

Grasping the Love of Christ Ephesians 2.15-22; 3.14-19

Introduction

What is it that makes the church like Christ in practice? If we are the body of Christ, how shall we, together, be like him? In the last two weeks we looked at two important aspects of the body of Christ:

- as the body of Christ himself, an embodiment of Christ in his people, made up of different body parts which are us.
- as the new humanity. Ephesians 2.15 tells us that Christ created in himself one new man, one new humanity, uniting in himself the two parts of humanity – Jew and Gentile.

1. A New Humanity (Eph 2.15-22)

At least that was the division as the Old Testament saw it. But other ethnic and national groups have seen it in other ways. The Greeks seemed to think the world was divided into Greeks and Barbarians. The Roman Empire had a clear distinction between Roman citizens and everyone else.

And so it goes for any ethnic or national group you care to name. We naturally distinguish ourselves from those different from us.

Those of us who have background in the British Empire know that the British had a superior idea of themselves over against the people who lived in territories that they colonised. So did the French and other European powers. TE Lawrence (of Arabia) said that the Englishman thought of himself as “a chosen being, inimitable, and the copying of him blasphemous or impertinent.” The French on the other hand thought of themselves as the perfection of mankind and went on “to encourage their subjects to imitate them; since even if they could never attain the true level, yet their virtue would be greater as they approached it.” (Pillars 355).

Which reminds us that this new humanity established in and by Christ is a radically different race.

And it reminds us that because it unites people from the old human race it may be a difficult body to unite in practice.

Nevertheless this new humanity has direct access to the Father of the Lord Jesus, because Jesus has reconciled it to the Father. By his death. Just as

the Son has free, permanent and unhindered access to the Father, so does his body the church.

Not only access to the Father but life with him. One of the ways to think of the church is as God's household (Eph 2.19). This is a family idea. The household as Paul understood it was an extended family living in the same house. So it carries all the implications of family bonds and relationships – in this case characterised by God himself. It is his household or family. The new humanity is God's family living with God, living in his presence.

2. Praying for the Family (Eph 3.14-15)

Which brings us to Paul's prayer. Straight after his great description of the church as God's holy temple, in 3.22, he launches into a prayer (3.1) which he breaks off in order to remind his readers of his amazing calling as a servant of the gospel to the Gentiles.

After the digression he starts the report of his prayer in 3.14. With great reverence and in an unusual manner (he kneels) he calls out to the Father. This is the same Father of the household. The same Father that Christ and his body have direct access to.

However he identifies the Father in a new way. He is the Father from whom every family in heaven and earth derives its name (3.15). The idea of naming families here points to the source or origin of the family. Many of our family names tell us where our ancestors came from or what they did. *Families* here, is a broad term that can include clans, tribes, ethnic groups, nations and so on. In this case Paul is reminding us that all families have their origin in God. He is after all the creator of all. It is similar to what he said to the Athenians,

And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, Acts 17.26

The reason Paul is praying like this will become apparent in his prayer. But we already understand the background. A new humanity made up of reconciled old humans, a body made up of people from all the tribes of the earth, is going to have a lot of adjusting to do while it gets ready for the consummation of God's great plan.

In other words, the new humanity, the body which is Christ's body, is in part a reality of the Age to Come. It will find its perfection and completion when

Christ returns and the new heavens and the new earth are a reality. In the meantime the church, the body, the new humanity is living in two ages. It already experiences some of the reality of the Age to Come – it has direct access to the Father, it participates in the life of the Spirit, it knows the presence of Christ. It rejoices in the forgiveness of sins and has a sure and certain hope of sharing the glory of Christ. Indeed it already reflects Christ's glory.

But it is also subject to many of the drawbacks of the Present Evil Age. Sin is still present. The old nature still has to be fought. Old habits have to be overcome and new ways of living have to be learned. And ethnic and cultural customs have to be left behind in favour of a new life in the new humanity.

How will it be possible for God's household to do this? That is why Paul prays to the Father who is the creator of every family and ethnic group, because he is the one who can help the different families become one family in his household. And in so doing their prior identities as members of different families will be replaced by one over-riding identity: they are Christ's and part of the family of the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. As Paul said in Galatians 3.26-28.

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, 27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

3. Power from Glory Eph 3.16-17

Paul reports his prayer in terms that remind us of his earlier prayer in 1.15ff.

The remarkable thing about this prayer is the huge emphasis on power and strength. He seems to have drawn on every word he could think of that had something to do with power. This seems surprising at first since he is about to pray about love.

However this is not any old power or strength. The strength he asks for will come from the riches of God's glory (3.16). Or as the NIV has it, his glorious riches. But the NRSV is better I think. It is God's glory that is the source of the strength Paul looks for. God's glory is God's godness. His great power and authority that he displayed in creation for example. The seraphim of Isaiah 6

declared that the earth was full of God's glory. His glory is seen in his marvellous deeds (Ps 96.3). His glory was seen in the splendour of his presence on Mt Sinai (Ex 24.15). Although splendour and brightness are evidence and displays of his glory, they reflect his greatness, power and majesty as Creator and Lord of all. The song of every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, expresses the idea,

"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might for ever and ever!" Rev 5.13

How does Paul think this great power will benefit the church? How does this strength become available to the household of God?

He has three ways of saying it.

a. through his Spirit in your inner being (3.16). The power and strength from the wealth of God's glory does not come as an impersonal force. It comes personally, by his Spirit. By God's own presence. Not as a discharge of power but as an indwelling of God's Spirit.

And it does not come as some kind of external battery pack that can be switched on when needed. It comes to persons. To the inner person. To you and me as we are in the inside. The real me and you. On the inside where the strength is most needed. To the place where our nature needs most help. The place from where the fruit of God's presence can grow and flourish.

b. the second way of saying it is by Christ dwelling in our hearts by faith (3.17). The relationship of the believer with Jesus is a two way relationship. We are included in him, part of him, joined with him in his death, resurrection and sharing in his life. And in the opposite direction as it were, Christ lives in us. Paul said it neatly in Gal 2.20,

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Christ dwelling in our hearts is the object of faith. Faith in Christ. Trusting Christ for all our life. Believing that we have no life apart from Christ and that therefore he must live in us if we are to live at all.

But to say Christ dwells in our hearts seems much the same as to say that the Holy Spirit brings God's strength to our inner being. So why did Paul repeat himself? Maybe he just liked writing catchy phrases. On the other hand he may be underlining a powerful truth which could be glossed over as trite and well known.

He may want us to know that the strength we need comes personally from God himself and by the agency of God himself. It is God the Son and God the Spirit who bring the Father's majestic and glorious power into our lives.

Furthermore, he may want us to remember that our need is so great that such great strength is needed. That we should not think that our own capacity and strength will be enough for our need as people who are caught up in the reality of a new family. That somehow we can get by in this family the way we got by in the old family.

c. The third way of speaking about this is to use two mixed metaphors. One from the garden about trees with deep roots. The other from construction about buildings with foundations (3.17).

In both cases the ground is love. At last we get to the big idea that he has been leading up to. Deep roots and strong foundations are both grounded in love.

Where is the ground where this love is to be found. Searching for (or providing) the best ground to plant a tree, or the safest ground to place a foundation is an important first step in horticulture and construction. Where will such love be found? From parents, spouses, children, friends, mates or groups? In part, and then only as an aspect of God's love. It is found in the love poured into our hearts by the presence of the Son and Spirit. Is it not a wonderful act of love that God should be so kind as to come and live in us? That is where the foundation of our lives should be and where the source of life for our lives should be. The ground for the roots and foundations is the love of God known in Christ by the Spirit's presence (Rom 5.5).

4. Power to Grasp Eph 3.18-19

In verse 18 we come to the reason Paul has been praying for power and strength. He wants them to grasp or comprehend, and understand the dimensions of the love of Christ.

He prays this with his eye on two connected aspects of the life of the body or family.

a. He wants them to grasp or comprehend the love of Christ “together with all the Lord’s holy people” (NIV). Or “with all the saints (NRSV).

Grasp, or comprehend, or realise means in this case to understand something in practice, in our experience. Here it means to understand what the love of Christ means in the company of all God’s people. It is an understanding that people have in a group. In a family. It is not meant as essentially a private experience. Rather a corporate knowledge.

That is why he has prayed for so much power.

For the comprehending, the grasping, of how broad and high and wide and deep is the love of Christ has to be done in company with the other members of the family.

We who are part of this family of God, part of this expression of God’s household, know that our differences sometimes help and sometimes hinder our life together. That is an aspect of the fact that as old humans we have all come from different family lines. Different customs and different experiences of life.

But Paul prays that we as Christ’s body, God’s household, may know four things about the love of Christ:

How Wide is the love of Christ: broad enough to include all kinds of people. People from every ethnic group, every tribe, every language. People of all sorts, educated, over educated, uneducated, sophisticated, urbane, bogan, male, female, young old, powerful, weak, confused, damaged, important ... no one is outside the broad embrace of Christ’s love. All of these he loves. All of these he helps us love. All of us he helps us love.

How Long: his love is long enough for eternity as Stott says. Long enough for a body of Christ to keep on loving the person who will need to be nurtured and cared for for the rest of their life. Love that persists and doesn’t give up. Long enough for a body not to divide, not to split up. To persist in humility looking to the interests of others rather than our own. Here again is why the strength that comes from God’s wealth of glory is needed. And why this is best comprehended in the family of Christ. Because love that lasts and persists and doesn’t give up is best done by a family not just by one person.

How High: Christ's love lifts us up to God himself. No wonder, if the Spirit and the Son live in the hearts of God's people.

How Deep: the depth of the love of Christ is understood by God's people together as they bring that love to those who are down in the depths – of despair, of grief, of suffering, of despondency. In the deep places of lives so complicated that there seems no way out. For the love of Christ as it operates through the love of brothers and sisters finds no place too deep or dark that it cannot go. Cannot go together that is. One member alone will be exhausted and discouraged. The family together is needed for the deep love. In so doing it takes us deep down to the heart of Christ's love in his suffering and death. We have a share together not only in the suffering of each other but a share in the sufferings of Christ (1 Cor 12.26).

b. Paul has his eye on a second aspect of the love of Christ. To know Christ's love in all its dimensions is to know that it is beyond full understanding (3.19). Nevertheless as a body comprehends that love in the practical experience of their life together they will find that the body of which they are parts is filled full of the fullness of God.

A body full of God. God's household filled with the fullness of God. How marvellous. It is how Paul described the church in 1.23. A body full of God. It is what you would expect if the parts of the body have the Spirit in their inner being and Christ dwelling in their hearts and the mighty power of the glorious God at work in them. It is what you would expect if Christ the new human is embodied in his people.

5. So

You will have noticed that this passage is a reported prayer. Paul tells how he prays. So you don't have to do anything about this. Paul is not exhorting anyone. All the action that is described here is done by God.

Perhaps I am overstating it. Perhaps not. We are compassionate people with aspirations towards love and good works. We want to love and help each other and any in need. Which is good as far as it goes.

But Paul is bringing our minds back to what God does. To God's grace and love. To the Father of the family who creates and provides for his family.

So should we do nothing? Just stay passive?

No. But the answer to Paul's prayer will start with us and God. The strength that comes from the wealth of God's glory comes personally through the Spirit and through Christ in us. The works of love flow from that relationship. Start with the indwelling of Spirit and Son in you heart and inner being. And go from there. Start with a prayer like this. Because we cannot emulate this. This love does not come by trying to live the kind of life Christ lived. It doesn't come by imitation or copying. It only comes from the inside out. From Christ who lives in us by his Spirit with all of the mighty strength that comes from the glory of God.

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