

Church and Holiness in Ephesians

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Ephesians has long figured prominently in discussions of biblical ecclesiology. And with good reason: It has a greater density of references to church than any major New Testament book,¹ and is second only to 1 Thessalonians within the Pauline corpus in the density of holiness terminology. But there is considerable debate about what Ephesians has to say on both subjects. An essay of brief scope can call attention to the major issues; it certainly cannot solve them all.

Debated Issues

The Church as Local or Universal in Ephesians?

Scholars debate whether the word ἐκκλησία, translated “church” throughout the NT, had any religious connotations before Christians appropriated it as a self-designation. Its use in the Septuagint referring to the assembly of Israel is of doubtful importance, since Jews well before the first century normally used “synagogue” (συναγωγή) for their gatherings, even in Aramaic. There is little reason to believe Christians adopted the term ἐκκλησία as a claim to being the “true Israel.” It simply identified the church as an “assembly” or “gathering” of people.

Paul’s letters preserve the earliest surviving literary evidence for the Christian use of the term ἐκκλησία, although he was almost certainly not the first to apply the term to gathered Christian communities. Scholars debate whether Paul actually wrote Ephesians, in part, because of its allegedly novel, non-Pauline ecclesiology. Most assume that the generally accepted Pauline letters always use “church” to refer to local Christian gatherings, whereas Ephesians always refers to the universal church.² The consensus fails to explain how either Paul or some later disciple could apply a term previously referring to individual gatherings to the disparate collection of Christian communities scattered throughout the Mediterranean world. This failure presents a serious objection to the view that “church” refers to a universal entity in Ephesians.³

This essay takes the minority view that Ephesians does not use ἐκκλησία in the later sense as a universal or invisible church encompassing all true believers of all time and in every place—living or dead, scattered or gathered.⁴ Clearly Ephesians uses the term to refer to more than a local gathering of believers. But this is not an entirely unprecedented development. Ephesians merely expands the notion of an earthly assembly to include “a heavenly assembly.” Living Christians concurrently *already* participate (Eph 1:3, 22, 23; 2:5-6; 3:10) in this heavenly church in some sense in anticipation of the eschatological consummation. “Christians belong both to a heavenly church which is permanently in session and to a local church which, though it meets regularly, is intermittent in character.”⁵ Each local church is a tangible expression of the heavenly church,⁶ a notion already

¹Based on Logos Bible Software calculations using the NA²⁷/ABS⁴ critical text.

²E.g., Victor Paul Furnish, “Ephesians, Epistle to the” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2, ed., D. N. Freedman, et al. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 535-42.

³This essay does not defend either position in the debate on authorship.

⁴So also Robert Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community* (Greenwood, S.C.: Attic Press, 1980), pp. 44-47.

⁵Banks, *Paul’s Idea*, p. 46.

⁶So Banks, *Paul’s Idea*, pp. 46, 47; P. T. O’Brien, “Church,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993), pp. 125-26. See, however, Kevin Giles’s (*What on Earth is the Church? An Exploration in New Testament Theology* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995], pp. 127-47) challenge to this minority view.

anticipated in the generally accepted Pauline letters.⁷ This, in turn, prepared the way for the later development of the concept of a universal church.

The Eschatology of Ephesians

Scholars generally do not take seriously enough Ephesians' repeated references to the church's existence in "heavenly places" (ἐπουρανίος—1:3, 20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12; and οὐρανός—3:15; 4:10; 6:9). To do so requires us to imagine how Christians participating in the heavenly gathering around Christ may also go about their daily lives. Perhaps an explanation may be found in part within Jewish apocalyptic eschatology, which was conceived both spatially and temporally.⁸ That is, "Heaven" was visualized as above in contrast to the world below. But it was also visualized as reserved for the future age to come in contrast to the present evil age.

Ernst Käsemann's essay "On the Subject of Primitive Christian Apocalyptic"⁹ rightly argued that the fundamental issue in apocalyptic was, "To whom does the sovereignty of the world belong?"¹⁰ This explained for him Paul's concern for bodily existence and ethics. The human body is "that piece of the world which we ourselves are and for which we bear responsibility."¹¹ Thus, the bodily obedience of Christians was for Paul the essential expression of worship to God the Creator in the world of everyday. Christ's heavenly lordship finds visible expression only when it takes personal shape in us in this present world and makes the gospel credible. The bodily obedience of Christians is an expression of the power of the Resurrection. Resurrection is not just about the reanimation of the dead, but about the reign of Christ. Because Christ already reigns as Lord, "his own are already engaged today in delivering over to Christ by their bodily obedience the piece of the world which they themselves are."¹² In so doing Christians bear witness to his lordship over the entire world and anticipate the future reality of the Resurrection and the uncontested reign of Christ.¹³

Believers participate in Christ's destiny as the representative of the new world that is coming. Thus, "membership in the Church *is* membership in this divine new world."¹⁴ Paul does not conceive of humans as solitary individuals. As specific pieces of the world, they are always determined from the outside, by the lordship to which they surrender themselves. Human life is "a stake in the confrontation between God and the principalities of this world," and thus, "mirrors the cosmic contention for the lordship of the world."¹⁵

So far, so good. But Käsemann's attempt to distinguish the eschatological understanding of Paul from that of the "Hellenistic enthusiasts" that preceded and followed him,¹⁶ including the authors of Ephesians and Colossians is unpersuasive. He claimed that enthusiasm's overly-realized eschatology made the body and bodily obedience inconsequential. It was preoccupied with individual freedom, overvalued ecstasy and miracles, had little regard for ethics, and was unconcerned about the eschatological future.¹⁷ Because even radical enthusiasts

⁷Andrew T. Lincoln, (*Ephesians*, WBC [Dallas: Word, 2002], p. 67), who otherwise accepts the consensus, allows that Gal 1:13; 1 Cor 10:32; 12:28; 15:9; and Phil 3:6 may have a more universal application. Similarly, Rudolf Schnackenburg (*The Church in the New Testament*, trans. W. J. O'Hara [New York: Herder & Herder, 1965], p. 84) follows the majority, but suggests Gal 4:26-27 and Phil 3:20 as Pauline analogies to the church existing in the heavenly realm.

⁸Both schemes coexist within the same Jewish apocalypses (e.g., 1 and 2 Enoch and 2 Esdras/4 Ezra). Lucien Cerfaux (*The Church in the Theology of St. Paul*, trans. Geoffrey Webb and Adrian Walker [Freiburg: Herder and Herder, 1959], p. 357) considers the heavenly church a counterpart to the Jewish apocalyptic notion of a heavenly Jerusalem.

⁹In *New Testament Questions of Today*, trans. W. J. Montague (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), pp. 108-37.

¹⁰Käsemann, "On the Subject," p. 135.

¹¹Käsemann, "On the Subject," p. 135.

¹²Käsemann, "On the Subject," p. 135.

¹³Käsemann, "On the Subject," p. 135.

¹⁴Käsemann, "On the Subject," p. 128.

¹⁵Käsemann, "On the Subject," p. 136.

¹⁶Käsemann, "On the Subject," pp. 124-37.

¹⁷Käsemann, "On the Subject," p. 127.

could not ignore the world not yet subjected to Christ, they felt particularly obligated to missionary activity. The problem is that none of this portrayal of enthusiasm fits Ephesians as well as Käsemann's description of Paul's apocalyptic view of the church.

Believers already possess their future inheritance by incorporation into the church. The unique emphasis of Ephesians is its spatially conceived eschatology, in which the church here and now experiences what the temporal eschatological scheme reserves for the coming age. Not only have believers already been saved (2:5, 8; 6:17), they have been raised (1:19, 20; 2:5, 6) with Christ. It is true that Ephesians never mentions the parousia hope, but there is ample evidence that its eschatology is not entirely realized and the future completely collapsed into the present. The church is the new community toward whom God intends in the ages to come to show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness in Christ Jesus (2:7). Like the uncontested letters of Paul, Ephesians distinguishes this evil age and the age to come (1:21; 5:16; 6:12), places a strong emphasis upon future hope (1:18; 2:12) and "the kingdom of Christ and of God" (5:5), sees growth in Christian maturity as essential to God's intentions for the church (4:11-16), expects Christians to obey the Holy Spirit in preparation for the future "day of redemption" (4:30), and looks forward to future judgment (6:8, 9).

Ephesians cherishes no illusion that sharing in Christ's victory removes the church from the sphere of conflict. Those who have been seated with Christ in heavenly places are at the same time those who continue to walk in the world (2:10; 4:1, 17; 5:2, 8, 15). They must stand in the midst of a continuing battle against the rulers of this dark world **and** against the spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places (6:12). G. B. Caird correctly insists that the "Hebraic hyperbole" here must not be misunderstood to suggest that Christians no longer struggle with the threats of pagan neighbors or with temptation, or that "spiritual" battles alone matter. Ephesians merely warns that, when the church is under attack from human enemies, the real enemies are "the spiritual forces in the background. *The heavenly places* are the territory in which invisible powers compete for" human allegiance and control. Christ's heavenly victory over the powers is "a representative victory," which must "be repeated in the lives of his followers."¹⁸ Only an ongoing tension between the already and not yet makes sense of the intercessory prayer that concludes the first half of Ephesians (3:14-21) and the parenthesis that follows in the second half (chaps. 4-6). Ephesians is easily as concerned about the ethical dimensions of holiness as are the generally accepted Pauline epistles.

Implicit References to Church in Ephesians

To incorporate uncritically everything Ephesians asserts about believers into its ecclesiology would be to make its specific affirmations about the church and holiness inconsequential. The word "church" is first mentioned only in Eph 1:22; it does not appear again until midway through chapter 3; and it appears nowhere in chapters 4 or 6. Nonetheless, we cannot simply ignore the insights into the church and holiness that come by way of what is said about "us" and "you" believers indirectly.

Ephesians' opening salutation closely resembles that of a typical Pauline letter, except for the designation of its addressees,¹⁹ who are "the holy ones who are also faithful in Christ Jesus" (cf. Rom 1:7; Phil 1:1; Col 1:2). If the letter was an encyclical, as some have concluded, it merely identifies its audience as God's people who are believers in Christ Jesus. The expression "holy ones"—traditionally "saints"—characteristically refers to those we would today call believers, Christians, or God's people.²⁰ Ephesians has sixteen occurrences of terms from the Greek word-family (ἅγι-/-ἅγν-) translated holy, holiness, sanctify, sanctification in English. The church is

¹⁸G. B. Caird, *Paul's Letters from Prison*, NCLaB (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 92.

¹⁹On the absence of "in Ephesus" in the textual tradition, see Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament: A Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament (third edition)* Corrected ed. (London/New York: United Bible Societies, 1975), p. 601.

²⁰Paul S. Minear (*Images of the Church in the New Testament* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960], p. 136) adds: "Wherever the church is spoken of as the saints, the power of the Holy Spirit is assumed to be at work within it" (p. 137).

defined in terms of holiness.²¹ Like the uncontested letters of Paul, Ephesians applies holiness terminology to the everyday activities of believers.

The author implicitly associates himself and his readers by using the first person plural pronoun. In Eph 1:3-10 “we”/“us”/“our” refers to “all Christians, irrespective of national origin.”²² This changes in 1:11–2:10, where “we” refers more narrowly to Jewish Christians in contrast to “you” Gentile Christians. But 2:11-22 refers to Christ’s creation of “one new humanity” (15), neither Jewish nor Gentile, but uniting Jews and Gentiles into a church that second century Christians would call a *tertium genus*—“third race.”²³

Although the OT sometimes uses “saints” to designate “Israel as the people of God,” we should not conclude that members of the church called themselves “saints” merely to claim the blessings once reserved for Israel.²⁴ Gentile believers, brought near to God through the death of Christ (2:13), become “citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God” (2:19). But since this holy church is a “new humanity” (2:15), the terms “saints” and “household of God” cannot refer simply to the existing, historical people of God plus Gentiles. What is this **new** community of which both Jewish and Gentile believers become fellow citizens if it is not merely an expanded or redefined Israel? The LXX and New Testament use of “holy ones” to refer to the company of angels,²⁵ God’s heavenly entourage, and the departed spirits of believers provides the only plausible answer—the assembly in heavenly places.

Ephesians takes for granted that the church consists not only of God’s people on earth, but of believers in Heaven—the church militant and the church triumphant, to use anachronistic language. God is “the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name” (3:14-15; NRSV). Ephesians presumes the existence of both earthly and heavenly assemblies. In Heaven, church is constantly in session, whereas the earthly church exists only as scattered believers who come together sporadically. The image of believers as a household concerns not merely their relationship to one another, but also to God. God’s household is not confined to this world; it exists also in Heaven, and includes angels and glorified believers.²⁶

The abrupt change of metaphors for the church from family to building and temple in Eph 2:19-22 is “facilitated by the triple meaning of the word οἶκος (‘household’, ‘house’, ‘temple’).”²⁷ Kinship imagery changes to architectural as the newly defined household becomes “a holy temple in the Lord.” This sanctuary is clearly metaphorical, as the expression “spiritually” in 2:22 indicates. Its “foundation” is the preaching of “the apostles and prophets” (2:20). And “Christ Jesus himself” is the ἀκρογωνιαίος of this temple. Whether Christ is imaged as the “cornerstone” or the “capstone” of the building,²⁸ the explicit point of the metaphor emphasizes Christ’s

²¹Robert Hodgson, Jr., “Holiness (NT)” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 3, ed., D. N. Freedman, et al. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 249-54.

²²Arthur G. Patzia, *Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians*, GNC (San Francisco: Harper & Row: 1984), p. 134.

²³Giles, *What on Earth*, p. 138. Ernest Best (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998), p. 269) agrees that the author of Ephesians “would not . . . have rejected the traditional term for the church: the third race.” Markus Barth, however, argues that the church has been incorporated into historical Israel, which includes all Jews, believing and unbelieving (*The People of God*, JSNTSup 5 [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983]).

²⁴So Giles, *What on Earth*, p. 133.

²⁵E.g., Job 15:15; Ps 88:6, 8; Isa 57:15; Amos 4:2; Dan 8:13. In the NT this seems to be the meaning of “saints” in 1 Thess 3:13; 2 Thess 1:7, 10; and Col 1:12 (Lincoln, *Ephesians*, p. 60). Best (*Ephesians*, p. 278) argues that “saints” in Eph 1:18 and 2:6 (and possibly 2:19) refer to angels.

²⁶Best, *Ephesians*, pp. 278, 379.

²⁷Caird, *Paul’s Letters*, pp. 60-61.

²⁸Best (*Ephesians*, pp. 284 [nn. 85 and 86], 285) lists defenders of both positions. Jerome’s *Commentary on Ephesians* presumes a deliberate ambiguity, because Christ both founds and finishes the church. This is consistent with the double-meaning of the head metaphor in which Christ is both the source of the body’s growth (Eph 1:22; 4:15; 5:23) and the objective of its growth (Eph 4:13-16). Christ is its beginning and end (David J. Williams, *Paul’s Metaphors: Their Context and Character* [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999], p. 116).

crucial role in making the church “a dwelling place for God.” God is not inaccessible in Heaven somewhere; people encounter God, no longer in a literal building, but in the community gatherings of Christians.²⁹

As members of the heavenly church, believers’ everyday lives are sanctified by the presence of God. But the church is holy, not merely by virtue of its unique relationship with God—positional holiness. It is the community God chose in Christ before creation to be holy and blameless before him in love (1:4). The church is not holy by definition alone; it is called to grow in personal holiness (2:21; 4:17-24). Ephesians defines a holy community as one that is distinguished by mutual love (3:17; 4:2, 15, 16), obedient to God’s gracious call, and pleasing to him (4:1-32)—“imitators of God” and the model of self-giving love seen in Christ (5:1-2). The church consists of those who have put off their old lives of sin to be clothed in a new humanity, created in the likeness of God “in true righteousness and holiness” (here from ὁσιότης; 4:24). The church is destined by God to live for the praise of his glory (1:12). God’s Spirit lives in the church (2:22), empowering it to love (3:16-19) and to live worthy of its call to holiness (4:1). The Spirit provides the ethical power the church needs to experience wholesome and loving mutual relations and to refrain from evil of every kind (4:1-5:2, 15-21). The Spirit is the source of its strength in the face of its cosmic battle with spiritual forces (6:10-18) and the foretaste of its final redemption (1:14, 17; 4:30).³⁰ Because the holiness of the church is God’s doing and brings credit to him, “the ethical definition of the church”³¹ is not about human achievement.

Personal holiness is the achievement of the Triune God in the corporate life of the Christian community.³² God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has blessed the church with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ (1:3). These blessings are not “spiritual” because they are invisible and inward only, but because they are the work of the Holy Spirit in the church (1:13, 14; 5:19). They are “heavenly” because they originate with God, not because they are reserved for the future age. The blessings once expected only in the age to come have already become a present heavenly reality for believers through the fulfilled promise of the Spirit.³³ In Ephesians 2:11-22 the unity of the church is similarly articulated in Trinitarian terms.³⁴ Through Christ both Jews and Gentiles “have access in one Spirit to the Father” (2:18). As a result of what Christ has done, Gentiles are “no longer strangers and aliens” (2:19). “In Christ,” the church is “joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord” (2:21), “built together in the Spirit into a dwelling place for God” (2:22).

The church is a graced community, enabled by God to live lives characterized by good works he planned for them to do (2:10). The church has been gifted by the ascended Christ so that “the holy people” that make up its membership might do “the work of ministry,” thereby “building up the body of Christ . . . in love” (4:7-16). As in the generally accepted Pauline letters, grace is not a divine indulgence that makes sin inconsequential, but God’s transforming work in the lives of believers that allows them to understand and actually do God’s will.

Giles claims that Ephesians 4:1-16 “says more specifically on the church than any other part of this epistle,” although the word “church” nowhere appears here. The focus is on the unity of the church described using the images of “body” (4:4, 12, 16), “building” (4:12, 16), “fullness of Christ” (4:13), and “new humanity” (4:13). The affirmations about the church are organized in a Trinitarian fashion—from the Spirit, through Christ, to God the Father. The church is one, but must constantly work to preserve this unity, utilizing the ascended Christ’s gifts. The unity of the church is an expression of the holiness to which it has been called (4:1; 1:4).

²⁹Assuming the reading in 2:21 of that of the earliest manuscripts and NA²⁷ (i.e., “every building”—every local church—being “built up into a holy sanctuary in the Lord”) rather than the textual variant followed by most translations, which refers to “the whole building” (i.e., the universal church). The sense of the former reading is that as each local church provides God with a spiritual dwelling place in that location (Eph 2:22), all these churches grow together into one holy sanctuary.

³⁰Giles, *What on Earth*, p. 145.

³¹Giles, *What on Earth*, p. 144.

³²Since all three persons of the Trinity appear throughout the passage, dividing 1:3-14 along Trinitarian lines is neither necessary nor persuasive.

³³So Lincoln, *Ephesians*, pp. 19-20; contra, among others, Caird (*Paul’s Letters*, p. 33).

³⁴For the Trinitarian pattern of thought, see Lincoln, *Ephesians*, pp. 40-42. Cf. also Patzia (*Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians*, p. 128).

The unity of the church comprised of Jews and Gentiles is the work of Jesus Christ accomplished by his death on the cross—“he is our peace” (2:14). Gentiles were brought near to God “by the blood of Christ” (2:13). “In his flesh he has made both groups into one” (2:14). He reconciled both groups to God “through the cross” and put to death the hostility between the two “through it” (2:16).³⁵ In 2:14-16 the benefits of Christ’s death are described by way of two metaphorical results: the destruction of the wall that divided the two groups³⁶ and the creation of “one new humanity” reconciled to God “in one body through the cross.” Christ brought an end to the hostility separating Jews and Gentiles by abolishing laws that kept them separate and giving them shared access to God.³⁷

Ephesians does not depict this unified community as gathering together to worship God, but presumes that worship takes place primarily in everyday life. It applies traditional worship terminology to the saving work of Christ (Eph 5:2) and to the new lifestyle of believers that is characterized by love (cf. Eph 4:1-16; Rom 12:1-10). The holy church worships God by living to the praise of his glory (Eph 1:6, 12, 14) *in the world*. In typical Pauline fashion (e.g., Rom 14:19; 15:2; 1 Cor 14:3-5, 12, 17, 26; 1 Thess 5:11), Ephesians depicts the church gathering together for mutual upbuilding (οἰκοδομή)—edification (cf. 2:21; 4:29). The church gathers to be equipped to bring praise to God by its life in this world in anticipation of its future communion with God and the saints in the heavenly world. It gathers to be prepared for the battle it faces.

Appealing to OT imagery,³⁸ Eph 6:10-19 exhorts the community as a whole (using the “you” plural throughout) to defend itself against the attacks of its spiritual enemies by putting on “the whole armor of God” (6:11, 13). If Roman military practice served as a model, the size and normal use of the shield in battle presumes a defensive formation that offered protection for soldiers acting in concert, not individually.³⁹ A command to “be strong in the Lord” (6:10) summarizes well the thrust of Eph 6:10-19. The church struggles against overwhelming odds. Evil would be overpowering without the more than sufficient strength available from the Lord (6:10-12). The ancient weapons of warfare serve as metaphors describing the spiritual resources God provided believers to face the struggles of life in “this dark world” (6:12; see 6:13-17). All of this imagery seems directed to one end—to urge the church to call upon the incalculable resource of divine might available through unceasing prayer (6:18-20; see 3:20-21).

“The sword of the Spirit” (6:17) is the only offensive weapon among the panoply, and the only weapon that is explained: It is “the word of God” (see Isa 11:4; 49:2; Hos 6:5; Rev 1:16; 19:15). The Holy Spirit as the church’s sword (see Heb 4:12, 13) comes to its aid in the struggle against evil, inspiring it to speak the words God wants it to speak (see Mark 13:11; Luke 12:11, 12; Isa 49:2; 51:16). Spirit inspired persuasive speech rather than threats of violence (see 6:9) is the only offensive weapon the church is allowed.

Explicit References to Church in Ephesians

The Church as the Body of Christ

³⁵It is unclear here whether Jesus’ mission and ministry is an essential prerequisite to the crucifixion. Does Christ’s proclamation of peace (2:17) refer to Jesus’ preaching or to the church’s proclamation of his death and resurrection?

³⁶Many see here an allusion to Temple wall which divided the Court of the Gentiles from the inner courts open to Jews only (e.g., J. L. Houlden, *Paul’s Letters from Prison: Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians*, WPC [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977], p. 90).

³⁷Space does not permit consideration of the claim that Christ’s death “abolished the law” (2:15). Ephesians insists upon the end of those “commandments and ordinances”—purity laws—that maintained the separation of Jews and Gentiles.

³⁸ Isa 11:5; 59:16-19; Wis 5:17-23; cf. 1 Thess 5:8; 2 Cor 6:7; Rom 13:12.

³⁹The point is not to urge Christians to aggression and violence, but to adopt the discipline, mutual support, preparedness, dedication, and self-sacrifice that marked the reputation of soldiers as portrayed in philosophical discourse. This point was drawn to my attention by my student Brian Mackey in his unpublished senior theology paper (December, 2005).

Ephesians' first explicit reference to "church" provides an equation, identifying the "church" as "his body." The passage raises a number of exegetical puzzles, not the least of which is whether this equation should be taken metaphorically or literally. But before we address this question, there are some even more basic issues.

A fairly literal translation of Eph 1:22-23 points out the initial problem—antecedent ambiguity. "And 'he subjected all things under his feet' and made him head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all things in everything." Deciding what is the antecedent of each of the third person pronouns—"he," "his," and "him"—is no easy task, since the pronoun serves as both the subject and object of the sentence and also appears as a genitive modifier.

There is no explicit subject in the Greek sentence equivalent to the pronoun "he;" it is only implicit in the verbs ὑπέταξεν—"he subjected"—and ἔδωκεν—"he made"⁴⁰ or "he appointed."⁴¹ The apparent antecedent—the last explicit preceding subject—is "God" in 1:17. Thus, God must be the active agent, and Christ, the recipient of God's activity. God made "him," αὐτὸν—Christ "head" over all things to the church. And the "feet" and the "body" must be Christ's—αὐτοῦ/"his." The four actions of God in Eph 1:20-22 are probably "not temporally successive but simultaneous."⁴² God raised Christ from the dead, seated Christ at God's right hand, subjected all things under Christ's feet, and made Christ head over all things to the church.⁴³

The corporal and spatial imagery of the passage is indebted to the metaphorical language of Pss 8:6 and 110:1. As in the Ancient Near East in general, Christ's seat at God's right hand (1:20) places him in a position of ultimate authority.⁴⁴ Just as the victor placed his foot on the necks of defeated foes, God has put everything under Christ's feet,⁴⁵ making him the master of the universe who rules over everything. In short, He is Lord.

But what are we to make of the phrase, "God has made Christ head over all things"? Does "head" function within this corporal imagery as merely another metaphor to distinguish the master from his subjects?⁴⁶ Is the point of all these body-part metaphors simply to assert that God designated Christ as the cosmic Lord of all that exists? Is the issue Christ's lordship over the universe on behalf of the church or his rule over the body, the church,⁴⁷ as in 4:12-16?

The Septuagint meaning of "head" (κεφαλή) as "ruler" or "leader"⁴⁸ makes perfect sense in Col 2:10, where Christ is called "the head of every ruler and authority." He is the Lord of lords. But when the Hebrew connotations of "head" underlie the Greek term, it may instead be synonymous with ἀρχή and have the force of "source" or "origin." The body is not only subject to the head, but "derives its growth and development from its

⁴⁰BDAG, ὑποτάσσω 1 (p. 847), δίδωμι 5 (here used as an equivalent of τιθέναι, p. 193).

⁴¹Best, *Ephesians*, p. 181.

⁴²Best, *Ephesians*, p. 182.

⁴³Although the church is clearly Christ's body (v. 23a), the precise meaning of v. 23b remains unclear and cannot be taken up here in detail.

⁴⁴Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene Albert Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Ephesians* (London/New York: United Bible Societies, 1982), p. 35.

⁴⁵Konrad Weiss, "ποῦς" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 6, ed. Gerhard Friedrich; ed. and trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 626. See also Best, *Ephesians*, p. 180.

⁴⁶Most ancient people did not think of the head as the part of the body that controlled other bodily parts, although such ancient medical writers as Hippocrates and Galen illustrate that some physicians did indeed espouse this then novel view (So Markus Barth, *Ephesians 1-3*, AB 34 [Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1974], pp. 186-92).

⁴⁷So also Lincoln, *Ephesians*, pp. 67-68 and Best, *Ephesians*, p. 182.

⁴⁸E.g., Deut 28:13; Judg 10:18; 11:11; 2 Sam 22:44; Isa 7:8, 9.

head.”⁴⁹ There are no ancient parallels to the notion that bodily growth originated from the head of the body as Col 2:19 and Eph 4:15-16 insist.⁵⁰

The “newer” medical view of the head was not the traditional Greek view and certainly not that of the OT. The head of a family in a patriarchal society was in charge of the family by virtue of being the biological source of the rest of the family—the family owed its existence to him.⁵¹ The head of a river was not the decision maker, but the source of the river’s water. Hence, outside the NT the metaphorical uses of “head” include both lordship and source or origin. In Col 1:15-20 Christ’s headship over the cosmos is parallel to ἀρχή and πρωτότοκος.⁵² Christ’s headship of both cosmos and church derives from his status as mediator of the original creation (Eph 2:10, 15; 4:24; cf. Col 1:16) and the new creation (Eph 2:15; 4:24), giving him the right to rule both the cosmos and the church.

Focusing on the image of the church as Christ’s body (2:23a),⁵³ some scholars insist that this is not imagery at all, but that the church is the literal continuation of the incarnation.⁵⁴ But there is no justification in Ephesians for making “church and body interchangeable.”⁵⁵ If Christ is Lord of “all things,” this must include the church. And a church that is subject to him must be distinguishable from him. In any case, if the imagery is metaphor and not allegory, its essential point is clear enough: The earthly church shares Christ’s heavenly status now (1:22-23; 2:15-16) and already reveals God’s future purposes in the heavenly places (3:10-11).

Ephesians’ fourth explicit reference to church repeats earlier claims that Christ is “the head of the church;” and the church, “the body” of Christ (5:23; cf. 1:22). But it adds another role to Christ’s résumé: Here Christ is “the Savior” of the church—the only place in the NT where he is so identified. That Christ is the Savior of the body clearly distinguishes him from the church.⁵⁶

The Church as the Community of Salvation

In the second explicit reference to church in Eph 3:8-10, Paul’s grace-enabled preaching is said to concern “the fathomless riches of Christ”—the all-inclusive message of universal salvation, of Christ’s willingness to save all people, even Gentiles. The purpose of Paul’s mission was to preach the good news of “the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in the God who created all things.” This plan⁵⁷ was “that the diverse wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places **through the church.**”⁵⁸ Elsewhere in the Pauline corpus, “rulers and authorities” normally refer to angelic and demonic spirits. Are we to imagine heavenly spectators witnessing the earthly church or the church’s heavenly presence? Regardless, the crucial point is that through the church the long unknown intentions of God have become public knowledge. The secret is out: God wants to save everyone. The Creator of the universe intends also to be its Re-creator.

⁴⁹Lincoln, *Ephesians*, p. 70.

⁵⁰Lincoln, *Ephesians*, pp. 68-72.

⁵¹Cf. Best, *Ephesians*, p. 193.

⁵²Best, *Ephesians*, p. 195.

⁵³On the possible origin(s) of the imagery of body as applied to the church, see Lincoln, (*Ephesians*, pp. 70-72).

⁵⁴E.g., J. A. T. Robinson, *The Body* (London: SCM, 1957), pp. 51, 58; Pierre Benoit, *Jesus and the Gospel*, trans. Benet Weatherhead (Bristol: Herder and Herder, 1973), pp. 53-58; Schnackenburg, *The Church*, p. 175; Cerfaux, *The Church*, pp. 262, n. 1; 263, 282, 323, 330, 347, 349, 357.

⁵⁵Miner, *Images of the Church*, p. 185.

⁵⁶Best, *Ephesians*, p. 537. Ephesians 5:23 seems to be a midrash on Gen 2:18-24: Woman was created from the source (i.e., “head”) of the man to be his companion (Caird, *Paul’s Letters*, p. 88). The church “is subject to Christ” not because he is its “head,” according to 5:24, but because he is its Savior (Best, *Ephesians*, p. 535).

⁵⁷The terms “mystery,” “will,” “purpose,” and “plan” all make “the point that God’s purpose has been hitherto concealed, but now declared in Christ” (Houlden, *Paul’s Letters from Prison*, p. 268).

⁵⁸Caird, *Paul’s Letters*, p. 66 (emphasis added). Caird also insists, “It is hardly an exaggeration to say that any interpretation of Ephesians stands or falls with this verse.” He is adamant that “... *the heavenly places* are not some region remote from the life of earth, but the spiritual environment in which unseen forces compete for man’s allegiance.”

Paul's preaching of the gospel brought "the church" into existence, a church that included Gentiles in its ranks. The church is to play a mediating role in accomplishing God's purposes by making God's wisdom known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. But how? Is it by the preaching of the gospel, by the mere existence of a unified community, or by the unified church's worship in the world—i.e., its life of ethical holiness? In any case, the church demonstrates "that one day cosmic divisions will also be overcome."⁵⁹

Perhaps because Ephesians celebrates what God has already accomplished in the unified church, it does not emphasize evangelism directed toward unbelievers. Its exhortation not to associate with the disobedient (5:6-7) should not be taken as a warrant against missionary activity.⁶⁰ Rather, as in 1 Cor 5:9-13 and 2 Thess 3:6-10, its concern is more probably with shunning professing believers who do not take the Christian ethic seriously. Christians are not to "participate in the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather to speak out against them" (5:11). Ephesians calls for Christians to speak the truth to their neighbors (4:25) and to speak in ways that build up and give grace to all who hear them (4:29). Equipped with the whole armor of God, Christians will be "ready to proclaim the gospel" (6:15; NRSV) with persuasion (6:17) and boldness (6:19, 20).

The third reference to church in Ephesians appears in the doxological conclusion of Paul's prayer-report in 3:14-21. God's worthiness to be praised is demonstrated by the very existence of the church. Doxology is not so much what the church says directed toward God as what others recognize as true about God because the church exists as an expression of praise to God. God is to be forever recognized for who he is as truly and faithfully in the church as in Christ. God provides the church more than adequate power to accomplish his purposes. God is present, his rule recognized, and his glory manifested in the church.

The Church as the Bride of Christ

All five of the remaining explicit references to the church appear in close proximity to one another within Ephesians' analogy of the relationship of husband and wife to that between Christ and the church in 5:21-33. This passage emphasizes the intimate nature of the marriage-like relationship between Christ and the church.

The fifth explicit reference asserts as a fact that "the church is subject to Christ" (5:24), presuming that the church lives in voluntary obedience to Christ whereas the sixth explicit reference to "church" appeals to the example of Christ, commanding husbands to love their wives "as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." "This is the only place in the NT where the church and not individuals is named as the object of Christ's activity,"⁶¹ and it raises a number of difficulties that cannot be addressed in detail here.⁶² In any case, any interpretation that limits salvation to the sovereign and arbitrary decisions of God is challenged by Ephesians' insistence that holiness is the purpose of Christ's love for the church. "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her in order to sanctify her by cleansing with the washing of water by the word" (5:25-26).⁶³ His love was intended to have the consequence of making the church holy and fit to belong to himself. Prior to responding to Christ's love, "the church" was not the church or not the kind of church Christ intended it to be.

The seventh explicit reference to "church" (5:27) again connects the church and some ethical and personal sense of holiness. Christ intends the church to be glorious and "without a spot or wrinkle"—"holy and without blemish." Ephesians 5:26-27 describe Christ's death as having three purposes/results (each introduced by *ἵνα*).

⁵⁹Giles, *What on Earth*, p. 138.

⁶⁰Against Furnish, "Ephesians," p. 540.

⁶¹Best, *Ephesians*, p. 541.

⁶²E.g., does this presume a preexistent church chosen beforehand by God to be receptive to his offer of salvation and therefore the only ones toward whom the love and death of Christ are directed? While the issue is indeed complex, if God's choice alone is sufficient apart from any human response, it is impossible to make sense of the salvation by grace through faith insisted upon in Eph 2:8-9.

⁶³It is unclear which "word" is intended—the baptismal formula—"I baptize you in the name of Jesus Christ/Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," or the preaching that accompanies baptism.

The first has a double effect: Christ's death "sanctified" and "cleansed" the church. Since both these verbs are aorists, it is impossible to distinguish them sequentially. The terms are probably intended to be mutually interpretive—i.e., sanctification effects moral cleansing. It is a matter of interpretation when this sanctifying cleansing was accomplished. Was it when Christ died—as a potential benefit, or was it when the believer was baptized—as an actualized benefit? If this is an allusion to the bath of baptism, the imagery is complicated by the fact that "baptism is an individual matter."⁶⁴ Whatever the precise meaning, the point is that Christ's death provides for the sanctification of believers (cf. Heb 13:12).

The second purpose/result is the presentation of the church to Christ as a bride (5:27). Unlike, 2 Cor 11:2, in which the church's marriage is imaged as a future prospect, here, the marriage is an accomplished fact. No longer just his fiancée, the church-bride has already become the wife of Christ. While there are difficult questions raised by this analogy,⁶⁵ it is clear from 5:32 that the church-bride, prepared by moral cleansing, is presented to her Lord-husband within "this world of space and time. . . . The church is already the bride of Christ."⁶⁶ "The bride is Christian believers viewed corporately as an entity."⁶⁷ Thus, the personal, ethical holiness of the church is not to be expected only in the age to come, but in this present world.

The third purpose/result of Christ's sanctifying death repeats the description of believers given in Eph 1:4. Christ died so that the church might be "holy and without blemish" (5:27). This connects what is said about the church with what the book's opening benediction says about "us." "God chose us in Christ before the creation of the world in order that we might be holy and blameless before him in love" (1:4).

In this context in which the church as the bride of Christ is the dominant metaphor, the eighth explicit reference to "church" (5:29-30) returns to the imagery of the church as the body of Christ. This has the effect of equating the book's two prominent images of the church. Beyond this, it clarifies the character of Christ's love for the church asserted in the sixth reference concerning Christ's love for the church. Human care for one's own body becomes the basis for the claim, "No one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body." That we are *members of Christ's body* clarifies the first explicit reference to church, which identifies it simply *as* Christ's body. Here the author and his readers as members of Christ's body are a part of the church. But the church and Christ are as clearly distinguishable as the members are from one another.

The ninth and final explicit mention of "church" in Ephesians (5:32) applies the mysterious one-flesh union of husband and wife to Christ and the church. It asserts that although the two are distinguishable, they are in some profound sense actually one. If the mystery of the church's relationship with Christ could be adequately described without resorting to imagery, a prosaic explanation would be satisfactory. Perhaps the same might be said of the church's simultaneous earthly residence and heavenly reality. Mysteries may be asserted but never fully explained.

Conclusion

Christ's paradoxical victory over the forces that resist God through his death on the cross has created the possibility for universally sinful humanity to participate in a new human community through the power of the Holy Spirit. Ephesians presents the church as a diverse, earthly community of renewed people, who gather together in unity and fellowship with the Triune God and in concert with the hosts of heavenly angels and glorified believers. Transformed by faith in Christ's gracious offer of salvation, the church submits to his lordship and lives worthy of his call to holiness. Christ has given the church gifted leaders who offer mutual

⁶⁴Best, *Ephesians*, p. 543.

⁶⁵E.g., Was the "marriage" consummated at the death of Christ, the moment of baptism, or some other such decisive moment in the Christian walk? Since the latter two "moments" are individual rather than corporate experiences, associating them with this "marriage" makes little sense of the analogy. Perhaps the analogy simply breaks down (Best, *Ephesians*, p. 546).

⁶⁶Giles, *What on Earth*, p. 143.

⁶⁷Giles, *What on Earth*, p. 144.

edification that enables believers to grow out of his resources in increased unity, moral maturity, love, and Christlikeness. Despite its diverse membership, the spiritually unified church may be compared to a healthy body, well-constructed building, holy Temple, well-ordered family, loving marriage, or disciplined military unit. The scattered community, equipped for “the work of ministry,” lives in the world so as to bring praise to God. Regular participation in the life of Heaven empowers the community of believers to anticipate the life of the age to come with lives of personal holiness and love, even in the face of opposition from sinister forces.

Ephesians presents a vision of the church in a world transformed by the good news that Christ already reigns as Lord. In Heaven he reigns unchallenged, despite continuing resistance on earth. The church makes visible Christ’s presence in the world and anticipates the final consummation of his rule.

The earthly church’s participation in the heavenly assembly has profound ethical implications for its daily life. Far from libertine imaginations of heavenly self-indulgence that Käsemann supposed arose from the over-realized eschatology of “Hellenistic enthusiasm,” Ephesians envisions an entirely different understanding of Heaven. It is not a world in which every human sensual craving is gratified; instead the mutual love of the saints seeks the well-being of others. Heaven is not the church’s literal address, but heavenly values and priorities have already created a human community that mirrors the life of Heaven. Ephesians’ celebration of the church’s heavenly existence reminds it of its earthly responsibilities.

If the obvious excesses of the Corinthian church sprang from the seeds of over-realized eschatology, as many scholars presume, Käsemann’s caution would be warranted. But can the origin of the ethical and theological problems in Corinth be so easily diagnosed? No NT book emphasizes the realized dimensions of eschatology as unmistakably as John’s Gospel. But it certainly lends no support to ethical indifference. John encourages believers, who live in this world, not to be of this world. Christians are to live, in intimate heavenly unity with the Triune God and with other believers, a life distinguished by holy love (John 17).

The excesses of the under-realized and overly literalistic eschatology of Dispensational Premillennialism are a more real and present danger to contemporary Christianity than the alleged realized eschatology of Ephesians. Too many Christians evade the implications of holy living here and now by investing all their attention on speculative theories about the unfolding of future events in this latter-day apocalyptic misunderstanding.

Some modern scholars equate pietistic Christian spirituality with an abuse they dismiss as “enthusiasm.” But there is no reason to presume that those who take seriously an authentic personal relationship with God and are convinced that God’s Spirit empowers them to live the life of Heaven in this present world have misunderstood the NT’s view of the Christian life. Certainly excessive subjectivity, emotionalism, and mystical fantasies have led to aberrant forms of Christianity. But so have excessive rationalism and humanism.

No thinking Christian of the twenty-first century seriously imagines that Heaven is somewhere up in outer space. But the NT nowhere makes such an overly literalistic modern reading of the imagery of Scripture an article of faith. Unless we begin with the assumptions of atheistic rationalism, it is not absurd to take seriously the existence of God. And it is not impossible for modern believers to share the conviction of Ephesians that earthbound believers may nonetheless participate in the reality in which God resides, however we may define it.

Ephesians offers no geography of heavenly places, but it does characterize the heavenly life of the church. This life is not marked by selfish sensual indulgence, but by an other-centered love like that modeled by the self-giving life of Christ. The very fact that Ephesians uses the human body and the intimacy of marriage to image the church of Christ is evidence against the notion that it might endorse a gnostic dismissal of material existence as inherently sinful. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit of God so sanctifies human existence that the earthly church lives in this present world to the praise of his glory.

Ephesians explicitly rejects as antithetical to the life of Heaven a wide range of self-indulgent behaviors (4:17–5:14) that not only characterized ancient paganism, but as certainly characterize the normal lifestyle of most in the affluent modern West. The same heavenly ethic that excludes the sexually immoral from the kingdom of Christ and God also excludes the greedy (5:3-5). Were ancient pagans who bowed at idolatrous shrines any more deceived by empty promises than are those who greedily pursue individual fulfillment at the temples of

modern consumerism—the shopping mall? Ephesians calls the Christian community to wake up and expose all such unfruitful works of darkness, not to participate in them (5:6-14).

Ephesians' concern that Christians reflect the holiness of Heaven in the world of everyday may account for its two most prominent images of the church—the body of Christ and the bride of Christ. Because the church is the body of Christ, it shares in his representative victory over the forces of evil and his exaltation to Heaven. But if his victory is to be repeated in the lives of his followers on earth, the church must live in voluntary submission to Christ's lordship. Just as Christ represents the church in Heaven, the church represents Christ on earth. God's holy people must actually live lives of holiness, replicating the life of Heaven on earth.

Because the church is already the bride of Christ, it has been cleansed and equipped to fulfill its holy calling. But the unified church is also a building in progress, so there is still room for growth in personal holiness. The demands of love are not exhausted in one heroic act, but call for daily expressions of humility, gentleness, patience, and tolerance (4:1-6).

Marriage, the most domestic of human relations, illustrates the mysterious relationship between Christ and his church, because its holiness is the fruit of his love. Ephesians describes the life of holiness in terms of loving community relations. The unity of the church composed of both Jews and Gentiles is the most visible expression of this. Christ's love serves as the model for the church in its mutual relations and in its life in the world. Ephesians reminds us that holiness must find expression in the daily lives of believers. It is primarily in the world that the church worships God, not in its gatherings, which celebrate its corporate life and equip it for its mission to embody Christ in the world. It is in this equipped and serving holy community, not in a literal building, that the world encounters the Triune God. If it is love that distinguishes the church from other communities, this must be encountered in a local church living out the life of Heaven on earth, not in the abstract notion of some universal entity.

"The epistle to the ephesians". Walking In Truth And Holiness (4:17-32). INTRODUCTION. 1. In the previous lesson, we saw where Paul began to describe our "duty" to "walk worthy of the calling with which you were called" - Ep 4:1. 2. In doing so, he first called us to "walk together in unity" by admonishing us to a. Display the "attitudes" crucial for maintaining unity - Ep 4:2-3 b. Understand the "basis" of the unity we have in Christ - Ep 4:4-6 c. Utilize the "gifts" given by Christ to His church that serves to.Â 1. What a contrast there would be if all those in the church truly carried out the admonition to "Walk In Truth And Holiness"! a. The church would stand out like "a city that is set on a hill"! - cf. Mt 5:14-16 b. And the world, though it now has "their understanding darkened" New Living Translation He did this to present her to himself as a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle or any other blemish. Instead, she will be holy and without fault. English Standard Version so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. Berean Study Bible and to present her to Himself as a glorious church, without stain or wrinkle or any such blemish, but holy and blameless. Berean Literal Bible so that He might present to Himself the church in glory, not having spot or wrinkle or any ...Â Ephesians 1:4 For He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless in His presence. In love. Ephesians and Colossians Introduction. Hi, everyone! We're Shmoop, and we like warm hugs! We also like heart-to-heart talks, nuzzling kittens, and skipping and holding hands while walking the street. We're pretty big into togetherness. You know who else really loves for people to be together? The Bible. Specifically, the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians. Both of these letters are way into unity and harmony.Â Powers of holiness, activate! Church of St. Paul in Tarsus Located in his birthplace, which is now in modern-day Turkey, this church dedicated to Paul hasn't held up quite as well as St. Paul's in London. Next. Navigation. Introduction. Summary. Themes. Figures.