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TEMPLE AND BODY: BIBLICAL COMMUNITY IN EPHESIANS

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A. INTRODUCTION

Though ‘community’ is spoken of much in contemporary culture, it seems that it is seldom defined beyond a vague sense of ‘people like me who like me and like what I like’. But what is a biblical definition of community? What is it for and does it have any purpose beyond itself?

The main part of this paper is an engagement with Ephesians which presents us with a biblical and theological foundation for thinking about biblical community. I will argue that the relatively neglected temple theme in Ephesians has important practical implications and that attending to the concept of God’s missional temple will provide us with a framework by which we may evaluate contemporary church praxis.¹

B. BIBLICAL COMMUNITY IN EPHESIANS – SUMMARY

In Ephesians 2:11-22, Paul describes Christ’s people, Jews and Gentiles, as those who have been vertically reconciled to God and horizontally to each other by the peace making work of Christ on the Cross, thus becoming members of and participants in the ‘one new humanity’ (Eph. 2:15).

Examination of Old Testament background demonstrates that this Gentile-including work of the Messiah fulfils ‘in Christ’ the trajectories of the OT themes of covenant and temple, mediated by texts in Isaiah and Zechariah. Paul uses the OT in such a way as to make clear that Gentiles and Jews are equally dependent on the peace-making work of the Messiah in order to be reconciled to God and to become members of God’s people.

¹ The foundations for this paper are my doctoral dissertation and have been built upon and ‘field tested’ in the context of a new church. For detailed exegesis, see A. Mark Stirling, ‘Transformation and Growth: The Davidic Temple Builder in Ephesians’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of St Andrews, 2012).

In the last section of this passage (2:19-22), these strands are drawn together and subsumed into the metaphor of God's people as the new (eschatological) temple, the 'dwelling place for God by the Spirit' (2:22).²

The expansionist nature of the themes and texts woven into Ephesians 2:11-22 impart an outward focus to the rest of the letter. The new temple is inherently missional. Discipleship (the building of a new temple composed of people united to Christ) and mission (the purpose of the temple as the dwelling place for God's presence to which the nations will come to worship³) are inseparably connected.

Observing connections between Ephesians 2:11-22 and the rest of the letter, especially 4:11-16 helps answer questions of how this temple grows and functions. In Chapter 4 Paul switches metaphors from temple to body. Leaders are given to the body by the risen Christ to help each member find its place and fulfil its function (Eph. 4:16). A synthesis of the argument of Ephesians will then suggest a number of practical applications.

C. ANALYSIS OF EPHESIANS 2:11-22

Ephesians 2:11-22 has been referred to as 'the key and high point of the whole epistle'.⁴ It is 'perhaps the most significant ecclesiological text in the NT',⁵ containing 'the whole substance of the author's theology; an ecclesiology developed from Christology which permeates the whole document theologically'.⁶

Ephesians 2:11-22 is constructed as a 'once-now' contrast scheme, parallel with similar structures in 2:1-10 and 4:17-24. Comparing Ephesians 2:11-22 with 2:1-10 shows that what is expressed in terms of the reality of sin in 2:1-10 is expressed in terms of estrangement from God's people in 2:11-22. What is presented in 2:1-10 as the transformation from walking in sin (2:2) to walking in good works (2:10),⁷ is depicted in 2:11-22 as a

² This is an interpretive key for Ephesians, its various themes cohering around the building, filling and functioning of the new Temple.

³ See Isa. 2:1-5 for the programmatic statement for this temple theology.

⁴ Markus Barth, *Ephesians: Translation and Commentary on Chapters 1-3* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), p. 275.

⁵ Klyne Snodgrass, *Ephesians: The NIV Application Commentary: From Biblical Text to Contemporary Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), p. 123.

⁶ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Ephesians: A Commentary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), p. 102.

⁷ The repetition of 'walk' (8 times in Ephesians) helps structure the letter and establish that one of Paul's main themes is transformed walking. See e.g., Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians, Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 275.

reversal of exclusion from God's people accomplished by Christ's peace-making death that creates a new humanity (2:15).

There is a progression from remembrance of former state ('Before' 2:11-13) to a description of this new corporate entity and its purpose ('After' 2:18-22), through the peace-making and new-humanity-creating work of Christ ('What causes transformation' 2:14-17). We will consider each in turn.

Before – the former state

The five features of the Gentiles' condition ('without Christ', 'separated from the *politeia*⁸ of Israel,' 'strangers to the covenants of promise', 'not having hope' and 'without God') are complementary aspects of the same reality giving a comprehensive description of the condition of the Gentiles who are 'without Christ.'

Of note here is that the reversal of the Gentiles' plight of covenant exclusion in 2:13 and the salvation in 2:8-9 are both 'in Christ Jesus'. The same salvation described in 2:1-10 (in 2:6, 7, 10, as divinely initiated gracious union with Christ) is in 2:11-22 expressed in covenantal terms. Salvation therefore means no longer being 'strangers to the covenants of promise' (2:12). Implicit in this argument is Paul's endorsement of the concept of covenant membership as an affirmation of some kind of continuity between God's people before and after the coming of the Messiah.

There are additional elements that describe the pre-Christian past of the Gentiles. In 2:13, the pronoun 'you' picks up the 'you' of 2:11; the five-fold designation of the Gentiles being summed up as those who were 'far off', a term used in the OT to designate the Gentile nations.⁹ The contrast is taken up again in 2:19 where the Gentiles are no longer strangers and aliens.

The 'before' descriptors therefore comprehensively describe the state of non-Christian Gentiles in terms of their lack of membership of God's people. It is this condition of estrangement and alienation and its consequences (summed up as 'far off' and 'apart from Christ') that the readers are encouraged to remember.

⁸ That is 'membership of a community with the rights, privileges and way of life associated with that membership', Ernest Best, *Essays on Ephesians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), p. 95.

⁹ Deut. 28:49; 29:22; 1 Kings 8:41; Isa. 5:26; Jer. 5:15 cf Israel's 'nearness' (e.g. Ps. 148:14).

After – the transformed condition

The negative designation of the Gentiles' pre-Christian past is contrasted with their current condition 'in Christ Jesus' (2:13) which is equated with being brought near. This is especially important because of the connection between this language and OT texts. 2:14-18 addresses the peace-making work of Christ that has brought them near, and 2:19 resumes the contrast with a summary of the pre-Christian state and then a more detailed outworking of the current condition of these Gentiles 'in Christ': they are described as 'fellow citizens of the saints' and 'members of God's household'. Citizenship (*sympolitai*) is contrasted with their previous separation from the *politeia* of Israel.

The use of a *syn* compound to describe this is significant. Together with the statements in 2:14-18 of 'the two being created into one new humanity' (2:15) and 'both being reconciled in one body' (2:16) and 'we both have access to the Father . . . ' (2:18—note the shift to first person plural), a picture emerges in which not only has the situation of the Gentiles been reversed, but there has also been an alteration in the condition of the Jews whereby they are now, together with Gentiles on equal terms, fellow-members of God's people.

It is also significant that those who were estranged from Israel in 2:12, are not explicitly stated to become citizens of Israel, but are 'fellow citizens with the saints.' Similarly (and perhaps to avoid any possible misunderstanding), the contrast is not explicitly made between estrangement from the covenants of promise and then covenant membership. Rather, the imagery is of collective membership of God's household, an image which then morphs so that these members are seen to grow and be fitted together to become a 'holy temple.'

2:22 makes clear that the people being built together constitute the 'dwelling place for God by the Spirit': the people of God grow together to become corporately the sacred space where the presence of God dwelt, just as in the physical temple.

In summary, Ephesians 2:11-22 contains a trajectory from old to new, from Gentile past separated from Christ and far from God and his people, towards membership of Christ's new humanity on equal terms with Jews. Far becomes near; without Christ becomes in Christ; alienation becomes citizenship, and this new humanity becomes the location of God's presence.

What causes transformation?

2:14-18 is the literary and theological bridge between the before and after descriptors. The 'far off' in 2:13 have been 'brought near' by the blood of

Christ. It is Christ's sacrificial death that reverses the five-fold description of the Gentiles' pre-Christian state.¹⁰

2:14-18 is an unpacking of the concept in 2:13 of the far off coming near. 2:14 introduces Christ himself as 'our peace' with a change from 2nd to 1st person personal pronouns, thereby including Jewish readers. 2:14 continues with the description of what has been done in order for Christ to be 'our peace'; he 'made the two one', destroyed the 'wall of partition' and nullified the law. All of these were done in order that Christ should create 'in him' (in himself) one new humanity, 'thus making peace.'

This 'peace-making' is further expressed in 2:16 as Christ having reconciled both 'in one body to God' through the cross, having killed enmity by it. 2:17 underlines the fact that both Jews and Gentiles are needy recipients of this peace-making work, while 2:18 describes both groups now having access to the Father 'by the Spirit.' This concept of the priestly role of granting access to God's presence provides one of the links to the following temple imagery.

There are several further observations. First, the subject of all of the verbs in this central section is Christ. This contrasts with 2:1-10 where God is the agent and 4:17-24 where it is believers. Secondly, the means by which these reconciling actions are accomplished is by the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross. The far coming near is 'by the blood of Christ,' enmity and the dividing wall of partition are destroyed 'in (or by) his flesh' (2:15), and the reconciliation of the two groups horizontally to form one body and vertically to God (2:16) is 'through the cross.' Thirdly, this horizontal and vertical reconciliation is seen as Christ removing any barriers necessary in order that he should create one united people. Christopher Wright summarises:

Paul's picture is decidedly not Jews plus Gentiles, remaining forever distinct with separate means of covenant membership and access to God, but rather that through the cross God has destroyed the barrier between the two and created a new entity, so that both together and both alike have access to God through the same Spirit.¹¹

¹⁰ The next occurrence of far and near language in v17 ensures that Jews do not think they need Christ any less – peace is preached to the far off AND those near. The parallel with 2:1-10 where Paul speaks in first person plural of all being by nature children of wrath (2:3), the designation of the 'circumcision' as 'hand-made' (v11 – a term always used of idolatry) and Christ preaching to 'far off and to those near' (2:17), all demonstrate Paul's lack of differentiation between Jews and Gentiles in their need of Christ's peace-making work.

¹¹ Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God* (Leicester: IVP, 2008), p. 528.

Both dimensions are presented in 2:11-22 as the fruit of Christ's sacrificial death by which he becomes 'our peace.' The work of the Messiah in Ephesians 2:11-22 therefore does not only concern the vertical aspects of the individual believer's condition before God but is also the means by which a new people is created and those who otherwise would be enemies are reconciled both to each other and to God.

Community as new humanity

Ephesians 2:11-22 emphasises the creation of new humanity. One cannot be reconciled vertically to God without also participating in the inaugurated new humanity of 2:15. There is an important connection between Ephesians 2:15 and 4:24 where those who have learned Christ have been taught to 'put on the new man' (with creation language closely associated). Thus, to put on this 'new humanity' is a reference backwards to 2:15 and involves participating in this new corporate entity. The command in 4:24 therefore draws into itself everything that is said of this new humanity in 2:11-22, a point obscured by the NIV and ESV translation as 'new self'.¹²

This theme of participation in the new humanity is foundational for the practical application in 4:25ff which may be conceived, therefore, as relational examples of putting on the new humanity. Reconciliation with God means membership of the new humanity which in turn means a new way of living ('walking') that is consistent with this new reality. This is another way of saying that Ephesians appears to conceive of no separation between soteriology, ecclesiology and ethics. They are held together in this concept of union with the Messiah and therefore communion with Messiah's people and the transformed 'walking' expressive of the new humanity.

Isaiah and Zechariah as Background to Ephesians 2:11-22

What is the significance of the use of the OT concepts and texts in Ephesians 2:11-22? There is only space to sketch in outline Paul's appropriation of OT texts in Ephesians 2:11-22.¹³ There is general agreement amongst interpreters that in Ephesians 2:17 Paul combines Isaiah 57:19 ("Peace, peace, to the far and to the near," says the LORD) with 'he came and

¹² Baugh's recent commentary surveys various options for interpretation of 4:24 and concludes that 'The new man is the new existence in the inaugurated new creation, which was pioneered by the resurrected Mediator...'; S. M. Baugh, *Ephesians: Evangelical Exegetical Commentary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), pp. 373-75.

¹³ This section of this paper is reproduced from 'Transformed Walking and Missional Temple Building: Discipleship in Ephesians', forthcoming in *Presbyterion* 45/2 (Fall 2019).

preached' from Isaiah 52:7. In using these texts, Paul also imports their theological context (the eschatological pilgrimage of Gentiles to Zion and their inclusion in God's people) and finds their fulfilment in the present reality of the Messiah's people. This appropriation and christologising of key themes in Isaiah is a move consistent with other NT texts.¹⁴ Furthermore, Paul's use of the common Jewish exegetical technique of hook-work linkage (*ge'zērā šāwā*) to combine texts invites us to seek further textual influence on Ephesians 2:11-22.

Zechariah 6:12-15 employs the same words 'far off', 'near' and 'peace' as the Isaiah texts and also exhibits strong thematic coherence.¹⁵ Zechariah describes a Messianic figure (the 'shoot') who will 'build the house of the Lord' (Zech. 6:12) and from whom, in a combination of priestly and kingly functions, 'counsel of peace' will issue ('that deliberate policy which procures peace.'¹⁶). Zechariah 6:15 then describes those who are 'far off' who will come (near) and help to build the temple.

This use of Zechariah coheres with the flow of thought of Ephesians 2 and provides an OT link between the 'far off' language of Isaiah and the concept of temple building. If this is so, then the Temple theme in Ephesians 2:21-22 is not an unconnected afterthought to the earlier statement about the far-off and near, but rather represents the culmination of a carefully constructed argument based on a Christological exegesis of Isaiah 52:7, 57:19 and Zechariah 6:12-15. The concept of 'far off' has been appropriated and applied to the idea of Gentiles becoming members of

¹⁴ See, for example, Jesus' own appropriation of Isa. 61:1-3 in Luke 4:18-19, Paul's use of 11 quotations from Isaiah in Rom 9-11, 10 quotations from or allusions to Isa. 53 in the NT, and the church's understanding of its mission to the Gentiles being drawn from Isaiah (29:14 = 1 Cor. 1:19; 40:13 = 1 Cor. 2:16; 66:4 = 1 Cor. 2:9; 11:10 = Rom. 15:12; 49:6 = Acts 13:47; 52:5 = Rom. 2:24; 52:15 = Rom. 15:21) For a more complete list and discussion of the relationship of Isaiah to the NT see John Oswalt, 'Isaiah', *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 2000); J. Ross Wagner, *Heralds of the Good News: Isaiah and Paul 'in Concert' in the Letter to the Romans* (Leiden: Brill, 2002); *Isaiah in the New Testament*, ed. by Steve Moyise and Maarten J.J. Menken (London: T&T Clark, 2005).

¹⁵ For discussion for criteria for recognising re-use of Scripture, see William A. Tooman, *Gog of Magog: Reuse of Scripture and Compositional Technique in Ezekiel 38-39* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

¹⁶ John L. Mackay, *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi: God's Restored People* (Fearn, UK: Christian Focus, 2003), p. 140.

the people of God. The Zechariah text is drawn in so that the concept of this new people of God is connected with the temple.¹⁷

What has come to pass in the creation of the new humanity in Ephesians 2:15 is thus the fulfilment of the eschatological pilgrimage of Gentiles to Zion in Isaiah and the rebuilding of the temple (with the help of the 'far off') by the Davidic 'shoot' of Zechariah. Furthermore, by bringing together covenantal concepts and temple imagery to describe this new entity, the church, as the new temple, is presented as the fulfilment of God's covenant promises.

Community as temple

Ephesians 2:11-22 is thus concerned with the figure of the Davidic priest/king who builds the temple and is helped to do so by the far off who come near. The innovation in Ephesians, however, is that Christ's people actually constitute the temple in which he has supremacy as cornerstone or capstone.

The new united humanity, created by Christ through his sacrifice on the Cross, is the rebuilt temple towards which the various OT texts pointed and the spiritual dwelling place constituted by Christ's people joined together and built up becomes the location of God's presence.

Conclusion

The appropriation of the OT in Ephesians 2:11-22 leads to two further conclusions about biblical community.

The use of these OT texts teaches Gentile readers their historical identity as God's people.

Paul's intention seems to be to communicate to the (largely Gentile) readers that they are members of a people in continuity with Israel. It seems hardly conceivable that this is offered merely as an interesting fact for his readers' amusement. Rather, given the general thrust of the letter towards relational application from 4:25 onwards, the readers are intended to understand something about their new identity that will make a difference to how they will then walk in this world. Paul wants them to know that they stand in continuity with the blessings and responsibilities of God's historical covenant people.

¹⁷ Further support for use of Zechariah is the undisputed quotation of Zech. 8:16 in Eph. 4:25.

The use of these OT texts imparts to the concept of growth a missional trajectory.

Moritz comments ‘Ephesians does little more than to bring out the perspective already inherent in Isaiah [. . .] that YHWH’s principle of gathering his followers from afar is not restricted to Jews but serves a more universal purpose.’¹⁸ Ephesians 2:22 is key in articulating an idea which then reverberates through the rest of the letter¹⁹ – the notion that believers are part of a corporate entity whose function is to be the dwelling place of God on earth in the way that formerly the physical temple had been. This lays a privilege and responsibility on those believers that sets the stage for all of the letter’s practical instruction. It also changes the nature of that instruction. It is no longer only about the moral or relational behaviour of believers. Rather, it is a fundamental aspect of mission that this corporate entity should be built up so that God’s presence is manifested to the nations.

D. CONNECTIONS WITH THE REST OF EPHESIANS – HOW DOES THE CHURCH GROW?

Ephesians 4:11-16 – A body with parts and leaders who equip

In Ephesians 4, Paul switches to the metaphor of God’s people as a body made up of constituent parts, the functioning of which body depends on each part doing what God made it to do (4:16).²⁰ This change in imagery emphasises the dynamic of growth less explicit in the temple imagery of Ephesians 2.

The connection between Ephesians 2:11-22 and 4:11-16 is not just thematic. There is also a strong lexical parallel. In 2:21, God’s people, like stones in a building, are being ‘fitted together’ (*synarmologeō*), a word used only one further time in the NT in 4:16 where God’s people, like parts of a body, are being fitted together.

This parallel adds to the temple being built of people in Ephesians 2 the additional concept of each member making some kind of functional contribution ‘as each part does its work’ (Eph. 4:16 NIV).

¹⁸ Thorsten Moritz, *A Profound Mystery: The Use of the Old Testament in Ephesians* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), pp. 46-47.

¹⁹ See especially the ‘glory’ language of Eph. 1 and the ‘fullness’ language of chapter 3.

²⁰ Literally here it is ‘each part working in measure’. The use of the term ‘measure’ repeats Eph. 4:7 where each Christian is given ‘grace according the measure of the gift of Christ’. The idea is of every member of the body being gifted by Christ to make their contribution to the functioning of that body.

This observation then invites examination of the preceding verses of which Ephesians 4:16 is the conclusion. Ephesians 4:7-16 describes the risen Christ giving gifts of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to his people.²¹ These persons are given to 'equip God's people for the work of service'²² so that the body of Christ is 'built up'.

The language of the rest of the passage is striking in continuing the theme of building up. Notable, however, is the introduction of maturity language. Thus, this 'building up' is towards three parallel expressions of the goal of building: unity 'of faith and of knowledge of the son of God'; maturity that is contrasted in 4:14 with the state of being infants; and 'fullness' (using temple language). All of this is in order that (4:14) 'we' should no longer be immature, characterised by vulnerability to false and deceitful teachings. This immaturity is then further contrasted in 4:15 with 'speaking truth in love,' a condition in which 'we' grow into Christ, the head. The head-body imagery is then further developed in 4:16 by means of the picture of each member of that body having a function that is like the ligaments and sinews that hold the body together so that it 'builds itself up' in love.

There is thus a comprehensive picture of the role of gifted individuals within the church whose function it is to equip these saints so that each plays his/her designated role so that the whole body is built up. Their leadership is aimed at growth to maturity in each of God's saints.

This all, of course, raises the practical question of what this leadership ought therefore to look like and how it ought to be exercised. I will suggest some directions in our application below, but for now it is sufficient to say that this dynamic missional temple that is the community of Christian believers grows only as its leaders function to 'equip' and 'build up' its members to maturity.

Ephesians 4:1-7 – A united body whose unity is maintained by worthy walking of its members

The argument so far has been that biblical community as conceived in Ephesians is deeply rooted in OT concepts of covenant and temple and

²¹ It seems to me that Paul here is not so much giving us a taxonomy of leadership in the church as he is giving us a comprehensive designation of leaders and then telling us what they are for. It is better, therefore, to let the following clauses that describe the results of the actions of these people bring definition to the list.

²² Note the singular 'work' rather than the NIV's plural. By translating more literally as singular, emphasis is brought to the concept of each member making their contribution to one overall corporate work, that is, the building and functioning of God's missional temple.

in OT texts that describe the nations coming to God's dwelling place. The concept of the people of God as missional temple that fulfils God's covenant promise to Abraham to bless the nations raises the stakes for healthy, functioning biblical community. In other words, what is at stake in whether this biblical community functions or not is nothing less than the mission of God to bless the nations through his people.²³

This in turn places Paul's concern for unity in Ephesians 4:1-6 in its proper context. Unity is related to the functioning of this temple and is therefore closely related to mission. Three implications follow.

First, in Ephesians, unity is the fruit of the peace making work of Christ on the cross (Eph. 2:11-22) reconciling those formerly estranged from God and each other in 'one new man' (Eph. 2:15). Disunity therefore risks denying the efficacy of the cross of Jesus.

Secondly, if the church is weak missionally, then it may be as a result of disunity. As we have seen, the two are theologically connected.

Thirdly, unity in Ephesians is not concerned with institutional or organisational membership, but rather with union with Christ and then with the 'worthy walking' that flows from that gracious union (Eph. 4:1) and leads to zeal to maintain the 'unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (Eph. 4:3). In 4:2 'worthy walking' that will promote and maintain unity is described as four qualities – humility, meekness, long-suffering and bearing with one another in love. The necessity of these qualities in order to maintain unity presupposes challenges to unity in the body of Christ. Sadly, at times, our brothers and sisters in Christ will be difficult to get along with! Any idealistic notion of biblical community is thus ruled out and perfectionism will be antithetical to unity. Building biblical community will require humility, meekness, long-suffering and a willingness to bear with one another in love.

Ephesians 4:17-24 and 4:25ff – A community graciously united and transformed

Two final observations must be made about biblical community as conceived in Ephesians. First, this community is composed of those who are graciously united to Christ and who are thus described in Ephesians 4:20 as having 'learned Christ'. This is further explained in 4:21-24 – to learn Christ is to hear him and be taught in him to put off the old man, be

²³ For development of this theme in book length, see especially Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010).

renewed in the spirit of the mind and put on the new man.²⁴ Those who constitute biblical community are therefore those who have both been transformed and are continuing to be transformed because they are graciously united to Christ. Biblical community is then to be characterised by the kind of relational transformation described in 4:25-6:9 that is the fruit of ongoing participation in and appropriation of the inaugurated new humanity in Christ (4:24 and 2:15).

The second observation is simply to signpost an area that requires much more work. There are numbers of statements in the triune blessing of Ephesians 1:3-14 that inform our doctrine of God. These statements are foundational to the theological and practical concerns of the rest of the letter. They are not so much raw material for philosophical speculation as they are statements about the kind of God who does what the rest of the letter tells us he does. These statements, it seems, are designed to encourage, motivate and give confidence to believers. A God who creates, chooses and blesses in a way that is not at all contingent or dependent on some quality or action in us is a God whose blessing may be received and utterly depended upon. Such a God does not need anything from his creatures, but rather gives lavishly to them. The God of Ephesians 1 is not one who is needy of legalistic service from his people. At the same time, he chose them to be holy and blameless, so his grace is not license. The relative neglect of doctrine of God in contemporary evangelicalism is just one of the factors contributing to distorted views and practices of sanctification.²⁵

E. SUGGESTED APPLICATIONS

The idea of God's people as those united to Christ and each other and who constitute and function as God's missional temple is pregnant with application. When we add the concept in Ephesians that the role of leaders is to equip each member to make their contribution to the functioning body, we have a comprehensive picture of the life of the community of God's people and a set of criteria by which we can evaluate our current forms, practices and structures. Will the church in 21st century Scotland be willing to take *semper reformanda* seriously by evaluating all that it does according to whether it serves the functioning of God's missional

²⁴ These verbs express an ongoing action. See Buist M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), pp. 359-64.

²⁵ There is a growing body of literature on this subject. See, for example, Grant Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ: Paul's Gospel and Christian Moral Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2019). Macaskill is explicitly critical of social trinitarian models in weakening our thinking on sanctification.

temple? On this question, it seems to me, hangs the question of mission to the unreached peoples of Scotland. Let me offer some thoughts on application in closing.

Leaders who equip – a vision for leadership

According to Ephesians 4:11ff, Christ gives gifts to the church of leaders whose God-given purpose is to ‘equip the saints for the work of service’. Since this means a diversity of members making their contribution to the functioning body, it follows that such equipping though sharing principles, cannot be carried out in a ‘one size fits all’ manner. A more personal work is implied.

Maturity that results from this equipping is summarised in Ephesians 4:20 as ‘learning Christ’ and is manifested in the relational transformation described in 4:25ff. Such a relational outcome cannot be accomplished by a non-relational input. People will need more than only doctrinal content (but certainly not less than – see 4:14).²⁶ Reduction of discipleship to indoctrination and socially induced behaviour modification falls a long way short of what Paul describes here as learning Christ. Helping people to ‘learn Christ’ and live out the reality of the new humanity is a thoroughly relational process, but it is a relational process that cannot be devoid of content. Biblical content is taught in the context of relationship in which the application of that biblical content is modelled and demonstrated.²⁷ Rejecting any false dichotomy, we may instead propose a way of thinking about equipping of God’s people that is a ‘content-full relationship’.

This kind of equipping relationship cannot be reduced to a programme, formula or technique. Rather, it is a way of being in which leaders approach every encounter – be it sermon, small group, personal conversation or casual chat in the supermarket – asking, ‘Lord, how may I serve your purposes today in this person’s life? How may I speak or act to point them towards Christ and help them embrace and follow him in faith.’ It is at this point that contemporary evangelicalism’s capitulation to late modernity balks at anything so soft and ill-defined.²⁸ Our preference for measurable outcomes and our reductionistic views of success drive methodologies in Christian ministry leadership that bear more resemblance to the modern manager than to our Lord Jesus. Such reduc-

²⁶ We may want to ask to what extent our pedagogy in the church is shaped by enlightenment presuppositions rather than biblical/theological categories.

²⁷ This also has capacity implications – a plurality of leaders will be required.

²⁸ See, for example, Os Guinness, *Renaissance: The Power of the Gospel However Dark the Times* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2014).

tionistic views also create fertile ground for the endemic abuses of power by leaders in the church.

In summary, this way of thinking about church and the role of its leaders challenges contemporary praxis and requires reflection and self-examination by leaders in the church. The discussion above of the character qualities necessary to uphold and maintain unity should particularly challenge leaders whose call is to model to others their own progress in Christ (1 Tim. 4:15). We might, for example, want to privilege character qualities of humility, meekness, long-suffering²⁹ and willingness to bear with others above mere giftedness or technical competence when appointing leaders.

Discipleship and mission in the 21st century

There is only space here to restate one key point. Because discipleship equips people for their contribution to a functioning missional temple/body, it follows that discipleship and mission are inseparable. Discipleship that is not outward focused and 'missional' is not biblical discipleship. Mission that is reduced to activity separated from growth in character and transformed relationships in union with Christ is not Christian mission.

Factors militating against the growth of biblical community

Ephesians closes with the exhortation to 'stand firm against the Devil's schemes'. With the mission of God dependent on the functioning temple/body, it should be no surprise that the enemy would have schemes to cause dysfunction. There is space here only to list some of those schemes and invite the reader to apply.

Disunity

Disunity is a time honoured tactic and clearly successful in Scotland. The extent to which the devil succeeds in tempting believers to pride, self-assertion, impatience and irritability towards each other (the opposite of Eph. 4:1-2) will be the extent to which unity is disrupted and mission compromised.

Theological weakness and reductionism

Various theological deficiencies will have a knock-on effect on the way God's people live and on whether they manifest individually and collectively the sort of transformed walking that is in view in Ephesians. I have

²⁹ The Greek here is often translated 'patience', but I feel this doesn't really capture the more active sense of 'suffering long' implied in *makrothymia*. Interestingly, it is the opposite of the modern Greek for 'quick temper'.

suggested above that we must trace these back to source neglect of doctrine of God. Related to this, the desire to formulate a 'simple gospel' that can easily be memorised and shared seems to be associated with a neglect of union with Christ, an idea central to Ephesians and foundational to Paul's ethics.³⁰ The consequences of this neglect are what Sinclair Ferguson terms the 'non-identical twins' of legalism and antinomianism.³¹

Individualism and Consumer culture

The adaptation of the Gospel to a culture of individual autonomy and the entitlement to have felt needs met, will inevitably conflict with the inherently corporate nature of life united to Christ and his people. A therapeutic and individualistic consumer 'Gospel' will be at odds with the qualities necessary to 'maintain the unity of the Spirit' (Eph. 4:1-3). A 'gospel' that preaches the benefits of justification apart from union with the One who dethrones the sovereign self in his call to discipleship (e.g. Luke 9:23ff) will fail to create the kind of community envisaged in Ephesians and, consequently, mission will be compromised. We will need to think much harder about cultural challenges to biblical community if we are to respond to them effectively.

'Attack the Leaders'

Given the importance of 'equipping God's people for the work of ministry', it is no surprise that leadership should particularly come under attack in order to negate the mission of God through his people. Again, there are numbers of factors, each of which needs a much fuller treatment than space permits here.

Leaders who don't equip

It will always be tempting to try to make the task of leadership in the body of Christ easier. To labour to see Christ formed (that is to help people to learn Christ) cannot be reduced to programme and will not be accomplished only by the delivery of information. Furthermore, a false view of maturity that involves hiding one's struggles rather than 'demonstrating progress' will fail to equip God's people to maturity. Hiding one's faults or sins in the desire to maintain a good reputation is a failure to love God's people who, instead of seeing the greatness of God's grace and how it works, are encouraged to aspire to a modern-day Phariseeism. There

³⁰ See Grant Macaskill, *Union with Christ in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

³¹ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance – Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

simply cannot be any shortcut to the long, slow, messy and often painful process of loving people towards maturity in Christ. Leaders in the body of Christ are tempted to prioritise almost any other activity than this and our adoption of reductionistic proxy success measures means that leaders will be rewarded and praised for anything other than giving their time to content-full relationships that equip the saints.

Busyness

In every group of pastors where I have taught this material, the feedback has been the same – content-full relationship seems biblical and sounds good, but ‘I just don’t have the time’. As a pastor, I empathise deeply. But we must ask the reformational question – if we are too busy to give ourselves to what is the central purpose of leadership in the body of Christ, then what are we busy doing and how can we stop or change it as soon as possible?

Insecure leaders who compete

Disunity in the body of Christ can often be traced back to the insecurity and competitiveness of church leaders. Power in leadership is used to compensate for what is perceived to be lacking in the leader’s life or to defend against perceived threat. By contrast, to take Ephesians 2:18 seriously is to say that contentment in fellowship with the Triune God should cause a security that abolishes the need to compete with others. Local church life that bears more resemblance to social Darwinism (survival of the best funded with the most attractive programmes), than to the fruit of the reconciling work of Christ is, literally, a dis-grace.

Hospitality

The last signpost is to the importance of hospitality. It is no accident that this is a key qualification for leaders in the body of Christ. Welcoming people into one’s home is an essential part of this and allows others to see whether the Gospel is just a nice idea preached from the pulpit or whether relationship with Jesus is lived out in practice. Our homes need to be less refuges and much more outposts of mission.

F. CONCLUSION

‘Community’ has become a buzzword in evangelical circles in recent years, churches being commended or condemned according to assessments of the quality of their community. It is tempting to see in the contemporary fascination with the subject a response to a culture that is increasingly characterised by fragmentation, isolation and loneliness, at the same time as increasingly dependent upon technological solutions for interpersonal communication. A culture that speaks much of ‘community’ may do so

precisely because it experiences so little of it, and this may in turn represent a great window of opportunity for the church that is faithful to its calling to be God's missional temple, demonstrating and proclaiming by the quality of Christ-centred community who the Triune God is and what he is like. May God make it so.