means no less than God's presence and operation in Christ; the dwelling of Christ in the saints (or of the Spirit in the house of God that is now the congregation) is to be identified with Christ's full and real presence in his body, the church. In turn, through the church God reveals his presence to the world..." <sup>10</sup> Our churches, then, must study Christ and follow Christ. Our hope is that it would no longer be us who live, but Christ who lives in us (Gal. 2:20). This spiritual reality is often referred to as our "union with Christ". Believers have died to their old selves and are now alive in Christ. We are in Christ, and Christ is in us. Grant Macaskill writes, "What Jesus takes to the cross is who we are, our very selves with their guilt, and what we enjoy in union with him is precisely who he is, his fullness with all its glory. The activity of the Spirit in sanctification, then, is intended not to bring about a better version of our selves but to realize in us the personal moral identity of Jesus Christ." <sup>11</sup> The Spirit is forming the moral personal identity of Jesus within us; our job is to yield to his inner work. We are individually being renewed into the image of Christ, into the incommunicable attributes of God. This is made clear in Westminster Shorter Catechism Q&A 35 – Q. *What is sanctification?*

A. Sanctification is the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness. <sup>12</sup>

Through God's sanctifying work we are, in one sense, filled with God's fullness. God desires for every individual believer to abide in him and display the fruits of the Spirit. The communicable attributes of God are growing in each individual believer. In fact, 2 Peter 1:8-10 tells us, "If these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ... for if you practice these

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<sup>9</sup> Barth, Markus. *Ephesians : Introduction, Translation, and Commentary on Chapters 1-3*. 200.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 205.

<sup>11</sup> Macaskill, Grant. *Living in Union with Christ: Paul's Gospel and Christian Moral Identity*. 39.

<sup>12</sup> Westminster Shorter Catechism. Q. 35



qualities you will never fall.” We must all pursue all these qualities. We should all seek to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Our personal growth confirms our calling and election.

However, as we will explore later, I do not believe an individual “being filled with the Spirit” is what Paul is referring to in Ephesians. Each instance of the word ‘pleroma’ in Ephesians, 1:23, 3:19 and 4:13, is found in the context of a corporate body of believers. While there is a clear connection between individual filling and corporate fullness, there is also a clear difference.

### **Overview Ephesians 4:1-16 – The Unification & Equipping of the Body**

We have now recognized two things about Paul’s understanding of the fullness of God in the church at Ephesus. Firstly, the inner work of the Spirit always precedes and empowers fullness. Secondly, the fullness of God is characterized by the communicable attributes of God displayed in and through the church. From here, we will take a deeper look at Ephesians 4:1-16 in order to discover how this happens in the church.

RC Sproul writes, “This passage (Ephesians 4:11-16) speaks boldly to the twentieth century Church. Somehow, somewhere, an idea has emerged and became very popular to the Christian community; so popular in fact, that it has now become almost an iron-clad tradition. It is that the ministry of the Church is to be done by the paid, professional, theologically-trained clergy. According to this view, the whole purpose of the laity is to receive the benefits of ministry... But the reason why certain gifts are given for leadership is to equip the believers for ministry. The Church is to be a mobilized army.”<sup>13</sup>

“The Church is to be a mobilized army.” A mobilized army works in unison. Effective soldiers are properly equipped for the battle that stands before them. What if the church functioned as a unified and equipped army? I believe this is a helpful analogy for what Paul has in mind in Ephesians 4:1-16. Following his prayer in Ephesians 3:14-21, Paul reveals his “urge statement”, which communicates to his readers his purpose for writing the letter. Ephesians 4:1-3 reads, “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit

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<sup>13</sup> Sproul, RC. *Focus on the Bible: Ephesians*. 105.

in the bond of peace.” We see here Paul’s exhortation for the church to move toward one another in unity. This movement toward one another is to be marked by the virtues of humility, gentleness, patience and love. And as Thomas Aquinas points out, “these four virtues must be cultivated, and their four opposite vices shunned.”<sup>14</sup> Aquinas lists the four vices for this church to shun as pride, anger, impatience and inordinate zeal. Paul, by calling the Ephesian church to pursue humility, gentleness, patience and bearing with one another in love, is in turn calling them to resist certain temptations of the flesh, which easily entangle and corrupt the life of the church. This is an important note as we seek to understand Paul’s prayer for “fullness” within the church at Ephesus. Fullness is not only about the virtues that grow, but also the vices that are cleansed from the body. In Galatians 5 and Colossians 3, the passages referenced in the previous section, Paul lists not only the “fruits of the Spirit” but also the “works of the flesh.” If God’s fullness is going to permeate a body of believers, it will involve putting to death the deeds of the body. After all, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:6-7, “Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump.”

In Ephesians 4:4-6 Paul, then, powerfully reminds Christians that “there is one body and one Spirit”, we are called to “one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” As vices are cleansed from the body and virtues are established, unity can be rightly pursued. This unity was especially important for the 1<sup>st</sup> century church to pursue because the division between Jews and Gentiles was engrained into society. Back in Ephesians 2, Paul taught that in his flesh Christ “has broken down the dividing wall of hostility...” Christ is creating in himself “one new man in place of the two” in order that ethnic hostility and division may be killed as Jews and Gentiles are reconciled to God.

However, unity does not mean uniformity. In Ephesians 4:7-16, following his call to unity within the church, Paul lays out a clear vision for diversity within the body and how the body of Christ is designed to grow up into maturity. After Christ ascended into heaven, he gave gifts by the Holy Spirit to Christians in order that the body of Christ may be built up. With this perspective the church should not only appreciate the gifts of all Christians,

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<sup>14</sup> Aquinas, Thomas. *Commentary on Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians*. 151.

but also encourage these gifts to be used regularly in the activity of the church. Therefore, Paul shifts to a focus on early church leaders (apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teacher). According to Paul in Ephesians 4:11, the role of church leaders is “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up of the body of Christ.” David Guzik comments, “The purpose of these gifts of leadership is also clear. It is that saints (God’s people) might be equipped for the work of ministry (service), so that the body of Christ would be built up (expanded and strengthened).”<sup>15</sup>

As saints are equipped for the work of ministry, the body is made able to build itself up toward maturity. “Knowledge of the Son of God” increases. Maturity develops. Believers speak the truth in love to one another. Each part is working properly. Ultimately, the church grows toward “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (v. 13). Here is where we find the connection between Ephesians 3:14-21 and Ephesians 4:1-16 - the word “pleroma” is used again. Sandwiched between these two uses of “pleroma” is picture of how a church grows to maturity in Christ.

This brings us back to the connection between an individual believer being filled with the Holy Spirit and a church being filled with all the fullness of God. Individual filling leads to corporate fullness. Each part must be working properly for the body to grow to maturity. According to the passage at large, the Ephesian church will be filled with all the fullness of God when God’s Spirit chooses to grant individual believers the spiritual strength in their inner being to comprehend the love of Christ, then these believers must use this strength to move toward one another in unity and utilize the gifts God has given them.

### **The Role of Church Leaders in the Fullness of God**

The key verses regarding church leadership in this section are Ephesians 4:11-13, “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” This is a vital passage as we seek to

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<sup>15</sup> Guzik, David. “Ephesians Chapter 4.” *Enduring Word*.

understand how the church is built up to maturity. Paul makes it clear that the role of church leaders in this process is “to equip the saints for the work of ministry.”

John Stott says, “The word ministry (diakonia) is here used not to describe the work of pastors but rather the work of the so-called laity, that is, of all God’s people without exception... The New Testament concept of the pastor is not of a person who jealously squashes all lay initiatives, but of one who helps and encourages all God’s people to discover, develop and exercise their gifts. His teaching and training are directed to this end, to enable the people of God to be a servant people... Thus, instead of monopolizing all ministry himself, he actually multiplies ministries.”<sup>16</sup>

If a church is going to be filled with all the fullness of God, it requires that church leaders view themselves as disciple-makers. Every member of our churches is filled with the Holy Spirit of God and, therefore, has something to contribute to the upbuilding of the church. According to these verses, our church leaders must embrace the responsibility of helping members discover and use their spiritual gifts. This seems to be something that 21<sup>st</sup> century Western churches have missed. This passage in Ephesians 4 carries a timely word for Western church leaders to consider. For Paul, church is more than an event to attend and consume, instead it is a living organism in which every believer contributes. This is why he consistently comes back to the metaphor of the church as the body of Christ.

Stott continues, “What model of the church, then, should we keep in our minds? The traditional model is that of the pyramid, with the pastor perched precariously on its pinnacle... Not much better is the model of the bus, in which the pastor does all the driving while the congregation are the passengers slumbering in peaceful security behind him. Quite different from either the pyramid or the bus is the biblical model of the body. The church is the body of Christ, every member of which has a distinctive function.”<sup>17</sup>

### **The Metaphor of the Body in Relation to Fullness**

A central reality for Paul is the church as the “body of Christ”. This concept is found throughout Paul’s writings, beginning with his own account of his conversion story in Acts 9, 22 and 26. While these accounts differ in some ways, one of the consistent details is

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<sup>16</sup> Stott, John R W. *The Message of Ephesians: God’s New Society*. 167.

<sup>17</sup> Stott, John R W. *The Message of Ephesians: God’s New Society*. 167.

Jesus' question, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Jesus' question lies at the heart of this essay. In reference to final judgment, Jesus alludes to this spiritual reality again in Matthew 25. "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me . . ." (24:35–36). And they ask when this happened, since Jesus wasn't there; he was in heaven. And he answers, "Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (v. 40). John Piper says, "The brethren of Jesus are the church. If you persecute the church, you persecute Jesus, and if you show love and affection to the church, you show love and affection to Jesus. The church is his body; it is the physical form of his presence on earth. Touch the church and you touch the body of Christ, which means you touch Christ."<sup>18</sup>

In his book, *Paul's Metaphors*, Williams says, "'Body' is perhaps best understood as characterizing the church. We are of the nature of 'body'; we are 'body' in relation to Christ; we lend to Christ a corporeal presence... We are the body that gives Christ a face to the world; his voice, as it were, his hands and his feet."<sup>19</sup> This is a helpful image as we consider how the fullness of God fills a body of believers. A physical body that is filled out, healthy and mature is full of body parts working together. This full physical body grows as it is nourished; it contributes to the flourishing of its community. In the same way, a spiritual body that is filled out, healthy and mature is full of body parts working together. It grows as it is nourished; it contributes to the flourishing of its community. This imagery clearly affects Paul's understanding of the "fullness of God". It seems, for Paul, since the fullness of God was pleased to dwell in Jesus Christ, then God also desires for his fullness to dwell in the Christ's body, his church.

As John Calvin says, "Not only does [Christ] cleave to us by an indivisible bond of fellowship, but with a wonderful communion, day by day, he grows more and more into one body with us, until he becomes completely one with us."<sup>20</sup> Christ's identifying with us goes beyond just two parties having fellowship, he prays in John 17:23, "I in them and you

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<sup>18</sup> Piper, John. *His Body: The Fullness of Him Who Fills All in All.*

<sup>19</sup> Williams, Paul. *Paul's Metaphors: Their Context and Character.* 90.

<sup>20</sup> Calvin, John. *Institutes.* 3.2.24

in me, that they may become perfectly one.” The desire of Jesus’ heart is that we would be in him, and that he would be in us, so that the world may believe that the Father sent him.

### **Corporate Fullness, not Individual Fullness**

One singular person cannot experience Paul’s understanding of “fullness”, instead, it is something that a church body experiences as it grows up into maturity. When Paul calls church leaders to equip the saints for the work of ministry, his desire is for the church to be built up toward “mature manhood”. This phrase, “mature manhood” can also be translated “to a perfect man” (NKJV), “to a mature man” (NASB) or “unto a full-grown man” (ASV). Each of these translations highlight the fact that the Greek phrase ‘eis anēr teleios’ refers to a singular body, not a generalized idea of maturity. Who is the perfect man, the mature man, the full-grown man? It is Christ himself. In other words, when the church at Ephesus functions as it should, Christ himself is alive in that city. The whole body, when joined and help together, when each part is working properly, displays the character of Christ to the surrounding world.

Notice how the singularity of Ephesians 4:13 contrasts with the plurality in Ephesians 4:14. If a church ‘full of Christ’ functions as one grown-up man, then a church lacking in Christ functions as a group of ‘children’. His audience would clearly know the difference between a group of children when compared to one full-grown man. These children are many, they are young, and they are ignorant. The group is characterized by instability, emotionally charged responses, the “new thing”, division and, ultimately, immaturity. On the other hand, a church filled with the fullness of Christ is unified; they are one. This church is mature, full of knowledge, rooted and grounded in the love of Christ. When we think of maturity, in this instance, we must think corporately, not individually. Daniel Grainger, an MDiv student at Watsburg Theological Seminary sums it up poetically this way, “This blessing, in its fullness is not for you alone... Called to dwell in the assembly of the living and the dead, bound to the holy rhythms of confession, we become more than what we were, what we are, what we could be.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Grainger, Daniel. *Too Brittle to Break: Theological Imaginings on the Body of Christ*. 57.

The supernatural, unifying power of the Holy Spirit enables the church to become more than just the sum of its parts. A new organism, the church, is formed and filled. This is extremely important. Maturity cannot be achieved apart from other believers. Every believer is given the Holy Spirit and is meant to grow up into a certain 'body part' within a local body of believers. We must seek to discover our spiritual gifting then seek to utilize these gifts for the upbuilding of the church. As more and more members of the body are live this way, the fullness of God will slowly and truly be realized within a church. Spurgeon comments on Ephesians 4, "Then, whatever spiritual gifts we have, they are not our own to use as we please; they are only entrusted to us that we may employ them to help our fellow-Christians. Beloved brethren and sisters, we are one with Christ, and we are one with each other; and, therefore, we must not look every man upon his own things, but also upon the things of others; and it should be a question of the first importance to every Christian, "How can I best utilize myself for the benefit of the rest of the members of the Church?" Do not ask, "How can I benefit myself?" but let your enquiry be, "How can I be most profitable to my fellow-Christians?"<sup>22</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I wish to provide a brief summary as well as practical application for using what has been said in this essay. Firstly, Paul's request for God's fullness is not an open-ended request that can mean whatever we want it to mean. He gives definition to his own words throughout Ephesians 3:14 - 4:16. He makes sure to give clear vision and instruction for what fullness should look like within a church. A church filled with all the fullness of God is strong (3:16), faithful (3:17), loving (3:17), knowledgeable (3:19), humble (4:2), gentle (4:2), patient (4:2), unified (4:3), bonded in peace (4:3), equipped (4:12), and mature (4:13). Secondly, Paul exhorts the church at Ephesus, and consequently all churches, to pursue unity within the body of Christ. If unity is going to be won, then every member of the body must be honored and appreciated. According to Paul, unity does not come at the expense of truth. Instead, as believers are rooted and grounded in truth, they will desire to move toward one another in love. Thirdly, each member of the body of Christ

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<sup>22</sup> Spurgeon, Charles. "Ephesians 4 Commentary." *Truth According to Scripture*.

must be spiritually equipped by church leaders in order for the body to grow to maturity. If this type of equipping is going to take place, church leaders must shift their vision away from simply writing sermons toward making disciples. If our leaders view themselves as disciple-makers, they will help their members discover and use the gifts God has given them to use. Our churches must be equipping the saints for the work of ministry, not simply offering content to consume. Our churches must be structured in such a way that allows for each individual member of the body to grow up to maturity, so that the whole body can grow. As this work of unification and equipping happens, the church will be built up, each part working as it was designed to work. And, in turn, our churches will be filled with all the fullness of God.



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