

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY SCHOOL of DIVINITY

Exegesis Research Paper – Ephesians 4:7-16

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Research, Writing, and Ministry Preparation

by

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Introduction

The church is the most critical community relationship amongst believers. There are several observations of what is meant by the unity of the church. The Bible employs more than a few images to depict the church. Amongst the more critical of these images are the people of God, the body of Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit. Each picture provides the biblical portrait of the church.

In Western Culture, especially the United States, the church is one example of Christian doctrine on which almost everyone, whether believer or unbeliever, holds an opinion. In the same way as any institution of society, the church can be examined and studied by the methodology of social science. Utilizing this approach would confuse the real with the ideal, and as a result create a dilemma of defining the church by empirical means which should be avoided.

Closely related to this observation is the prevalence of biblical illiteracy and indigent hermeneutical methodologies that sabotage proper exegesis of biblical text within the church. As a result, the Christian must pursue the proper doctrinal application of Scripture by developing exegetical proficiency. By doing so, he may distinguish the true church and its attributes from an empirical anecdote.

This essay will minister a thorough exegesis of Ephesians 4:7-16, by advancing the fundamental importance of the preservation of the true church, its unity, unity in diversity, and the enhancement and necessity of unity, the diversity of spiritual gifts. The thesis will cover background and cultural context, literary genre and context of the passage, as well as meaning of the passage and bibliography of scholarly resources.

Background and Cultural Setting

Ephesus was a metropolis located on the western shores of Asia Minor, adjacent to the gateway of the Cayster River. The city was well-known for its plethora of temples (including the goddess Diana (Artemis, The Acts of the Apostles 19:27) and the Roman emperor), where pilgrims journeyed from all over the Mediterranean world to worship the pagan deities. From this influx of worshippers, false teachers arose within the Christian community of Ephesus and the Lycus valley region that began to merge the gospel with Greek ontology. Epaphras (Colossians 1:7) sought Paul's counsel on how to battle the amalgamation of worldviews by the heretics.¹

Literary Genre and Context

One of the intriguing aspects of the study of the Pauline Corpus is that each of the epistles would address and confront distinct circumstances. Paul usually personalized his letters to address specific issues of a local group of people that he knew personally.² But, as it turns out in Ephesians, he wrote to several churches in various locations, many of which he never knew. Contrasting with the other letters of the Pauline Corpus, the occasion for Ephesians is exceptionally challenging to conclude. "It is known that Paul was writing from prison to Gentile Christians (3:1)"³ around A.D. 57 to A.D. 62; about the same time, he wrote Colossians and Philemon.⁴ At hand are questions though. Where was the epistle sent and for what reason?

¹ Harold W Hoehner. Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009: 82-83

² Ibid., 67.

³ Bart D. Ehrman. The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020: 381.

⁴ Charles Swindoll. "Ephesians." 2020. Book of Ephesians Overview - Insight for Living Ministries. Accessed February 29. <https://www.insight.org/resources/bible/the-pauline-epistles/ephesians>.

Perhaps then, the original letter may not have been sent to one individual congregation but to several groups, case in point, throughout Asia Minor. The overarching indicative of the first half of Ephesians is to remind Gentile readers what God has done for them by retelling, “you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.”⁵ But now by the blood of Jesus Christ they have been brought near and now been made one (unified body, the church) with the Jews through the ministry of reconciliation. All are one with God through Jesus’ work of redemption (2:1-22). “More specifically, Jesus’ death has torn down the barrier that previously divided Jew and Gentile, that is, the Jewish Law so that both groups are now absolutely equal (2:11-18); Jews and Gentiles, both called of God, can live in harmony with one another without divisiveness of the Law. Moreover, Christ has unified both Jew and Gentile with God (2:18-22).”⁶

Meaning of the Passage

To fully comprehend Paul’s homiletical discourse past Ephesians 3, one would have to be reminded of the triumphs that God has afforded all Christians through the gifting of grace. “Grace,” the Greek noun *charis*, is used in a number of ways in the New Testament. The root idea is “that which delights” and is often used in the sense of “favor.” Here it means “making glad by gifts,” of showing free, unmerited favor, with an emphasis on freedom in giving.⁷ In the context of 4:7, *charis* indicates the “exceptional effect produced by generosity, favor.”⁸

⁵ Jesus Bible, ESV Edition, Grey. Place of publication not identified: ZONDERVAN, 2019.

⁶ Ehrman, ed., *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 382.

⁷ Hans Conzelmann, “*charis*,” *TDNT* 9:372-415, especially pp. 373 and 394.

⁸ *BDAG* 1079-1081.

If a summation were to be made of the arch indicatives of Ephesians chapters 1 through 3, it would be, “you were dead, but God (Ephesians 2:2-4)!” In support of this premise, Paul turns the reader’s focus from orthodoxy (calling) to orthopraxy (conduct). Thus, the divide of these two aims transcends from the doxology of Ephesians 3:20-21 to Ephesians 4:1 with the seeming shift being heralded by “therefore.” The doctrine emerges as Christ’s headship over His body (all Messianic believers), unity in His body, and the glory that the body gives to its Head.⁹

The second half of Ephesians consists of imperatives that encourage both Jew and Gentile Christians to live in ways that exhibit unity with God. The display of a unified body is to be evident in the church (differentiates the true church from empiricism), in the particularity of the Christian disciple from the rest of society, and in their social relationships with each other. Understanding this context affords the critical foundation for subsequent inquiry and will benefit the reader in comprehension and present-day application of Ephesians 4:7-16 in the course of a future examination.¹⁰

According to D.A. Carson, “Paul is so significant a figure in the New Testament and in the church’s history that he has been called the second founder of Christianity. This, of course, is not true, for it ignores the continuity between Jesus and Paul and diminishes unfairly the contributions of men such as Peter, John, and Luke. But there is no question that Paul played a vital role in the growth and establishment of the church and in the interpretation and application of God’s grace in Christ.”¹¹

⁹ Paul Pettit. *Foundations of Spiritual Formation: a Community Approach to Becoming like Christ*. Grand Rapids, MI.: Kregel Publications, a division of Kregel, Inc., 2008: 108-110

¹⁰ Abraham Kuruvilla, *Ephesians* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2015): 94

¹¹ D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992/2005): 354.

Paul's declaration in Ephesians 4:1-3, introduces the audience to a thematic overview of stanzas in favor of a unified church that is the result of God's grace, truth, and love. The outcome is the effectual call of the Holy Spirit that causes one to respond in faith to the gospel. It is justification. It is the acknowledgment that man's deeds can neither justify him nor make him righteous in the Father's sight. Without this basic concept, the balance of biblical truth and the ethics of God's word are inaccurate. R. C. Sproul said, "Paul urges us "to walk in a manner worthy" of our calling. "Walk" in Ephesians translates a form of the Greek word *peripateō* that suggests consistent, continual action. We must live in gratitude for our salvation always, and we can make no excuses when we fail to obey the Lord in love."¹²

"The love of God expresses itself in the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, in His sacrificial death, and His continued presence with the Christian community."¹³ The implication of God's love is emphasized by the outpouring of the Spirit upon those who are the church. Luke wrote in his gospel (1:4-5), And while staying with them he (Jesus) ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." The promise did not depend on the believer's sincerity of faith, pureness of faith, nor acquiring a better faith, but rather the object of faith, Jesus Christ. The result of the believer's faith is Christ alone, a distinctive of the true church and not an empirical anecdote.

The growth of the church is the result of the ministry of spiritual gifts. Paul's methodology accentuates seven unities; one body, one Spirit, one hope, One Lord, one faith, one baptism, and One God, the substratum of spiritual formation. The emphasis of "oneness" is the

¹² R.C. Sproul, "Privileges and Responsibility." Ligonier Ministries. Accessed February 13, 2020. <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/privileges-and-responsibility/>.

¹³ Hans Schwarz. *The God who Is: the Christian God in a Pluralistic World*. Eugene, Or.: Cascade Books, 2011, 254.

fulfillment of Isaiah's (56:1-8) prophecy in relation to a covenant community consisting of both Jews and Gentiles. It is the portrait of the church whose Lord is Jesus Christ.¹⁴

John MacArthur said, "but then there is the uncommon uniqueness of the body of Christ in that each one of us has been graced with a gift that is measured out to us by Christ--to each one of us, each one of us. There is no such thing as a believer who is not gifted for ministry in the body of Christ. This too is a grace. It is a grace; it is an undeserved favor; it is not something we earn. It comes according to the measure of Christ's gift. Measure is *dorea*; it's a word that emphasizes the word gift, I should say, is a word that emphasizes the freeness of it. *Dorea*; it's a free gift; you don't buy it; you don't purchase it; you don't earn it; you are given it, and it is measured out by the determining purpose of Christ. Okay? So, the source of your gift is Christ who has designed that gift, measured out that gift, and given you freely that gift by which you are to minister in the church. Every believer possesses such gifts."¹⁵

MacArthur's observation of "gifts" measured out within the body of Christ is in alignment with Paul's consideration of the diversity of gifts for ministry and worship within 1st Corinthians 12:1-14. The applied is the individual's enablement, and possession of gifts as the Spirit would endow, whereas, in Ephesians 4:11, the Spirit has bestowed upon the church, gifted men providentially or directly through the Spirit. "Some" (churches or places) need, for example, an evangelist, while others may need a pastor and teacher. The gift required for service to administer the word of God to the body of Christ is not left to human judgment or self-choosing, but the provision of gifted men is purposed 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

¹⁴ Pettit, ed., *Foundations of Spiritual Formation: a Community Approach to Becoming like Christ*, 77

¹⁵ John MacArthur. "Characteristics of a True Church, Part 4." *Grace to You*, May 26, 2013. <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/90-459/characteristics-of-a-true-church-part-4>.

the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (4:12-13).¹⁶

The preservation of the true church begins with unity. First, it is the foundation of spiritual formation. Peppered throughout Ephesians 4 are the Pauline triad of faith, hope, and love. The indication is the result of God and people united within the body of Christ. Moreover, each person is a reflection of Jesus Himself, resulting from the Spirit within. Pettit said “God is in the business of replicating His character in His children; each copy is a special edition. Formation cannot be pursued as a class. Formation takes place in the context of living, although it is important that the believer be intentional about it, which is where practices like the spiritual disciplines come in, helping us to gain our proper focus each day.”¹⁷ Lastly, the church is an eschatological community of fulfillment and of hope, built on the foundation of God’s love. The maturation of the believer is the focus of fellowship and mission, the practice of genuine community with its catalyst being the gospel. Scot McKnight said, “yes, the church’s story must be freshly checked against the gospel story of Jesus, but we have no right to ignore what God has been doing in the community of Jesus since the day he sent the Spirit to empower it.”¹⁸

The necessity of unity begins with the recognition of the role of the Holy Spirit as the agent of formation. He enables those within the body of Christ to witness effectively for God. In the Upper Room Discourse Jesus’ words of an expedient departure lead to His ascension and Him sending the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, as the enabler making the believer’s bearing of fruit possible while living the gospel. Paul notes that the believer’s maturity results in strength to

¹⁶ MacArthur, ed., “Characteristics of a True Church, Part 4.”

¹⁷ Pettit, ed., Foundations of Spiritual Formation: a Community Approach to Becoming like Christ, 105

¹⁸ Scot McKnight, Dallas Willard and N. T Wright, The King Jesus Gospel, 2011: 172

remain grounded in God's truth without wavering, while speaking it in love; we may grow up in Christ, who is our head.¹⁹

Abraham Kuruvilla said, "Paul's divinely empowered role in the administration of God's plan forms a paradigm for the ministry of all believers, as God is made known to the cosmos through the church."²⁰ Expounding upon Kuruvilla's observation, Paul's illustration depicts the believer's life as the consummation of all things in Christ, as opposed to his former life. His use of himself as a paradigm is the example of God's grace working through him to be the agent of enlightenment of God's mystery— the unification of all humanity in the body of Christ. The enhancement and necessity of unity amongst believers is the principle of edification with Jesus Christ as head of the body as the source of sustenance. Each member of the church has an integral relationship with one another; each utilizing the gifts that Christ has given him for the corporate growth of the body. "Believers, increasingly conformed to Christ in faith by the Spirit, and comprehending, in community, the immensity of Christ's love, glorify God who dwells in them (3:14-21, 4:15)."²¹

The distinction of the true church from that of empiricism is the existence of the Holy Spirit in the diversity of gifts shared amongst those who occupy the body. The means of transportation is the unifying message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Scot McKnight suggests that the gospel of the mid-twentieth century reduced the Reformation's soteriology. He continues, "This gospel is divorced from the entire history of the church and shoulders responsibility for diminishing the fullness of the Story of the Bible and the gospel that emerged into the Nicene Creed, not to ignore the Reformation's confessions. That Gospel is also divorced

¹⁹ Pettit, ed., *Foundations of Spiritual Formation: a Community Approach to Becoming like Christ*, 44-45

²⁰ Kuruvilla, ed., *Ephesians*, 97

²¹ *Ibid.*, 111

from moral transformation, which both undercuts everything preached from Wesley to Moody and Sunday— and at the same time gave Dallas Willard a massive audience to whom he made an appeal for the necessity of spiritual formation into Christlikeness.”²² McKnight’s observation aligns with Paul’s maturation and unification framework of Ephesians 4:1-5:20 by stressing the importance of attaining to “the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (4:13).”

From inception, one can determine that the true church is a unified church consisting of gifts (individual and the leaders (Christ Himself gave gifted people)) distributed as God would determine to equip His people, and unity around core Christian beliefs of the faith and knowledge of the Son of God. The spiritual formation of both leaders and individuals of the body of Christ involves change. Paul Petit said, “Leadership and spiritual formation have a symbiotic relationship. Both, by their very nature, require the production and experience of continuous change. From one perspective, spiritual formation involves individual change while leadership involves group or organizational change, which also requires individual change.”²³ Paul’s “until we all reach unity” (4:13) clause suggests that the Spirit’s process of maturing both leadership and individuals within the body of Christ is a distinctive of the true church. “The once-descended-in-incarnation, now-ascended-in-exaltation Christ gave His followers gifts (4:7-10).”²⁴ Ephesians cites Psalm 68:18 in 4:8 to support this point by offering a Christocentric interpretation of “He ascended” in Ephesians 4:9-10. This important fact expresses the purpose of these gifts is “to equip” Christ’s people for service. Furthermore, spiritual maturity leads to spiritual stability. Moving beyond infancy and its accompanying vulnerability to unsound

²² McKnight, Willard and Wright, ed., *The King Jesus Gospel*, 92-93

²³ Pettit, ed., *Foundations of Spiritual Formation: a Community Approach to Becoming like Christ*, 177

²⁴ Bruce W Longenecker and Todd D Still, ed., *Thinking Through Paul*, 253

teaching and deceitful scheming, mature believers grow collectively and individually in love into Christ, who is head, both as authority and source, of the body (4:14-16).²⁵

The exegesis of Ephesians 4:7-16, concludes that the fundamental importance of the preservation of the true church is dependent upon its unity, unity in diversity, and the enhancement and necessity of unity, the diversity of spiritual gifts. In proximity to this fact is the preservation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In order to obtain unity in the way of spiritual formation, one must possess a true apprehension of what the church is as opposed to an empirical narrative. “To grasp the gospel we have to grasp what God is doing in this world, and that means we’ve got a story to tell.”²⁶ Ephesians celebrates that through the gospel, Gentiles are heirs with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.²⁷ The use of hermeneutical methodologies finds that the true definition of the body of Christ is a unified community of servant leaders and people, called to a living and dynamic relationship with God, formed and empowered by His Spirit, and whose unity and diversity of gifts are focused on His fellowship and mission.²⁸

²⁵ Bruce W Longenecker and Todd D Still, *Thinking Through Paul*, 253

²⁶ McKnight, Willard and Wright, ed., *The King Jesus Gospel*, 164

²⁷ Bruce W Longenecker and Todd D Still, *Thinking Through Paul*, 245

²⁸ Pettit, ed., *Foundations of Spiritual Formation: a Community Approach to Becoming like Christ*, 104,

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