

## Unity in plurality

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### Ppt 1

Unity in plurality or One in plurality - Introduction and Bible study - Ephesians 3:14-21

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*José and David are meeting each other. José is from Latin America. He grew up in the metropolis of Guayaquil. He was baptized Catholic, but in a Protestant church he came to faith and was re-baptized there. His wife remained faithful to the Catholic Church. David is Dutch and is from the village Nunspeet. He has spent his whole life in a local church of Reformed confession. In it he was baptized and did his profession of faith. In the church he met his wife. In that church he was married. Why is it important for José and David to talk to each other about their Christian faith?*

I have been privileged to be present in an encounter with José and David. Three short fragments of conversation.

The first was about the assurance of salvation:

**David:** Hermano José, don't you have any doubt about your faith? I hear so much about certainty and firm faith, I don't recognise that from my own context...

**José:** Hermano David, if it is dark in the room and the light goes on, nobody doubts about the light, right?

The second was about Holy Communion:

**David:** Hermano José, I heard that next Sunday Holy Communion will be celebrated. Don't you have any feelings of hesitation about that?

**José:** Hermano, my heart leaps for joy that it's the administration of Holy Communion again. And then I put on my best clothes, because of His grace that's every day new again.

The third was about David himself.

**José:** Brother David, you have asked me a lot of questions. May I ask you a question too? Do you personally know the Lord Jesus?

There was silence for a moment before the answer came.

**David:** Hermano José, if I am not mistaken then I know Him.

Ephesians 3:14-21 and previous context teaches us that not only knowing Christ personally is important, but also getting to know the Savior in community, together. Getting to know Christ is not done on my own, but presupposes fellowship of the saints, the saints of all times and places. Only in this way can there be personal growth and fulfillment of faith in Christ. Therefore, I must seek that fellowship beyond the boundaries of my own denomination and beyond the boundaries of my own culture.

I am going to explore some comments about the text. In particular, the significance of some metaphors. Let us read the text.

### Ppt 2

Prayer for Spiritual Strength

*14 For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, 15 from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, 16 that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, 17 so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19 and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. 20 Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*

Ppt 3

The letter to the Ephesians is a general, apostolic exhortation. **Doctrine of faith**, (chapters 1-3) and **Ethics** (chapters 4-6) are framed in **praise** (1:3; 1:20-23; 3:20-21) and **intercession** (1:15-19; 3:14-19). God's redemptive action in Christ for Jew and Gentile, united together in one body, is the main theme of the letter.

**A. The letter is characterised by a large number of metaphors.**

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Apostle Paul uses different metaphors and these are closely interrelated: House/home community, Temple, Body, Head, New man (dressing), Armour (putting on). Furthermore, the concepts of **fullness/fulfilment** (pleroma)(1:10; 1:23) and hiddenness/secret/mystery (musterion)(3:3-5; 3:9-10; 5:18) play an important role.

Jews and Gentiles form a new **household** and **temple**, in which they have equal access to the Father, through Jesus Christ. This is the body, this is the temple where God dwells and from where He manifests His fullness in this world.

This temple is not yet finished. It is still a work in progress. The church is not a static entity but a dynamic, spiritual event in which not only quantitative growth but also qualitative edification and growth in knowledge and love are central.

If we oversee this with 2,000 years of church history, we get an impression of the overwhelming dimensions of that temple, crowded with people from all nation, all gender, all language. Overwhelming in cultural diversity and number. A temple increasing in glory and glory.

The salvation obtained in Christ, forms the basis. The church should live (walk) according to it (4:1). She is called to be united and to bear witness to the Gospel before the powers and authorities in all kind of societies. This needs the full armour from Ephesians 6. This living faith is a battle. Metaphors of **household** (1:17; 2:3; 2:4-8; 2:17; 2:19; 3:14; 3:17; 5:25; 6:1-9) and **body** (1:22; 3:6; 4:5; 4:23; 4:15-16; 4:23; 4:25; 5:30) emphasise **mutual unity, love, togetherness and obedience**.

The related image of the **head** (1:10, 1:22) expresses the idea of dominion and victory.

The metaphor of **the (holy) temple** (1:3; 2:21-22; 3:17-18) has an important meaning in our pericope. It is the earthly image of heaven. It is the dwelling place of God in the Spirit (2:21-22).

The temple has the meaning of a centre of blessing and fruitfulness (Compare also Ps 92:14-15). The temple has cosmic dimensions: of width, length, depth and height (3:18). Rooted and founded in love (3:17).

### **B. Paul's prayer for the Ephesians (Ephesians 3:14-21)**

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The section of our pericope is the second and final prayer in the letter (first prayer 1:15-23). The prayer has a **Trinitarian** structure. It is addressed to "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (3:14-15).

Paul asks to be strengthened by His Spirit in the inner man (3:16). The goal is that Christ may dwell in their hearts by faith and the church may be rooted and grounded in love (3:17). The prayer ends with a doxology to the Father (3:20-21).

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### **C. Now we come to the heart of our pericope: Ephesians 3:17-19**

*Ephesians 3:17-19 ESV: so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith-that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*

The indwelling of Christ in the hearts of believers is similar to the indwelling of God in His temple. My colleague Dick Kroneman, who once made a study of this, refers here to the meaning of the term indwelling. That points to taking up a fixed abode/residence, a meaning full of experienced space, a place where somebody feels at home. **Christ** feels at home in the heart of a believer. This indwelling of Christ in the heart has a permanent character. This is not something static, but something dynamic. It is a matter of growing and being strengthened. The heart here points to the seat of all our thinking, willing and feeling.

The metaphorical temple in this context is a immeasurably large, cosmic in scope. At the same time, this temple is also limited and localised in the *ekklesia*, the universal church of Christ, made up of Jews and Gentiles. The Christian church of believers constitute the sacred space where God, Christ and the Holy Spirit dwell. Full of the fullness of Christ. Knowing the love of God in Christ is apparently the rich, unending goal of the *ekklesia* after all.

The second part of verse 17 uses two other metaphors, the tree metaphor and the building metaphor. In fact, these depict the same thing. Rooted evokes the image of a plant or tree organically connected to the soil in which it is planted and from which it draws moisture to grow and flourish. Grounded refers to a building under construction. Both metaphors indicate constancy and continuity in love.

The image of the temple can be seen here as the connecting link between these two: the **tree** metaphor and the **building** metaphor. In the ancient Near East and in the Old Testament, the temple is the place where God reveals himself. It is the place where heaven and earth meet. Fertility symbols, such as the tree, think also of Psalm 1, often play an important role in this.

Temples were often built on a mountain and near a spring, and there were often trees in the temple court. We also find the connection between tree and temple, for example, in Psalm 92:12-13.

Our pericope is about fully understanding the immeasurable love of the Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 3:18-19) *"may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."*

Four features totally fit the image **two word pairs of opposite concepts** of the temple. In Ephesians 3:18, this three-dimensional space is expressed in. When constructing a building, three dimensions are enough: length, width, height, but the metaphorical temple in our text section has cosmic dimensions. In light of this, it is understandable that a fourth dimensions is mentioned: the depth.

The theme of height and depth is also found in Ephesians 4:8-10 *"Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." (In saying, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.)"*

In other words: Christ, through His descent into the lower regions and His ascension, spans the ends of the entire cosmos.

This spiritual house needs all kinds of saints to give colour to it. Christ's love is too great for one person, for one denomination, for one nation, for one language. Believers of all times and places are part of this community life in which the glory of Christ is fulfilled. Therefore, we may be more attentive of the diversity among Christians, instead of being busy, marking and carving our church boundaries.

Human knowledge, insight and wisdom are important, but if we not handle them carefully it leads to pride. Spiritual gatekeeping - who gets to enter the temple and who does not - can just become important in Christian school and church. Who belongs and who does not? And to be honest, this is the attribute of those who exalt themselves above others, who take their own culture as the norm, and speak exclusive about their own standard.

Paul here emphasises another attitude, the attitude of the love of Christ. He prays here for the concentration on love that transcends knowledge. The love of Christ is our viewing window. Not dogmatics, not even ethics, but Jesus, His unconditional love in His sacrifice, His work of atonement, His call to imitation, etc.

In the multitude of habitants lies the glory of the King. This is a well-known sentence used in the church and it's true. Paul writes here about the church as the fullness of Christ, Who fulfils all in all. Ephesians 1:23 *"which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."*

It is a fulfilment that is not yet complete; it's becoming greater and greater, bigger and bigger. It will be complete on the day of the Second Coming. But one thing is certain, God's church is God's temple and the bigger and wider, the more nations and cultures share in it, the more radiance and

glory Christ gets. And its expansion means contributing to Christ's fulfilment of the church. So that is where all our attention may go, a kind of overall mission of the Christian teacher: to contribute by his or her teaching to the building of this temple, to the fulfilment of the glory of Jesus.

#### **D. Reflections**

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So it is not without reason that the letter to the Ephesians was also a stimulus for the proclamation of the Gospel to the outside world. Jonathan Edwards talks in this context about God's intention that there should be a glorious and abundant outward outflow of his infinite fullness of goodness. A fullness that takes shape in several ways: the union of Christ with the believer, the expansion of the church and the exercise of spiritual gifts. All colours that blend together in one painting into a beautiful panorama.

For John Eliot and Hudson Taylor, the glory of Christ was an important missionary motif. John Eliot encouraged young preachers to preach much about Christ. Hudson Taylor frequently pointed out the need to be built in Him to receive the fullness of gifts for going out into the world.

John Piper, in his very famous *Let the Nations be Glad*, emphasised that mission should be all service to God and to Christ. If that understanding is weak, then commitment to church extension will also be weak.

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Of course the *unico mystica*, the spiritual unity between Christ and His people contains secrets and mysteries. Often faith is subject to temptation. In believers there is still the indwelling sin of unbelief. That's why apostle Paulus is praying. This imperfection is no excuse to put our text in brackets. In fact, in Ephesians 3, three things are tied together, like a kind of threefold cord: (1) union with Christ, (2) the perspective of all believers of all origins and from all over the earth, and (3) the power and strength of Christ's government with all the gifts that believers receive from Him.

Fulfilment is in a sense also eschatological. Yet there does run a line from our reality into the future. But the fulfilment of the church is through us and not outside us and the church.

Let us not just emphasis on personal faith in Christ. Although this is necessary. Let us not only put interest in the power and strength of Christ and all the gifts He gives. **But also about what other believers from other times and places have experienced and passed on about Christ's love, and how they practiced their love in Him, how they maintained their faith in Him, how they confronted al kind of challenges, how they expressed their faith to others. And so on.**

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Yes, that needs courage. In Christians from other cultures we discover our blind spots. Thinking in nuances is always harder than thinking in opposites, in black and white.

It also takes humility, to nuance our own thinking. But really we need each other to understand in a deeper way what Christ is doing in this world.

Paul prays that through God's power and strength, the hearts of believers may be a dwelling place, a temple for Jesus Christ, and that together, **united in plurality, united in Christ**, they may gain a deeper understanding of Christ's love that surpasses all understanding. That they may be filled with the gifts of God, to live out of His fullness. And all this with a view to a greater brilliance and glory of their master Jesus Christ. Towards a perfect fulfilment on the way to the Second Coming.

Let's practice this prayer in our teaching and let's be teachers of hope, fulfilled with the Love of Christ.

### **Questions**

1. How do we apply Paul's emphasis on the communion of saints in the world church to the reality of our current church and missionary situation which in many cases is characterised by brokenness, ecclesiastical tribalism, theological-cultural conservatism, spiritual individualism and fear of foreign errant doctrine creeping in?
2. As Western Christians, we often emphasise our rational thinking and knowing of the truth. What can we learn from the emphasis in Ephesians 3:17-19 on knowing Christ's love? And what can we learn from Paul's emphasis on thanksgiving and intercession in relation to church unity, both locally and globally?
3. What can we do to give 'with all the saints' more shape in church, school and society?
4. What factors (forces) go against this? How can these be overcome in love and truth?