
EPH 3:14-21 : AN APOSTOLIC PRAYER [3]

No. EE9

It is quite hard to decide how verse 15 should be translated. The problem is not that the Greek is so difficult, but rather that there are two possible ways to translate it. One only has to compare the various translations to notice this. But let me explain.

- The first possibility would read more or less as follows: *from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name* (ESV; NASB; RSV; Ampl). What it means in this case is that all living creatures - including the angels - carry the name of their Maker. This translation therefore honours God as the universal Creator of everything and everyone.

- The second option would read more or less as follows: *from whom the whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name* (NIV; KJV; NKJV). In this case the verse refers to all of the Father's children - the people of God - including those who are already in heaven, and those who are still on earth. It involves the Church triumphant as well as the Church militant as a whole, and honours God as the redeeming Father of all His children.

□ I am strongly persuaded that the last-mentioned is the correct translation - and I am happy to say that several commentators and preachers who I have come to consider reliable (Hodge, Spurgeon, Lenski, Hendriksen, Lloyd-Jones, Stott *et al*) agree.

But why am I thus persuaded? *Although the Greek of the text does not exclude the other possibility, the context suggests compellingly that*

the second version is correct.

THE BACKGROUND OF PAUL'S PRAYER

□ It is necessary to consider what Paul writes before this verse, since it will not only help us in interpreting our text responsibly, but will in fact enable us to place the entire prayer in its context.

□ As was emphasised previously, Paul prays in response to his preceding teaching ("For this reason ...", v.14; NIV).

Actually, if you will recall, the apostle apparently wanted to begin the prayer at the beginning of ch. 3 (3:1), but interrupted himself. Consequently it is clear that one should keep that which precedes Eph 3:1 in mind in order to understand the prayer correctly.

We therefore have to consider ch.2 briefly.

□ When the apostle describes fallen man in Ephesians, he says that, amongst other things, his life is characterised by a double *alienism*. He is firstly alienated or separated from God, his Creator. And he is secondly separated from his neighbour - an alienation that came to radical expression in the antagonism between Jews and Gentiles (2:12; 4:18).

In both cases Paul uses a word in Greek which indicates the absence of fellowship and intimacy (Gr. *apallotrioo*).

□ However, these estrangements - vertical and horizontal - are abolished by God's grace in Christ.

In 2:1-10 the apostle gives wonderful perspectives about the restoration of the relationship between God and man. Whereas the natural man is dead in sin, and a slave to this world, the devil and the flesh, and under the wrath of God, the man in Christ has been made alive with Him, resurrected with Him, and seated with Him in the heavens.¹

1. To grasp the breathtaking meaning of this fact, one needs to read it in the light of Eph 1. But that would lead us too far from our current theme.

- In the rest of the chapter Paul discusses the abolishment of the separation between Jew and Gentile.

In 2:14 he talks about a "middle wall of division". In all likelihood this refers to a wall found on the temple grounds that prevented non-Jewish people from getting too close to the temple. The famous Jewish historicist, Josephus, writes about this wall more than once. Apparently there were large notices placed on the wall at regular intervals warning Gentiles not to move through the openings in the wall. At least two such notices have been discovered. On these non-Jewish people are warned to expect no mercy, and even execution, should they trespass.²

But this antagonism and the accompanying rift between Jew and Gentile are eradicated in Christ (2:13-22). Through His death on the cross the Lord Jesus brought the enmity to an end. Jews and Gentiles who are in Christ are henceforth not only reconciled with God, but also united in *one* body (16). The Ephesians - in the nature of the case mostly Gentiles - were no longer "foreigners and aliens, but fellow-citizens with God's people and members of God's household" (19). And so the worldwide church of Christ was established as "one new man" (15).

Several times Paul underlines the wonder and unity of Christ's body in this epistle, using different images.

In 2:20-22 he says that we are like bricks that are built into a single temple in which God dwells through His Spirit - a temple which exists to honour God. In 3:6 he says that Jews and Gentiles are co-heirs, that together they are the body of Christ, and that they share the promises of God. And notice how Paul emphasises this same truth in 4:1-6.

□ Therefore, when Paul prays here in Eph 3, the

2. John Stott, *God's new society*, 1979, p.92

wonder of what the Lord is doing is at the forefront of his thoughts: *a new family that is taken from the fallen world - a new, united humanity in Christ!*

It is a family which comes from *all* generations in history. And finally it will consist of people from every nation, race, and language. Moreover, it not only includes people who are still on earth, but also innumerable believers that have passed away and are in heaven.

WHAT DOES THIS TELL US?

1. Let it be always central in our minds and convictions that we are part of the Father's household - a household that not only spans cultural and national boundaries, but also those of time and eternity.

Undoubtedly the church has always had many different cultural and national faces - and this is not wrong as such. As the church has been established in different places during different ages, it has assumed a historically and culturally determined character. And this may be expressed freely. After all, this diversity of expressions is not of primary importance.

However, we must hold on uncompromisingly to the timeless and worldwide unity of the church .

- I am not talking merely of an organisational or ecumenical unity. That is the way of the false church, where institutional buoys are necessary to keep the church afloat in the absence of the Spirit.

- Do we not in our country's history know the tragic realities of a church which has violated these principles? This is because we have been steeped in the tradition of *sacralism* - the mixing and confusion of the roles of church and state, of faith and culture, of gospel and politics. No, the church of Christ is *one* - even though we might meet in separate groups due to language differences, distance, or other practical considerations.

If only our fathers had understood that there is such a thing as the true church, on the one hand, and a false church, on the other! If they had only understood that the true church is God's *one alternative society* in this world!

2. It is true that we are no longer "foreigners and aliens" (Eph 2:19) - but exactly for this reason we are "aliens and strangers" in this world (1Pet 2:11).

The moment when I was taken out of fallen humanity in Adam and brought over into the new humanity in Christ (Rom 5:12-21), a *new alienation* came into being in my life.

This can lead to tremendous conflict, especially in the lives of young and inexperienced Christians. In fact, if this does not happen, it is possible that true conversion never took place. Because to someone who is born again, the old things pass away and everything becomes new (2Cor 5:17). These privileged people have a new heart, new priorities, new ambitions, new passions - in fact a totally new life. *And this inevitably forces you against the tide and the preoccupations of the unbelievers - making you a foreigner and a stranger in this world.*

On the other hand, someone who has experienced the saving grace of God immediately becomes aware of the calling to reach out to a fallen world. After all, are we not called to be salt and light in this world? Have we not received the Lord's command to carry the gospel into the whole world?

To get all these forces and callings into a state of equilibrium in your life might take many years of struggling and searching. But do not become discouraged, for your conflict is a sign of your earnestness - and as such a sacrifice that pleases your Father. I know, in the process one often acts unwisely, and thus brings dishonour to the Lord's Name. But this is why the Lord Jesus places shepherds as guides within his church. Take Heb 13:17 seriously, and you will avoid many a snare.

3. Let us not become discouraged when the

church - even our own congregation - is far from perfect. No, rather let us pray for the church as Paul does.

Paul was hopelessly in love with Christ - but also with Christ's body, the church. And he understood the church's great privileges, as well as its calling.

Hence his all-encompassing ambition for the church. He also understood, however, that the obstacles in the way of becoming a true church are enormous. This is why he prays. For when a child of God experiences irresistible inner impulses, without being able to achieve it himself, he will pray, won't he - over and over again. And *that* is exactly what is happening here.

I plead with you therefore: do not rest until Paul's passion for the church burns in you as well. Dedicate yourself unflinchingly to intercession for the church - according to the example given here in Eph 3 (and elsewhere). For the world *must* recognise that what it sees in us can only be explained in terms of God's miraculous dealings.

And pray for the many thousands in our country who have become completely cynical about the church - simply because they can not discern between the true and the false church.

Read Art. 29 of the Belgic Confession - and understand your calling!

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