

The Spirit in the Life of the Believer: Ephesians

1. A major theme in Ephesians is the unity between Jewish and Gentile believers brought about by the blood of Christ (2:13). This unity which is central to Christ's "plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him" (1:10). This unity in the church is on display as God's way of sounding the death knell to the spiritual forces of darkness, by making "known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" the "wisdom of God in its rich variety" (3:10).
 - a. Read Eph 2:11-3:6. What role does the Spirit play in the unity between Jew and Gentile?
 - b. According to Eph 2:21-22, the *entire church* forms the temple of the new covenant era. Partly on the basis of this shared Spirit, Paul¹ later begs the recipients of the letter to make "every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (4:3-4).

How much meaning does this "shared access in one Spirit to the Father" (2:18) mean to you when you think of disunity you have experienced within the church?
 - c. It has been almost two millennia since the membership of the church transformed from Jewish to overwhelmingly Gentile. What has become of the witness of unity of which this letter speaks?
2. Curtiss et al.², in an article on multiracial churches, write,

Race, as it always has, plays a significant part in the lives of people living in the United States. It shapes where people live and whom they live with, where they send their children to school, with whom they can most easily become friends, their likelihood of having access to wealth and health, whom they marry, how they think about themselves, and their cultural tastes. Race also shapes how people value others, how much they trust others, provides quick stereotypes by which to classify people, and shapes fears of crime.

They point out that fewer than 5.5% of American churches have a membership which is less than 80% uni-racial. In a companion article, Bill Hybels writes,

...Probably the most intense experience I've ever had in this area... was in 2003 in South Africa, where after 10 years of meeting with the various groups separately, we were finally able to bring together the white and the coloreds and the blacks for a single conference. We trained a thousand people in the middle of Soweto, and when we sang a couple of songs together in that environment there wasn't a dry eye in the place. We spent the whole day talking about the power of community if the church is working right.

We all agree that in Christ there is "neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female" (Gal 3:28). It has also been argued that institutional injustice in the US can be combated by racial

¹ For ease of writing, I will call this Paul's letter to the Ephesians. However, a large fraction of scholars—perhaps even most—believe Paul is not the author of Ephesians. Also, it's quite likely this letter wasn't meant for the church in Ephesus.

² "All churches should be multiracial," *Christianity Today*, April 2005, p. 33.

integration. Should it be the goal of local churches such as RCRC to be multiracial? What would that entail? How would the Spirit play a role?

3. In 5:18 the recipients of the letter are commanded to “be filled with the Spirit” (as opposed to getting drunk). Carson points³ out that 5:18-21 form a single unit, a string of participial expressions in the Greek, “that fill out what it means to be filled with the Spirit,” and culminating in v. 21, “be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.”

Let us do what your good Sunday school teacher told you never to do, and look to a different author entirely—that of Acts—for a greater understanding of being “filled” with the Spirit:⁴

- The disciples were filled at Pentecost (2:1+)
- Peter was filled anew (4:8), giving him courage to take on the Sanhedrin
- Christians engaged in united prayer are said to be filled with the Spirit (4:31)
- Christians encouraged and built up to lead a holy life are said to be filled with the Spirit (9:31)
- When a good man rejoices with single-hearted delight to see God at work in others, as Barnabas did (11:24), that is a sign that he is full of the Spirit of God
- And when disciples under difficult social conditions are filled with exultation, then that too is an expression of being filled with the Spirit (13:52)
- But equally, when you are calling God to act in judgment against an evil man like Elymas you need to be filled with the Spirit or else the whole thing could grievously backfire (13:9)

How does the Lucan “filling” compare to that in this passage? Allowing for large error bars in your discernment, would you say you have ever experienced the filling of the Spirit? What was it like? How would you relate it to any “close moments” you’ve experienced? How would you obey Paul’s command?

4. Read Eph 4:1-16. This passage launches the second half of Ephesians, which focuses on the implications of the accomplished work of Christ for Christian behavior.
 - a. What motivation does Paul offer for “making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit”?

Now read 1 Cor 12:4-11.⁵

- b. With 1 Cor 12 in mind, what role does the Spirit play in the sanctification process described in Eph 4:1-16, and esp. vv. 11-13?
 - c. How does Paul describe this as a corporate process, rather than individual?

³ *For the Love of God*, vol. 2, March 25.

⁴ This list is drawn from Michael Green, *Thirty Years that Changed the World* (Eerdmans) 2002, p. 257-259.

⁵ While 1 Corinthians is written in a different context, it nevertheless fleshes out the role of the Spirit in the gifts given to members of the body of Christ. This is independent of authorship issues: Even if Ephesians was written by a second-generation “Paulinist”, the author is well steeped in Paul’s theology and usage.

- d. If sanctification really is meant to be a corporate process—that is, if we grow as Christians by exercising our gifts in ministry with one another (4:12-13)—what does this imply about how we should pursue spiritual growth?⁶
 - e. Do you have a vision for the spiritual growth not just of select individuals in your church, but of your whole church? Or do you, in your more subdued moments, think that perhaps there's more stagnation than spiritual growth? List reasons why you do or don't think the members of RCRC are growing "up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (4:15).
5. Read Eph 3:13-21, the second of Paul's prayers for his readers. Here he repeatedly uses the term "power." Power for what? In what form? To what end?

D. A. Carson writes, regarding this prayer,

Paul wants us to grasp something of the limitless dimensions of the love of Christ, to know this love that surpasses knowledge, so he prays that we might have God's power so as to be able to take this step. But why? Why does he think it so important? He tells us: he wants his readers "to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God" (3:19b). To put the matter simply, Paul wants us to have the power to grasp the love of God in Christ Jesus, to the end that we might be mature... Do you see the stunning implication? Paul assumes that we cannot be as spiritually mature as we ought to be unless we receive power from God to enable us to grasp the limitless dimensions of the love of Christ. We may think we are peculiarly mature Christians because of our theology, our education, our years of experience, our traditions; but Paul knows better...

We can intuitively understand how this works from our experiences in the natural realm. Perry Downs, a colleague at the institution where I teach, and his wife, Sandy, have for years served as foster parents. Most of the children they have helped, now well over twenty, have been newborns and have stayed with them until adopted. But some years ago, the agency with whom they are connected asked them to take in twin eighteen-month-old boys. Perry and Sandy hesitated but agreed to accept them when the agency assured them that the boys would be with them only for about six weeks.

The first night in the Down's home, the boys were put to bed, and not a peep came from their bedroom. Curious, Perry crept into their room a half hour later. He found both boys wide awake, their pillows wet with tears, but neither was making a sound. It transpired that they had been beaten for crying in several of the homes in which they had been placed before coming to Perry's and Sandy's. This was their ninth home. Testing suggested that the twins were irremediably damaged emotionally and intellectually.

⁶ <Devil's Advocate> And does it send a shiver down your spine to think that growth requires cooperation with that lazy, unwashed, casserole-baking mob we call The Church? </Devil's Advocate>

As it happened, the twins stayed with Perry and Sandy for close to two years. By the time they were adopted, they were judged within the “normal” range of intellectual and emotional capacity...

Not for a moment would I suggest that emotional scars are beyond repair. The grace of God reaches into every kind of environment and powerfully transforms broken people. But all things being equal, apart from the intervention of the grace of God, all of us know that for a human being to grow to full emotional and interpersonal maturity, the stability of a loving and disciplined home is an indispensable ingredient.

The same is true in the spiritual arena. Just as a human being cannot enjoy normal maturation and develop into a mature person with the structure of disciplined love in the home, so also a Christian who does not grow in the experience of the love of God in Christ does not grow to full maturity. That is what Paul presupposes in his prayer.⁷

Discuss.

6. This letter begins with a list of the blessings given by God for the church through Christ. The list ends by saying that,

Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory. (1:13-14)

(See also Acts 15:8-12; Ezek 9:4-6; 2 Cor 1:22.) Regarding this “pledge,” Peter O’Brien writes,

According to 2 Cor 1:22 the Corinthians received the ‘down payment’ of the Spirit to guarantee the consummation of their future salvation. Their longing for the heavenly dwelling (2 Cor 5:1-5) results from the certainty that they have been provided with an advance installment of the spirit (cf. Rom 8:23). Here in 1:14 the Spirit received is the *deposit guaranteeing our inheritance*: in giving him to us God is not simply promising us our final inheritance, but actually providing us with a foretaste of it, even if it ‘is only a small fraction of the future endowment’ [Lightfoot].⁸

A down payment is meaningless if it can’t be detected. Having seen the various activities of the Spirit described in Ephesians, what indications would the Ephesians have had that they had received this down payment? What indications do *you* have of the seal of the Holy Spirit? In what ways might this be a foretaste of the consummation to come?



Fun quotation: “[Ephesians] was John Calvin’s favorite letter... William Barclay quotes Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s assessment of it as ‘the divinest composition of man’ and adds his own dictum that it is ‘the Queen of the epistles’” (John Stott’s IV commentary).

⁷ *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, pp. 194-195.

⁸ *The Letter to the Ephesians*, p. 120-121.