

***ἐν ἀγάπῃ* as Foundation**
An analysis of Pauline ecclesiology
as a contribution to the ecumenical dialogue

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“We can no longer resign ourselves to the historical situations of separation... We must at least suffer at the sight of the lacerations that have taken place in the mystical and visible body of Christ—the one and only Church.”

– Pope Paul VI

Introduction

Ephesians 3:14-21 is an extraordinary passage, possibly expressing the conclusion of Paul's prayer begun in Ephesians 1:17-23, that each Christian might be given the power to deeply and wholeheartedly know the incredible love of God. In unpacking this, Paul deals with many important topics. This essay will address one important aspect of the passage, which is the supernatural love that is the cause – or the *foundation*, as I will argue – for the effective Christian life the Lord wants us to live. As we see elsewhere in Scriptures, the very essence of God is love, so one cannot claim to know God if he doesn't love, because "God is Love" (1 John 4:8). This is a theme very dear to the Apostle Paul, just as it was the center of the message of Jesus Christ. Indeed, Jesus himself said that there is no greater commandment such as love God above everything and our neighbors as we love ourselves (Mark 12:31). Love is such a central theme in Christ's preaching that it sounded radical to his listeners, for Jesus commands us to love even our enemies, and to pray for those who persecute us (Mt 5:44, Luke 6: 27-36).

This essence of God, love, is found in a Trinitarian existence. God is love in his very being. The Holy Scriptures present us with this relationship in different ways, mainly what we know as Inner-Trinitarian conversation texts. In other words, our knowledge of God comes from his special revelation. If we have any knowledge of his being, it is because he wanted to manifest it to us, and this knowledge also includes the persons of the Trinity. As the Reformed theologian Scott Swain well noted, "if we are to know the persons of the Trinity, the persons themselves must reveal themselves to us"¹. Take for instance Matthew 11:27, "No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." According to Swain, the notion here of "father," "son," and "spirit" are unique terms, never applied to would-be gods or creatures. It is that the persons of the Trinity belong to the "inside" of the one God's life². Swain's explanation helps us understand that God is self-sufficient in himself, lacking nothing and needing nothing. Still, he created all things and makes us participate in that relationship of love, from his very existence to ours. Such is His love!

It's not hard to believe that Paul has that passage from Matthew 11 in mind when he writes to the Corinthians: "For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him?" – Perhaps not the passage itself, as many scholars date the Pauline letters as predating the gospel writings. Still, we know that the content of the preaching (and the Spirit of it...) remains the same from beginning to end, so it's not hard to believe that its content was, if not the same, pretty similar to the *kerygma* of Paul's time. Again, Dr. Swain is helpful here, "Paul's analogy helps us appreciate one of the important differences between God's revelation through his works and God's self-revelation through his word"³. The analogy here is that, through natural revelation, we have access to the knowledge of the mighty, wonderful God, Creator of all things. But God's special revelation gives us access to relational knowledge, to God's being and attributes. Obviously not inexhaustibly, as finite creatures can't have knowledge of the infinite or limited creatures to have knowledge of the unlimited, but it is precisely this fact that makes the analogy even more powerful: the Almighty God, the Creator of all things, Triune God, decided in his sovereignty to create us and to have a relationship to us, because his very essence is love.

¹ Scott R. Swain, *The Trinity: An Introduction* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 38.

² Ibid

³ Ibid, 39

But if we truly believe this, and if our very existence and the course of our history are the fruit of God's love and sovereignty, wouldn't that also include the Church – the reunion, assembly, and unity of all these beloved ones? In Jesus' famous high priestly prayer in John 17, Jesus cries out for his disciples to be united as he is united with the Father. As the Reformed theologian Peter Leithart well noted of this passage: “Jesus is in the Father, and the Father in Jesus. Each finds a home in the other. Each dwells in the other in love. Jesus prayed that the church would exhibit this kind of unity: Each disciple should hospitably receive every other disciple, as the Father receives the Son. Each church should dwell in every other church, as the Son dwells in the Father.”⁴ Indeed, this is God's will for his children: that we may live in love (*ἐν ἀγάπῃ*), and that this love reflects the very being of God. But it hasn't been like that. Again, Leithart is helpful here:

This is what Jesus wants for his church. It is not what the church is. The church is divided. It is not that the church has remained united while groups falsely calling themselves churches have split off. It is not that we are spiritually united while empirically divided. The church is a unique society, the body of Christ and the temple of the Spirit. But it is a visible society, the body of Christ and the temple of the Spirit. But it is a visible society that exists among other societies. The visible society is divided, and that means the church is divided.⁵

This is the reality laid out right in front of us, and it's a topic that has haunted me in particular for a long time and one of the main reasons I decided to embark on the seminary journey. This work is a piece of the big puzzle that I intend to put together throughout my career as a theologian: how to contribute to a more united church, which lives the will of our Lord Jesus Christ, also what the Apostle Paul prayed for in Ephesians 3:14-21.

Context and Background

To begin our analysis we need to take into account the context and background of Paul and his letters. As pointed out by the New Testament scholar Morina Hooker, “two figures dominate the pages of the New Testament. The first is Jesus, the second, Paul.”⁶ Although, from his writings, one might say that he would not agree with this comparison, since he considered himself a “slave of Christ.” But the fact is that Paul is the central figure in the New Testament between the middle of Acts and the end of Philemon. And as the reformed theologian Herman Ridderbos rightly pointed out, it is not surprising that with respect to so profound and complicated a phenomenon as the manner in which the Apostle Paul has given form and expression to the gospel of Jesus Christ, a great variety of conceptions is to be traced in the history of Pauline investigation⁷. This vast history of interpretation does not interest us here, for the sake of time and space, but its Background interests us because one thing stands out when we look at his figure: Paul understood what it is to be loved by the Father. Paul, more than anyone, knew what it was to be zealous for religion, for a code of conduct, morals and principles. He was a great persecutor of those he thought were in disagreement with such standards. In other words, if we are looking for a good definition of what it means to be a

⁴ Peter J. Leithart, *The End of Protestantism: pursuing unity in a fragmented church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2016), 1.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Morina D. Hooker, *Paul: a short introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003), 1.

⁷ Herman N. Ridderbos, *Paul: an outline of his theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), 13.

sectarian, this is undoubtedly Saul of Tarsus. But that same Saul, when he had his eyes opened, did not find the punishment he thought his guilt deserved, but grace and love. It was this love that motivated him to live fully as an apostle of the one who sent him.

In Samuel Sandmel's words, Paul was a religious genius⁸. His legacy as a servant of the most high God is enormous. What he tells us about himself is not much. But, precisely with the traits of character that his work projects, in every way confirmed, in fact, by the book of Acts of the Apostles, the image that we glean from it is enough for us to discern something more. Yes, Paul was a religious genius, but not only that. He was above all a man called, used and inspired by God. The genuine character of his integrity characterizes the entire work he produced, because he was a true follower and imitator of Christ. Acts is also the great source of information about Paul's life and work, in addition to his letters. The apostle says that he was born into a family of Jews faithful to the principles of their religion and that he himself was a Pharisee of honorable lineage, circumcised on the eighth day, of the lineage of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church, concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless (Ph 3:5,6; Rm 11:1; 2Co 11:22). Since Benjamin was the youngest son of Jacob/Israel, Paul may be alluding to his Benjaminite origin in 1 Co 15:8, where he calls himself the last and smallest of the apostles and in some sense the product of an abnormal birth⁹.

Hellenized Jew as he was, Paul moved socially and culturally well in the environment of the gentile world, but he never renounced the values of his Jewish faith and to live intensely faithful to the sacred law of the Jews. This stance of life and faith is clearly visible in his use of Scripture and his extraordinary familiarity with its message. If he persecuted the church with the cruelty that he himself witnessed, it was because of the recognition he had among the people and the threat to which he felt his own religion was exposed. Without a doubt, his conversion to Christ and his word was a miracle. It would be very nice and delightful if we had more detailed accounts and descriptions of his experience of faith, but the elements we have are sufficient. On several occasions, through the mouth of the evangelist Luke, Paul testifies to the action of God in his life, not only at the precise moment of his conversion, but also at critical moments of the persecutions to which he was subjected throughout his life¹⁰. For some, Paul was considered "the prince of theologians", the first and greatest Christian theologian. By others, he was considered more a 'theologizer' than a theologian in his interaction with the churches and their specific needs. Still for others, he was considered "a serious religious thinker" without intending to systematize his theological convictions. But the fact is that, in the whole of his epistolary corpus, he gives expression to a coherent, theologically consistent and globally significant theology¹¹.

What led Paul to change his life so radically, going from being a persecutor of the church to being an apostle of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles? It was his acknowledgment that: (1) Jesus Christ was the Messiah; (2) a new page in the history of salvation opened with the coming of the Messiah, culminating in the fullness of his kingdom; (3) Christ was obedient to the Father in unsurpassed fidelity, which culminated in the cross. He fulfilled the law of God, and fulfilled it perfectly on our behalf: the holy for the unclean, the righteous for sinners. Therefore, in such a dramatic way, the course of Paul's life was his real and personal encounter with the Messiah,

⁸ Samuel Sandmel, *The Genius of Paul: a study in History* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 4.

⁹ Klaus Haacker, "Paul's Life" in *The Cambridge Companion to Paul*, ed. James D.G. Dunn (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 20.

¹⁰ Manuel Alexandre Júnior, *O Novo Testamento: uma introdução histórica, retórico-literária e teológica* (São Paulo, SP: Vida Nova, 2021), 335-338.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 343

who died and rose again to fulfill the mission that the Father had given him¹². Each of the Pauline letters includes concrete references to the principles and values that most surface in it, in terms of doctrine and life, in the respective context.

Considering Yung Kim's proposal for reading the Pauline letters¹³, we could assume that Paul's theology fits into a doctrinal *corpus* in three dimensions: centered on God's righteousness (*dikaiosune Theou*), on Christ's fidelity to the Father and on our faith in him (*pistis Christou*), and on the spiritual body of Christ (*soma Christou*). The part that interests us here will be the third, the spiritual body of Christ. Obviously, for Paul, the notion of the Body of Christ had many implications. It is even from him that the most famous text of the institution of the Eucharist comes (1 Co 11). The life we have in Christ is life in the body of Christ (σῶμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ); and as such, it is also lived in conformity with Christ, on the path of imitation of Christ, a life that honors God's holiness and unfolds in accordance with his justice. True spirituality in the life of the believer and the Christian community (which calls itself the church and is the true body of Christ) is shaped in what is good and acceptable to God and materializes in the fraternal love with which we must love one another. As we read in Romans 12:2, transformation and restoration is key: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." This is a very curious feature of Paul's most extensive letter, Romans: it is very famous for its high theological content, with passages that are often controversial and subject of quarrels. But many sometimes forget that the last part of it has an extremely pastoral and practical tone. We perceive in Romans that the entire doctrinal content of the letter is aimed at forming the minds of believers and making them develop the right attitude compatible with their new nature.

Paul's concern for the new life of believers is a theme that runs through all of his letters. This theme manifests itself for Paul in the unity of the church as a body. Just as John related the beautiful words of Christ: "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another", Jesus here sets love as the hallmark of his disciples. Likewise, Paul treats the feature of the new creation precisely through the lens of unity. His first letter to the Corinthians and the epistle to the Ephesians are great examples of this.

Starting with 1 Corinthians, we know that it was a large and very well located church in the ancient world. Paul writes with a very personal tone, as if it were a private conversation – with specific information such as travel plans (16:5–9), proper names of individuals (1:14, 16:10-17), and references to specific events (1:14-16, 2:1-4)¹⁴. One of Paul's main concerns in the letter is precisely the development of the Corinthian church and the factions that began to form in it, which is evidenced in chapter 3. Verses 1 and 2 makes a statement that must have astonished the listeners in Corinth: "But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready." Corinth was a famous church for exhibiting great spiritual vitality, lavishing gifts and valuing them highly. In their worship services spiritual gifts were a central part. Hearing the apostle Paul say that he could not address them as spiritual people must have been quite a blow. In the context of the whole letter, where Paul speaks of the revelation of the mystery of God in the person of Christ now delivered to the church, at verse 3 he makes an even heavier claim: "for you are still of the flesh". And he gives the reason: "For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh

¹² Ibid, 344

¹³ Yung Suk Kim, *A Theological Introduction to Paul's Letters: exploring a threefold theology of Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979).

¹⁴ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker exegetical commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 19.

and behaving only in a human way? For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not being merely human?” In fact, the reason why Paul says they are not spiritual but carnal is because there is jealousy and strife among them, and they are splitting into factions. As Gordon Fee explains, “picking up the theme of being ‘Spiritual’ from what has just preceded, Paul makes a frontal attack and pronounces the Corinthians as not being *pneumatikoi* (Spirit people) at all. Indeed, not only are they not living as people of the Spirit, they are just the opposite; they are ‘fleshly’.¹⁵” This conclusion should terrify us. No matter how spiritual we think we are, our divisions show the opposite. For Paul, that was clear.

Pauline Ecclesiology

Now that we have the problem in view – divisions in the Body of Christ, the Church – and a good background on Paul and his theology, we can now focus on what interests us, which is what the church is for Paul, in other words, the *Pauline Ecclesiology*. A good way to do this is to look at the letter that Paul wrote to the church that he apparently devoted a lot of energy and effort to: the church at Ephesus. If we look at the accounts that Luke gives us in the Acts of the Apostles, we know that Paul served in the church at Ephesus for three years (20:31), and that he devoted many hours of public teaching there (19:9-10). For this reason we can conclude two things, (1) Ephesus was a well-educated church, and because of that also well-organized and strong in the faith. (2) Paul had a special affection for that community, since he spent so much time there teaching and pastoring. According to Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest – if not the greatest – theologians of all time, in the prologue to his commentary on Ephesians, using his scholastic method to delineate the outline of the letter, he points out that, being Paul the efficient cause of the letter, and the Ephesians the material cause, the final cause of the letter is to “fortify, designated by **the have strengthened**.¹⁶” Concerning the material cause, he writes:

The Ephesians, to whom he wrote, are described in three ways: first, by their locality, ‘the Ephesians are Asians’, coming from Asia Minor; second, by their religion, ‘they have accepted the word’ of Christian ‘truth’; third is their constancy, ‘they have remained steadfast in the faith.’ The first has reference to their home country, the second to grace, and the third to perseverance¹⁷.

This exposition corroborates the two points I made above. Ephesians, although in academic textual criticism of the last century has been disputed regarding its authorship, is part of the classical canon and in eighteen hundred years of tradition has always been considered Pauline authorship. Combining this fact with Luke's accounts, I believe it is the perfect example for us to understand Paul's view of what church is. The first point that is interesting to note is, not only in Ephesians, but in the Pauline letters in general, even the so-called "pastorals", the high theological tenor of their content. No matter how practical a disputed issue is, Paul will always address the issue in a way that brings Christ and the gospel—and the ramifications of that doctrine. At this point, without a shadow of a doubt, we say that Paul is a theologian par excellence. In the specific case of Ephesians, says Reformed theologian Guy Waters that “Paul wrote the letter to the Ephesians as a summary of this three –year gospel instruction in Ephesus.

¹⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2014), 131.

¹⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians*, trans. Matthew L. Lamb, O.C.S.O (Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1966), 41.

¹⁷ Ibid

Out of pastoral concern for the Ephesian church, the apostle placed particular emphasis upon the subjugation “powers” to Christ and the nature, calling, and destiny of the church of Jesus Christ.¹⁸ He points out that Paul in Ephesians sets forth the Christian life in its personal, corporate, and cosmic dimension¹⁹. But of these three, the corporal dimension stands out precisely because of its pastoral tone. Indeed, Guy Waters says that in this letter specifically, Paul devotes good attention to the gospel of Christ as victory over powers which he subdued by his death and resurrection, but he explicitly places the church at the heart of the letter’s message²⁰.

This section of the *Corpus Paulinus* is known as the prison letters, precisely because they were the letters that were written while Paul was imprisoned in Rome. In this case, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon. Called "the queen of the Pauline epistles", the Letter to the Ephesians has as its central theme the doctrine of the church in its relationship with Jesus Christ. The church is to Christ what the body is to the head (1:22,23), and the wife to her husband (5:23-32)²¹. According to Saint John Chrysostom, the great 4th century Christian preacher and orator, the letter to the Ephesians is full of sublime thoughts and doctrines²². Without a doubt, it is a masterpiece of Christian doctrine and life. One of the most influential church documents of all time. In the letter as a whole, Paul speaks of the treasures of God's amazing grace to his people (1.7), the immeasurable riches of Christ (3.8), and the riches of his glory (3.16). He exhorts the Ephesian believers to continue their walk with God "until they 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" (4.13). This point is worth reflecting on. Just as we saw in the church at Corinth Paul treating them as carnal, ‘fleshly’ people, not spiritual, because of the divisions that were taking place among them, here in Ephesians he also exhorts them to unity, comparing spiritual maturity with how much they are united in faith and in knowledge. Looking from an eschatological angle, we can infer from Paul's speech that the future of the church would be marked precisely by unity, and this same unity would be the mark of its maturity and its reflection of the life of Christ.

The structure of the letter to the Ephesians is very similar to that of Romans. We can easily divide it into two symmetrical parts: the first, doctrinal, expounds the divine plan of redemption, underlining God's sovereign design in the establishment of the church. The second, above all ethical, analyzes the conduct of the believer and his current walk in faith, in contrast to his past life in the world. He also emphasizes that the energy that animates and drives the church is the Holy Spirit, presented here as: the seal of our redemption as children of adoption (1.13); the Spirit in whom we have access to the Father through Jesus Christ (2.18); the source of revealed truth (3.5); the secret of Christian power and unity (3.16; 4.3,4); the guide that inspires our thought and language (4.30); the source of our satisfaction (5.18). It is clear from Paul's theology the role he assigns to the Holy Spirit. It is in this sense that he tells the Corinthians that they are not spiritual. It's not because they didn't practice ascetic activities that didn't elevate them, but precisely because they didn't live in the spirit. The Holy Spirit is the *De Anima* of the church, and it is in this sense that it is said that the church is the Mystical Body of Christ. The Roman Catholic theologian, Joseph Bluet, help us to understand this definition:

¹⁸ Guy Prentiss Waters, “Ephesians” in *A Biblical-Theological Introduction to the New Testament: the gospel realized*, ed. Michael J. Kruger (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 271.

¹⁹ Ibid, 268

²⁰ Ibid, 269

²¹ Manuel Alexandre Júnior, *O Novo Testamento: uma introdução histórica, retórico-literária e teológica* (São Paulo, SP: Vida Nova, 2021), 425.

²² St. John Chrysostom, *Homiliae in epistulam ad Ephesios* (Patrologia Graeca, 62.10)

The visible Church of Christ, formed and united and vivified by the indwelling Holy Spirit, pulsing with a divine grace-life which flowed into it from Christ its Head, ever incorporating new members into itself through the instrumentality of Baptism, given by God to the world as the medium of universal salvation. This was the whole 'Christ', the 'fullness of Christ', the corporate and visible realization, even here on earth, of the fruits of our Savior's Passion²³.

This is the traditional concept when we call the church the Mystical Body of Christ, for it is literally a body possessing matter (its members, the believers), and yet it is Christ, for its driving force is precisely its Spirit. The term *Church*, as we use it today, comes from the Greek term *Ecclesia* (ἐκκλησία). In the New Testament this means the visible society of the baptized which our Savior founded and entrusted to the government of the Apostles²⁴. Bluett's article helps us to see that theologians have used this concept from three points of view. The first is the organizational concept, which concerns membership in the local church. He who is a member is part of the *Ecclesia*. The second is the spiritual concept, which considers the Mystical Body only from the standpoint of the divine grace-life which is its glorious vitality, will represent all who are in the state of grace as Christ's member – which includes here all kinds of believers. And there is the "redemptive" view, which represents the body of view of redemption, of all places and all times, what the Reformed tradition calls the "invisible church" with its elect. Those elected here form the *Ecclesia*. Bluett points out that Paul's own concept of the Body of Christ includes the positive elements of all three of these concepts²⁵.

In a closer look at Paul's theology, you will realize that the theme of Union with Christ is crucial to interpreting all the themes raised by him. His ecclesiology is no different. Theologian Michal Gorman has suggested that "the core of Paul's theology is a narrative soteriology of Spirit-enabled full identification with and participation in the God revealed in Christ crucified, such that the gospel of God reconciling the world in Christ becomes also the story of God's justified, holy, Spirit led people in the world."²⁶ Scholars and researchers are not unanimous regarding the meaning of the term "in Christ" (ἐν Χριστῷ) that Paul repeatedly uses, but advanced studies have thrown us a good light. Constantine R. Campbell is very helpful here:

Union gathers up faith union with Christ, mutual indwelling, Trinitarian, and nuptial notions. Participation conveys partaking in the events of Christ's narrative. Identification refers to believer's location in the realm of Christ and their allegiance to his lordship. Incorporation encapsulates the corporate dimensions of membership in Christ's body. Together these four functions as "umbrella" concepts, covering the full spectrum of Pauline language, ideas, and themes that are bound up in the metatheme of "union with Christ". Furthermore, all four terms entail ethical expectations, as Paul draws upon the implications of union, participation, identification, and incorporation to inform the Christian life²⁷.

The point is that ἐκκλησία for Paul is the community of those who have been united with Christ: it is impossible to speak of Paul's ecclesiology apart from Paul's concept of union with Christ, and vice versa.²⁸ This is a very important notion, because it illustrates a reality that

²³ Joseph Bluett, S.J., "The Pauline Concept of the Mystical Body" in *The American Ecclesiastical Review* (vol. 108, no. 1 Jan 1943, p. 49)

²⁴ Ibid, 50

²⁵ Ibid, 51

²⁶ Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 8.

²⁷ Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 413.

²⁸ David J. Downs, "Pauline Ecclesiology" in *Perspectives in Religious Studies* (vol. 41 no 3, Fall 2014)

is not merely institutional, where the church is like a kind of department, or country club, but it is a reality. There is an ontological character in the church for Paul that makes it inseparable from the new reality of the believer – that is, those who are born again. Richard Hays summarizes this way:

[For] Paul, being ‘in Christ’ was inextricably woven together with his experience of participation in a remarkable new boundary-blurring human community made up of Jews and Gentiles together, a community where Christ’s presence was understood to be palpably manifest through the sharing of bread and wine and through the outpouring of the Spirit in communal worship²⁹.

This is precisely why Paul can speak of the church as the “body” (σῶμα) of Christ. The doctrine of Union with Christ in Paul is so important that it is also one of the great points where there is divergence in the reading of his theology. In an attempt to try to narrow their theology down to a single term or notion, many will end up ignoring important concepts or oversimplifying them. A good example of this is the famous New Perspective in Paul, with its proponents with E.P. Sanders, James Dunn, N.T. Wright, and others. In the focus of developing the notion of “covenant nomism”, the notion of Union with Christ ends up being undermined. What is at stake here is precisely the nature of our religion. Christ is a fixture in a larger religious landscape, or is he in fact the very center of our religion? Even if the latter is affirmed, is he a center that still depends on other elements or he is the center where all other elements orbit around? In other words, is Jesus enough? The doctrine of Union with Christ is just where we put an end to this issue. The nature of our religion is not like God stretching out a ladder to heaven which we have to strive to climb, but is about God taking our nature, bearing our woes, and his spirit living in us, within us, and we in him. As Grant Macaskill asserts, “Paul represents the Great Exchange that lies at the heart of the gospel, whereby Jesus bears the affliction of our condition and we enjoy the glory of his, as involving at its most basic level an exchange not merely of *status* but of *identity*.³⁰” This point corroborates with Downs's assertion above, that in order to understand what Paul understood by church, one must also understand his concept of Union with Christ. We affirm then, along with the entire Christian tradition, that the church is an assembly, a body made up of people, those who have been baptized. But all these images are not just a status, but a new identity, a new creation. New Testament and hermeneutic scholar Anthony Thiselton will identify this problem not only in the conception of Union with Christ, but in two more specific obstacles in reading Paul. The first is in the reading that many do in relation to Jesus and Paul, as if they were two totally different things. As if Jesus had taught one thing, and Paul, based on Jesus, introduced new teachings³¹. This is a fundamental mistake, because Paul is an apostle of Jesus and a participant in his ministry, inspired by the same Spirit of Christ. There are two stages in the history of redemption. The stages are different, but the Spirit that guides them is the same. The second error is precisely a failure to identify these stages of redemptive history and the concepts of New Creation and Apocalyptic³². “Technically Paul is explaining the Christian life in terms of what is called ‘apocalyptic’. This is found in the Old Testament and in Jewish and Christian writings of Paul’s time. Old Testament, Jewish,

²⁹ Richard B. Hays, “What is ‘real participation in Christ?’: a dialogue with E.P. Sanders on Pauline soteriology” in *Redefining first-century Jewish and Christian identities*, ed. Fabian E. Udoh (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 336

³⁰ Grant Macaskill, *Living in Union With Christ: Paul’s gospel and Christian moral identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 39.

³¹ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Living Paul: an introduction to the apostle’s life and thought* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 11.

³² Ibid

and New Testament apocalyptic writings urged that the kingdom of God would not arrive by means of human effort alone. Only God could bring about a new order of being.³³

It is clear then that for Paul we are participants in the great plan of redemption, chosen from the foundation of the world, being conformed to the Creator and holder of all things. It is not a religion of bargaining or self-interest, but service to the sovereign God. This is why the notion of "in Christ" is so important, because this plan is divided into two perspectives: those who are being saved and those who are being condemned (1 Co 1:18). It is the divine decree taking shape in space and time. For Paul, those who are saved are precisely those who are united in Christ. And this is not some abstract concept, but an objective reality, consolidated in the rite of baptism and frequently celebrated in the Lord's Supper. It is also at table that we discern the Body of Christ, that is, those who belong to the church. The church is the future reality already in the present time. It is creation awaiting the consummation of redemption but already redeemed, living eternity in the now. This is why the apostle states that every time we eat the bread and drink the wine [in the Supper] we proclaim the Lord's death *until he comes* (1 Co 11:26).

This reality is again seen in the passage of Ephesians 3:14-21, specially at the verse 17, where Paul uses the prepositional phrase ἐν ἀγάπῃ (in love). This particular passage is heavily disputed because of its difficulty concerning the two participles that follow it: ἐρριζωμένοι (rooted), and τεθεμελιωμένοι (founded). At first glance, the immediate interpretation is that Paul's prayer is a cry for Christ to dwell in the believers through faith *in love*. But if this prepositional phrase is related to the sentence that precedes it, these two participles are rendered dangling in the air, and it is more fair to place them as part of the next phrase in verse 18. Some scholars have found a way to interpret this phrase by following Origen's intuition in commenting on Ephesians, that the participles in the nominative seems to be wrong. If an error is attributed to the passage, it is only necessary to imagine which one would be correct, and we have an acceptable interpretation.³⁴ New Testament scholar Frank Thielman offers an even better way out. Paul is aware of the present reality of believers in the new creation. The two participles are in the nominative precisely because they represent a role there, something present as leading, like "You are rooted and founded in love". But at the same time he prays to God that the Spirit will work in their hearts so that they will be strengthened and also become aware of this reality. That is why the prepositional phrase is linked to the participles, not to what precedes it. In Thielman words:

...that stamen cannot imply the absence of Christ from his readers' heart. Perhaps to make this explicit, he interjects here that they are already "rooted and founded in love". God has shown them his love through the death of Christ and through uniting them with his resurrection and exaltation... Paul prays, then, that God will work both through the presence of his powerful Spirit in the lives of his readers' faith to strengthen them so that they fully comprehend the meaning of the truth that Christ dwells within their hearts.³⁵

We notice that this sentence differs nothing from Paul's approach throughout his letters, for ἐν ἀγάπῃ here is not an introduction of a new term into his theology, but a variation of the same notion ἐν Χριστῷ. To be in Christ is to have the Spirit of Christ himself dwelling in us, which is synonymous with being "in love", for God is love, and anyone who does not love does not know God.

³³ Ibid, 12

³⁴ Frank Thielman, *Ephesians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. Baker Academic, 2010), 231.

³⁵ Ibid, 232

Conclusion

In conclusion I wish to provide practical applications for using what has been said in this essay to help myself and others correct misconceptions of God and his relationship with us to better appreciate the power of being continuously filled with his Spirit to be able to abidingly focus with the eyes of our heart at an identity level on the astoundingly immeasurable love of God for each of us.

Pauline ecclesiology is a Christological ecclesiology. That is, the Church is the union of those who are united with Christ. For Paul, the strongest mark of those who are united with Christ is love. It is a central theme in his letters. ἐν ἀγάπῃ (in love) and ἐν Χριστῷ (in Christ) go hand in hand. Paul echoes Christ when he says that his disciples will be known for their love (John 13:35). Paul says that of the gifts that make up the church, the most important is love. In fact, it is essential, for if on “speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, he is like a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” (1 Co 13:1). The conclusion we come to is that our Union with Christ is the foundation of our life, and that his Spirit is our life.

By understanding this passage of Ephesians 3 and applying it to our lives, we cannot look at the state of the church today and feel indifferent. A fragmented church, increasingly divided into different denominations. We call ourselves disciples of Christ but we don't love one another, we don't go one another mile with our brother. We've been on this path for centuries. Political, doctrinal, pastoral disputes, endless disputes are reasons for division. We are always excommunicating each other. We do not accept certain denominations, we consider certain baptisms to be invalid, or we would never have communion in certain churches. Obviously I am not advocating that there are no criteria. I am not advocating some kind of non-doctrine here. But looking at the church today, isn't it true that we have divisions even among churches that affirm historic creeds? Affirm the faith of the fathers? Believe in the Triune God and in the person and work of Christ, truly God and truly man? Now, isn't this confession already enough for us to recognize our brotherhood? In other words, doesn't this confession make us in Christ? If the answer is yes, we are doing a terrible job. It's time for we to start looking at our neighbor and recognizing him as our neighbor, because the foundation of our ecclesiology must be ἐν ἀγάπῃ.

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