

Paul prays for the church

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Dr Markus Barth, who finds Ephesians so puzzling that he depicts it as 'a stranger at the door', nevertheless confesses that this stranger gains the right to enter 'because its readers have a place in the intercession of the author' (*The Broken Wall*, Collins, 1960, pp. 23, 24).

Certainly Paul begins and ends the doctrinal section of his letter with praise and prayer. Let me direct your attention to the prayer which concludes it (3: 14-21). We need to set it in its context.

The apostle has been unfolding God's eternal purpose to unite all things under the headship of Christ (1: 10), and meanwhile—as a means to that end and a foretaste of it—to reconcile Jews and Gentiles to each other and to God and so to create 'a single new humanity' (2: 11-22).

This union of Jews and Gentiles with each other through their common union with Christ is the 'mystery' which has been revealed to Paul (3: 3-6) and which is now to be made known to all men through the preaching of the gospel, and to the principalities and powers through the multi-coloured phenomenon of the church (3: 8-10).

Such is Paul's vision. And now he prays that the dream may come true. He begins 'for this reason' (14), resuming his train of thought where he left it in verse 1. For what reason does he pray? Surely because of the greatness of God's reconciliation and because of his personal responsibility as apostle to the Gentiles to make this good news known.

'I bow my knees before the Father,' he says. Now the normal posture for prayer among Jews was standing. In Jesus' parable of the pharisee and the publican both men 'stood to pray' (Lk. 18: 11, 13). So kneeling was unusual; it indicated an exceptional degree of earnestness, as when Jesus knelt in the garden of Gethsemane, falling on his face to the ground. Scripture lays down no rule about the posture we should adopt when praying. It is possible to pray kneeling, standing, sitting, walking and even lying. But I think we may agree with William Hendriksen that 'the slouching position of the body while one is supposed to be praying is an abomination to the Lord!'

His prayer is addressed 'to the Father', of whose family or household Jews and Gentiles are now through Christ equal members (2: 19). He is the

'one God and Father of us all' (4: 5). It is natural therefore that Paul should go on to affirm that from this one heavenly Father 'the whole family' is named. Since the emphasis of these chapters is on the unity of God's family, it seems unlikely that the right translation should be 'every family' (RSV, NEB). It refers rather to 'the whole family of believers' (NIV). This family includes 'heaven and earth', that is, the church militant on earth and the church triumphant in heaven. Although separated by death, they are still both part of the one family of God.

At the same time, there is a deliberate play on words, 'Father' being *patēr* and 'family' being *patria*. It is this which has led some translators to try to keep the verbal assonance and render 'the Father from whom all fatherhood . . .'. This seems legitimate because, although *patria* means 'family' not 'fatherhood' in the abstract, yet it is a family descended from the same father and therefore the concept of fatherhood is implied.

It may be, then, that Paul is saying not only that the whole Christian family is named from the Father, but that the very *concepts* of fatherhood and family are derived from God. In this case the true relationship between human fatherhood and the divine fatherhood is neither one of *analogy* (God is a Father like human fathers), nor one of *projection* (Freud's theory that men have invented God because they needed a heavenly father-figure), but one of *derivation* (God's fatherhood being the archetypal reality, what Armitage Robinson calls 'the source of all conceivable fatherhood').

To this Father Paul prays that God will give certain gifts 'out of the riches of his glory'. His prayer is like a staircase by which he ascends higher and higher in his aspiration for them. His prayer-staircase has four steps whose keywords are 'strength' (that they might be strengthened by Christ's indwelling through the Spirit), secondly 'love' (that they might be rooted and grounded in love), thirdly 'knowledge' (that they might know Christ's love in all its dimensions, although it is beyond knowledge), and fourthly 'fullness' (that they might be filled up to the very fullness of God).

1. Strength

Paul's first prayer to God is that 'he may grant you

to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith'. These two petitions clearly belong together. Both refer to our innermost self, 'the inner man' in the first and 'your hearts' in the second. And although the first specifies the strength of 'his Spirit' and the other the indwelling of 'Christ', both surely refer to the same experience. For Paul never separates the second and third persons of the Trinity. To have Christ dwelling in us and the Spirit dwelling in us are the same thing (see Romans 8: 9-11). Indeed, it is precisely by the Spirit that Christ dwells in the believer's heart, and it is strength which he gives us when he dwells there.

Somebody will perhaps object that surely Paul is praying for Christians, so how can he pray that Christ may dwell in their hearts? Was not Christ already indwelling them? Does not Christ dwell by his Spirit in the heart of every believer? Our reply to these questions would be 'yes indeed', and we would appeal to Romans 8: 9 and 1 Corinthians 6: 19 for biblical warrant. But, as C. H. Hodge puts it, 'the indwelling of Christ is a thing of degrees'. So also is the inward strengthening of the Spirit. What Paul prays for his readers is that they may 'know the strength of the Spirit's inner reinforcement' (JBP), that they may lay hold ever more firmly 'by faith' of this divine strength, this divine indwelling.

Bishop Handley Moule throws further light on the text by his elucidation of the verb. 'The word selected (*katoikein*) . . . is a word made expressly to denote residence as against lodging, the abode of a master within his own home as against the turning aside for a night of the wayfarer who will be gone tomorrow.' Again, it is 'the residence always in the heart of its Master and Lord, who where he dwells must rule; who enters not to cheer and soothe alone but before all things else to reign' (*Veni Creator*, Hodder, 1890, pp. 235, 240).

2. Love

If we were to ask Paul what he wanted his readers to be strengthened for, I think he would reply that they needed strength to love. So he prayed that they might be 'rooted and grounded in love' (17). For in the new and reconciled humanity which God has created, love is the pre-eminent virtue. The new humanity is God's family. Its members are no longer aliens and strangers (separated from each other by race, nationality or class) but brothers and sisters who love the same Father and love each other as brethren. Or rather should do! But we

need the power of the Spirit's might and of Christ's indwelling to enable us to love.

In order to express how fundamental Paul desires love to be in their lives, he joins two metaphors, botanical and architectural, in the expression 'rooted and grounded in love'. He wants them to have 'deep roots and firm foundations' (NEB). Thus he likens them first to a well-rooted tree and second to a well-built house. Yet the unseen stability of both is due to the same thing, namely love. Love is to be the soil in which their life is rooted, the foundation (*themelios*), on which their life is built. Thus love is to nourish and to stabilise all their relationships, whether to God or to each other.

3. Knowledge

The apostle's third petition is that they 'may have power to comprehend . . . and to know the love of Christ'.

Indeed he prays that they may comprehend it in its full dimensions, its 'breadth and length and height and depth' (18). Modern commentators warn us not to be too literal in our interpretation of these dimensions. Yet it seems to me legitimate, and more than preacher's rhetoric, to say that the love of Christ is 'broad' enough to encompass Jews and Gentiles, indeed all mankind, 'long' enough to last for eternity, 'deep' enough to reach the most degraded sinner and 'high' enough to exalt him to heaven.

Ancient commentators went further and saw these dimensions pictorially displayed in the cross, whose upright pole reached down into the earth and pointed up to heaven, while its crossbar carried the arms of Jesus stretched out as if to embrace the world. Armitage Robinson called this a 'pretty fancy', but then some pretty fancies are true!

Notice that we can comprehend these dimensions of Christ's love only 'with all the saints'. The isolated individual Christian can indeed know something of Christ's love. But his grasp of it is limited by his limited experience. It needs the whole people of God to understand the whole love of God—'all the saints' of every race, nation, culture and temperament, with all their varied experience of Christ.

Even then, the love of Christ 'surpasses knowledge' (19). Christ's love is as unknowable as his riches are unsearchable (8). Doubtless we shall spend eternity exploring the inexhaustible riches of divine love.

4. Fullness

The apostle's fourth petition for them is 'that you may be filled with all the fullness of God' (19).

Now 'fullness' is a characteristic word of the parallel epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians. In these letters Paul tells us both that the fullness of the Godhead dwells in Christ and that we in Christ have ourselves come to fullness (Col. 1: 19; 2: 9, 10). At the same time he implies that there is still room for growth. As individuals we are to go on being filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5: 18). And the church, which already as Christ's body is his fullness, filled by him (Eph. 1: 23), is to 'grow up into him' until it attains mature manhood, even the measure of the stature of Christ's fullness (Eph. 4: 13, 15).

The desire Paul expresses here in his prayer is strictly not that his readers may be filled 'with' all the fullness of God (AV, RSV) but rather that they may be filled 'up to' (*eis*) God's fullness, that they may be 'filled to the measure of all the fullness of God' (NIV). This staggering expression must surely look on to the final state of perfection in heaven when together we enter the completeness of all God's purpose for us and are filled to capacity, right up to that fullness of God which human beings can receive without ceasing to be human. Meanwhile, we are to grow towards that destiny now, being changed into Christ's image from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor. 3: 18).

These four petitions are sandwiched between two references to God. In verse 15 he is the Father from whom the whole family derives, and in verse 20 he is the one who works powerfully within us. Indeed, God's ability to answer prayer is forcefully stated now in a composite expression of seven stages.

First, God is able to 'work' or 'do', for he is not idle, inactive or dead.

Secondly, he is able to do 'what we ask', for he answers prayer.

Thirdly, he is able to do what we ask 'or think', for sometimes we imagine things we dare not ask.

Fourthly, he is able to do 'all' that we ask or think.

Fifthly, he is able to do 'more than' all that we ask or think.

Sixthly, he is able to do 'far more' than all that we ask or think.

Seventhly, he is able to do 'far more abundantly', 'immeasurably more' (NIV), indeed 'infinitely more' (JBP) than all that we ask or think. The word *huperেকperissou* is one of Paul's coined 'super-superlatives' (F.F. Bruce).

All this is 'by the power at work within us' (20)—within us individually (Christ dwelling in our hearts by faith) and within us as a people (God dwelling in and among his people as his temple, 2: 21, 22). It is the power of Christ's resurrection, the power which raised Christ from the dead and enthroned him at God's right hand (1: 19-23). It is that power which is at work in the Christian and in the church.

Paul's prayer concerns the fulfilment of his vision of the new society which God has created in and through Christ. He prays that we may be rooted and grounded in love, and may know Christ's love although it passes knowledge. Then he turns from the love of God past knowing to the power of God past imagining, from limitless love to limitless power. He is convinced, as we must be, that only divine power can generate divine love in the divine society.

He ends his prayer with a doxology. 'Now to him (this God of resurrection power, who alone can make the dream come true) be glory.' The power comes from him; the glory must go to him.

And the glory must be his 'in the church and in Christ Jesus' together, in the body and in the Head, for the church is the reconciled community and Christ is the agent of the reconciliation.

And the glory must be his 'to all generations (in history) for ever and ever (in eternity)'. Amen.