

Collecting Money and Maintaining the Unity of the Spirit¹

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Among the most precious texts of God’s Word is Ephesians 5:25b: “Christ...loved the church and gave himself for her.” Before time began or space was formed, the One we know as the Lord Jesus Christ had set his heart on dying for human sinners. Not out of necessity nor from need, not by constraint nor grudgingly, but from a heart of love, out of mercy and kindness, freely and willingly, Christ came into this world to die for the Church.

Equally the Holy Spirit, whom Christ gave in his stead when he ascended to the right hand of the Father, also loves the Church for which Christ died. After all it was the Spirit who laid the Church’s apostolic foundation on the day of Pentecost.² And it is the Spirit who adds men and women to the Church as he enables them to confess Christ as Lord.³ It is the Spirit who pours the love of God into their hearts and draws them to worship God and pray to him as “Dear Father.”⁴ It is the Spirit who lavishes gifts upon the Church that she

¹ This article was given as an address at a conference for ministers held at Bala, Wales, in June 2008.

² Acts 2. See also Ephesians 2:19-22; 3:5.

³ 1 Corinthians 12:3.

⁴ Romans 5:5; Philippians 3:3; Galatians 4:6.

might grow in spiritual maturity and bring glory to the One who is ever at the centre of all the Spirit's work, namely, the Lord Jesus.⁵

It properly follows that one of the marks of being filled with the Spirit is participation in this love of the Spirit for the Church.⁶ Those who are led by the Spirit, those who are filled with the Spirit, love the people of God.

“The Love of the Spirit”

The Spirit's creation of love for the people of God seems to appear in a verse in Romans 15. Paul is about to embark on a dangerous trip to Judea and Jerusalem, where he knows he will face “unbelievers” who are strong opponents of the gospel.⁷ So Paul requests his readers in Rome not to forget to pray for him. Adding to the solemnity of this appeal for prayer is the two-fold basis upon which the Apostle makes his request. First, the admonition that Paul gives to his readers is “through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Here Paul invokes the authority of the one Lord, to whom both he and his readers are bound as servants.⁸ He says in effect that because Christ is their Lord, they ought to pray for his servant who is seeking the advance of his Master's kingdom and the exaltation of his dear name.

Then, he makes this request “by the love of the Spirit.” This is a unique phrase in the Scriptures. Elsewhere when the Scriptures speak of the love of one of the divine persons, it is the always the love of the Father or the love of Christ.⁹ Moreover, it is not immediately clear what Paul means by the phrase.

- Is it the love that believers have for the Holy Spirit?
- Or the love that the Spirit has for believers?
- Or should it be understood to mean the love that the Holy Spirit produces in believers for one another?

⁵ 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4:11-13; John 16:14.

⁶ 1 John 3:16-24.

⁷ Romans 15:30-31.

⁸ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (1979 ed.; reprint Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), II, 776.

⁹ Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 632. For an exposition of the love of the Spirit for the believer that draws on a variety of biblical texts about the Spirit's work, see Robert Philip, *The Love of the Spirit Traced in His Work* (1836 ed.; reprint Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006).

Few commentators think that the first option is a possibility here. The second has been held by, among others, John Ryland, Jr. (1753-1825), the close friend of William Carey (1761-1834),¹⁰ and John Murray (1898-1975), the Presbyterian theologian who taught at Westminster Theological Seminary for much of his life and who wrote a superb commentary on Romans.¹¹ The interpretation of John Calvin (1509-1564), though, is the one that probably makes the best sense here. He interprets the phrase as the love “by which the saints ought to embrace one another.”¹² As Calvin goes on to say: “The love of the Spirit means the love by which Christ joins us together, because it is not of the flesh, nor of the world, but proceeds from His Spirit who is the bond of our unity.”¹³

In this reading of the phrase, Paul is basing his appeal on the fact that his readers are indwelt by the Spirit and as such know something of the love that the Spirit produces in believers for one another. Paul thus expects that love for God’s people will in part be demonstrated by prayer for them. To paraphrase the Apostle John: the one who says he loves God’s people and never prays for them is a liar.

“Constrained by the Spirit”

Now, this trip to Jerusalem is also treated at some length by Luke in the final section of the Book of Acts. On the way to Jerusalem, Paul with his apostolic band and a few other brothers,¹⁴ stop at Miletus, from where Paul asks the elders in Ephesus to come and meet him. As Paul meets with the Ephesian elders in Miletus, he tells them that he is “constrained by the Spirit” to go up to Jerusalem. He is not certain what awaits him there, although the Spirit has been bearing witness through various Christian prophets that he will face “imprisonment and afflictions.”¹⁵ A little further on in the journey Paul and his apostolic band reach the ancient Phoenician city of Tyre where, during a meeting

¹⁰ “The Love of the Spirit” in his *Pastoral Memorials: Selected from the Manuscripts of the Late Revd. John Ryland, D.D. of Bristol* (London: B.J. Holdsworth, 1828), II, 42-43.

¹¹ *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1965), 221.

¹² *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. Ross Mackenzie (1960 ed.; reprint Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1973), 317. See also Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 633.

¹³ *Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, 317.

¹⁴ For a list of some of those accompanying Paul, see Acts 20:4.

¹⁵ Acts 20:22-23.

with some brothers, they urge the Apostle – “through the Spirit,” Luke tells us – not to go to Jerusalem.¹⁶

At Caesarea, yet another stop on the journey, Paul and his co-workers lodge with Philip the evangelist. While there, Paul is again warned, this time by the prophet Agabus, of what awaits him at Jerusalem. “Thus says the Holy Spirit,” Agabus solemnly announces as he takes Paul’s belt and binds his own hands and feet, “This is how the Jews will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.” This is too much for Paul’s companions who now plead with him not to continue in the journey. But Paul, knowing that the Spirit is leading him up to Jerusalem, is determined to go on. He is ready, he tells his friends and the brothers in Caesarea, “not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.”¹⁷

So the Spirit led Paul up to Jerusalem, where he did indeed experience afflictions and imprisonment at the hands of the Romans.¹⁸ But – and this is vital to answer – why did the Spirit lead him up to Jerusalem? In short, the answer to this question can put this way: was it not because of the Spirit’s love for the Church and especially his delight in the unity of believers in Christ?

The Collection and the Spirit

Go back to Romans 15, where one discovers the reason that Paul took this dangerous trip to Jerusalem in the first place. There Paul informs the Roman believers that he is coming to Rome and that he intends to go from there to Spain. But before he headed off to Rome he first had to go up to Jerusalem.¹⁹ As he writes in verses 25-28:

At present, I am going to Jerusalem to bring aid to the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. When therefore, I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you.

¹⁶ Acts 21:4.

¹⁷ Acts 21:13.

¹⁸ See Acts 21:27-28:31.

¹⁹ Acts 15:23-24.

Paul was going up to Jerusalem to deliver a collection of money for the poor believers there. But who were these poor saints and how did they come to be poor? What were the historical circumstances that prompted Paul to begin making such a collection as this in the first place?

To answer these questions we have to go back to the earliest days of the Jerusalem church when, soon after Pentecost, the first Christian community exuberantly sold their real estate and their personal possessions, “had all things in common,” and sought to ensure that there were no poor among them.²⁰ In doing this, these believers were not seeking to obey any explicit commandment from Christ. Rather, they were simply motivated by a desire to make manifest and plain for all to see that in Christ they had “one heart and one soul.”²¹

In disposing of their financial reserves in this way, however, the community placed itself in a highly vulnerable position. Persecution would only have aggravated this situation.²² Moreover, during the 40s there were a series of food shortages in Palestine and then a particularly severe famine in 48 AD which appears to have triggered a financial crisis in the Jerusalem church.²³ Thus, when the Apostle Paul went up to Jerusalem in the very year that this famine struck he was specifically asked by the leaders there to “remember the poor.”²⁴

In making this suggestion the leaders of the Jerusalem church little knew how it was to become a major part of Paul’s life and ministry for nearly a decade. Scott McKnight goes so far as to describe it as “Paul’s *obsession* for nearly two decades.”²⁵ While this is probably something of an exaggeration, it clearly was of great importance to the Apostle.

This collection involved the making of elaborate plans to gather together what was a substantial amount of money from the various

²⁰ Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35.

²¹ Acts 4:32; Max Scheler, *Ressentiment*, ed. L. A. Coser and trans. W. W. Holdheim (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 111-112.

²² Compare the persecution described in Hebrews 10:33-34, where the loss of material possessions and goods was involved.

²³ Keith F. Nickle, *The Collection: A Study in Paul’s Strategy* (Geneva, AL: Allenson, 1966), 24, 29-32; S. McKnight, “Collection for the Saints” in Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, with Daniel G. Reid, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL/Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 144.

²⁴ Galatians 2:10.

²⁵ McKnight, “Collection for the Saints”, 143.

churches that Paul had planted among the Gentiles.²⁶ Then, once the money had been gathered, it was to be delivered to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem to help provide succour and aid for the poorest of them there. But Paul came to see that this collection was a marvelous opportunity to demonstrate to the Jerusalem church and Jewish believers everywhere that even as there was one Lord and one gospel, so also there was one people of God.²⁷

In Romans 15:27 the Apostle indicates succinctly what his view of the collection was: it is nothing less than a concrete and visible expression of the unity that Jewish and Gentile believers had in Christ. It was from the Jewish believers in Palestine that Paul and other missionaries to the Gentiles had been sent out to bring the light of the gospel to those who were imprisoned in the dark dungeon of paganism. In so doing the Gentiles had been partakers in their spiritual blessings. Through the witness of Jewish believers these Gentiles had been taught the things of the Spirit. Having such unity in spiritual things, it was only proper that the Gentiles minister to their Jewish brothers and sisters in material things. In fact, the word that Paul uses in Romans 15:26 to describe the collection is *koinonia*, which in other contexts in Paul's writings is translated "fellowship." The sharing by Gentile believers of their financial resources with their brothers and sisters in Palestine is not simply a gift of money and nothing more. For Paul it speaks of their common life in Christ and, as such, it is a sign of fellowship, proof of their love for the brethren.²⁸

It is noteworthy that in this text, his last word on the collection, Paul gives no indication that he thought this substantial gift of money would solve once and for all the financial hardship and problems of the Jerusalem believers. But he hoped and prayed that it would convince the believers in Jerusalem that just as there is one gospel and one Lord, so there is one people of God, bound together by one Spirit and demonstrating that unity in real, tangible ways. The collection had become for Paul far more than a gift to relieve poverty and physical suffering. It was nothing less than a powerful symbol of the unity of God's people in the Spirit, a unity that had been brought into being by

²⁶ See 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8-9. The reference in 2 Corinthians 8:20 to this collection being a "lavish gift" points to the substantial amount of money involved.

²⁷ McKnight, "Collection for the Saints", 145.

²⁸ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 38B (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1988), 875.

a Spirit-empowered embrace of the gospel. The one gospel preached to different ethnic groups had produced one people of God.

As has been pointed out, in taking this collection up to Jerusalem Paul was well aware of the dangers that he faced. Thus, he asked the Roman Christians to pray fervently that his “service for Jerusalem” would be “acceptable to the saints.”²⁹ Paul’s sense of the dangers that awaited him in Jerusalem were not unfounded. After he had delivered the collection to the believers there,³⁰ the presence of one of his Gentile brothers with him got him into trouble. Seen by Jewish zealots in the Temple who hated him and the gospel which he preached, he was wrongly accused of defiling the Temple by bringing one of the Gentiles, the Ephesian Trophimus, into those areas of the Temple reserved for the Jews.³¹ A mob sought to kill the Apostle and he was rescued only at the last moment by the Romans. Placed under arrest, he would spend the next four years as a Roman prisoner and it was in chains that he finally arrived in Rome.

“The Unity of the Spirit”

One of the Apostle Paul’s deepest convictions was that the death of the Lord Jesus had not only accomplished the reconciliation of God and those for whom Christ died, but it had also broken down the barriers that divide men and women from one another. This conviction first comes to expression in Galatians, where Paul asserts that in Christ Jesus “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female.”³² In the presence of God, all men and women are on an equal footing: all are sinners and all need to come to God the same way, through faith alone in the Lord Jesus Christ alone. In the context of this letter this verse is a sharp rebuke to those individuals who were troubling the Galatian believers by urging them to believe that for salvation one had to embrace all of the distinctive features of Judaism. Not so, Paul strongly responds. Religious background, race, even gender, are meaningless issues when one stands in God’s holy presence. There, one thing, and one thing alone matters: does Christ Jesus know you as his own? One’s religious heritage, one’s economic standing, one’s gender – all fade away in the light of one’s

²⁹ Romans 15:31.

³⁰ See Acts 24:17 for the sole reference to the actual collection in Acts.

³¹ Acts 21:27-29. Trophimus had come up with Paul to Jerusalem as a representative of the churches in Asia. For the other representatives, see Acts 20:4.

³² Galatians 3:28.

answer to that most important of all questions, “Do you know God through his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ?”

A few years later, when some Corinthian believers, “restless experientialists,”³³ had become overly impressed with one of the more spectacular spiritual gifts, namely, speaking in tongues, and were in danger of despising those who did not manifest this gift, the Apostle was quick to remind them that *every* believer in the body of Christ is a gifted individual whom the body needs to function properly.³⁴ “In one Spirit,” he declares, all believers were “baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit.”³⁵ The fundamental unity of Christians, established by the Holy Spirit on the basis of the death of Christ, is a unity that transcends religious heritage, economic status, and in this context, even spiritual giftedness.

In Romans Paul again returns to the issue which he had taken up in his letter to the Galatians: how do sinful men and women find complete and full acceptance by a holy and just God? Some Jewish Christians found it extremely difficult to shed the basic assumptions with which they had grown up, namely, that the Jewish religious heritage, epitomized in circumcision and strict adherence to the Jewish food laws, was necessary for salvation. We see this struggle, for instance, in the life of the Apostle Peter, who, as a believer of some years’ standing, was still clearly wrestling with whether or not it was right to eat with Gentile believers.³⁶

Paul’s response to this particular struggle was twofold. First, he systematically laid out, for his own day and for all time, the only way that a man or a woman finds peace with God: since “all,” both Jew and Gentile, “have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,”³⁷ then all must come to God in the identical way, namely, through faith in Christ Jesus, who was crucified for sinners. As Paul says later in the tenth chapter of Romans: “There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’.”³⁸

³³ This apt description is that of J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 30.

³⁴ See 1 Corinthians 12-14.

³⁵ 1 Corinthians 12:13.

³⁶ See Galatians 2:11-13.

³⁷ Romans 3:23.

³⁸ Romans 10:12-13.

Then, Paul was willing to give his life for the sake of this unity created by the Spirit and take up to Jerusalem a tangible witness to that unity: a collection of money from Gentile Christian pockets for the relief of poor Jewish believers. When Paul later wrote from a prison cell in Rome to the Ephesian church that they needed to be zealous to preserve the “unity of the Spirit,” the Apostle knew from real experience something of what this might cost.³⁹ Many years later John Calvin well expressed the heart of Paul’s thinking when, in his preface to his commentary on 2 Thessalonians, he said of himself – but the words can equally apply to Paul – “my ministry...ought to be dearer to me than my own life.”⁴⁰ But Paul knew that all who love what the Spirit loves can walk no other path.

If one compares this Paul, willing to die for the Spirit’s work in unifying believers, to the Saul, whom the Risen Christ transformed on the Damascus Road, what a change in temper and passion! That Saul was a religious zealot filled with hate and violence for the followers of the Lord Jesus. This Paul was now a man of love, willing to be killed for the sake of Christ and his work through the Spirit in the Church.

And why the change? The Spirit who had come to indwell him was none other than the Spirit of love and a Spirit of unity. And so it is with all truly Spirit-filled men and women.

³⁹ Ephesians 4:3.

⁴⁰ “To the distinguished Benedict Textor, Physician” in *Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, 385. I am indebted for this reference to Victor Shepherd, “My Ministry is Dearer to Me than Life” (Sermon, Annual Meeting of the Centre for Mentorship and Theological Reflection, Toronto, at Tyndale Seminary, Toronto, June 5, 2008).