
EPH 3:14-21 : AN APOSTOLIC PRAYER [6]

No. EE14

We now look at the last part of Paul's first petition in this profound prayer (you will recall that it contains three petitions): He prays *that the Father may strengthen the church at Ephesus so that Christ may dwell in their hearts through faith* (Eph 3:17a).

This petition may seem strange at first sight. Did the apostle not a moment ago pray for the work of the Holy Spirit in the inner being of the Ephesians? Does Christ not in any case live in the hearts of all believers? Moreover, does He live in our hearts, or in heaven (1:20)? And what does the Bible really mean when it says that Christ lives in our hearts?

A CLOSER LOOK AT OUR TEXT

❑ **Firstly we should keep in mind that Paul is writing to people who are Christians already.**

One reason why it is important to emphasise this point, is that the dictum "you must invite the Lord Jesus Christ into your heart" is quite commonly used in the world of evangelism - as if our Lord is too much of a gentleman to enter any heart uninvited!

It is based on Rev 3:20: "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock..." But remember, this letter in Revelation was written to a *church* - one made up of many believers. It has very little to do with evangelism and initial conversion.

❑ **Secondly, there is a close connection between the inner working of the Holy Spirit and the indwelling of Christ – in other words,**

between v. 16b and v. 17a.

We should never contrast the activities of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity. No, they always work together.

The Holy Spirit lives in God's children (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19); and Christ lives in us through the working of the Holy Spirit (Rm 8:9-11; 2 Cor 13:5; Hb 3:6); so, also, God the Father lives in his children (2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:22; 1 Jn 4:12-15).

As will be seen below, we should see this indwelling as a relationship and not in terms of locality.

❑ **Thirdly, we gain a better understanding of the issue if we take note of the Greek word translated as "dwell".**

In Greek the word "to dwell" is *oikeo*. Two further meanings can be given to this root word by adding two different prefixes: *paroikeo* means to stay over, as would a traveller, while *katoikeo* means to live somewhere as a permanent resident. Paul uses the latter word in our text.

There are, therefore, different degrees to which Christ can dwell in our hearts. It is the prayer of the apostle that Christ may dwell permanently in the hearts of the Ephesians or, to put it differently, that they may experience his indwelling intensely and continuously.

This could perhaps best be illustrated by the following example. You buy an old house, which you then begin to restore. As you make progress, the feeling of ownership grows, until it eventually becomes your home.

The apostle therefore prays here that Christ may move into the house of the Ephesians fully - that He may "settle" there and so change their lives. The heart is, after all, the centre of your personality.

❑ **Fourthly, we must understand what Christ's indwelling really means.**

As children, most of us understood this expression spatially. As we grew older, we realised that this could certainly not be so. After that we

probably stopped thinking about it at all. But now our text forces us to consider it again.

- Let us start with an illustration. Have you ever been really in love? When that happens you think about your beloved constantly in one way or another. Even when you are busy he or she is never really out of your mind. You dream about the love of your life constantly. The apple of your eye lives in your heart! And if the two lovers were to marry and after many years the wife should go overseas to visit the children, would it not be something very special to hear her husband say at her return, "You were in my heart every hour of every day!" This is what Paul is talking about.

I would not dream of diluting Christ's indwelling to a mere emotion. It involves so much more. *But when the Bible talks of the indwelling of Christ in my heart, the essence lies in my love for Him.* If someone *lives* in your heart, he or she is the object of your constant affection, devotion, loyalty, adoration and love.

- So, what does it mean to have Christ dwelling in your heart in the way that Paul means?

Christ will often be the object of your meditation and reflection. Your mind will be filled with the awareness of the wonder of his person. You will marvel at the fact that He is the unfailing answer as Prophet, Priest and King in your every need - and in every need of every single person who belongs to Him. You will delight in his promises and wise commands. Above all his sufficient and eternal mediatory work will create in you a feeling of security that no money can buy.

He will be the centre of your entire life; you will not be able to imagine a life without Him; your greatest wish will be to get to know Him even better and more fully. To grow in obedience and praise will become the consuming passion of your life. And, of course, you will become passionate about getting others to love Him just as much.

Time and again you will experience what the

disciples of Emmaus termed, "our hearts burning within us" (Lk 24:32), because you have, as it were, lost your heart to Christ for all eternity.

- Now one can understand why the Apostle says that this indwelling of Christ comes "through faith". Surely it is impossible to feel this way about Him if you do not believe in Him. He will dwell in your heart, and your love for Him will grow, to the same extent as your faith grows.

But there is yet another key: knowledge and insight. Without knowledge, faith is impossible. Like conviction and trust it is an essential element of faith. That is why we read in Rm 10:14-15: "... And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?"

□ The connection between v.16b and v.17a now becomes crystal clear. The working of the Holy Spirit is an irreplaceable prerequisite for our faith, as well as for our insight into our inheritance in Christ. Without His involvement in our lives we will remain strangers to that for which Paul is praying here.

A COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCE

In our consideration of what the apostle has to say about the indwelling of Christ, we have thus far focussed on the experience of the individual believer. And certainly Paul had every individual member of the church in mind. However, we need to remember that the apostle wrote this letter to the Ephesians collectively and certainly had in mind the church as a corporate body.

This gives rise to the question: How does Christ live in the heart of a *church*? If we remember how the individual experiences this, the answer is simple: *A church experiences the indwelling of Christ if and when He becomes the centre of its existence.*

Whenever such a church talks and prays and proclaims and sings, the focus is on Jesus Christ.

This is where the preaching is so important. Is it

always Christ-centred? Do you hear, Sunday after Sunday of his glory and great deeds as Prophet, Priest and King? Is that the preaching in which the members delight and upon which they insist? Do they find man-centred and moralistic preaching boring and empty? Do they go home dissatisfied when Christ is not preached?

Truly, there can be nothing more beautiful in the world than a church in whom Christ dwells. This is what the apostle means: a church which is "built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Eph 2:22).

More precious than gold is the church which spreads the pleasant fragrance of Christ. The extent to which God grants such churches to a nation is the extent to which that nation enjoys the blessing of the Lord. It is in churches like these that true conversions take place. And there can be no greater benefit to a community than great numbers of true, devoted, radical, serving, law abiding and loving Christians in its midst – in other words, people in whose hearts Christ dwells.

A FEW POINTS OF APPLICATION

1. This *summum bonum* for a church and its members does not just happen.

Paul is beseeching God to lead the Ephesians ever more deeply into experiencing Christ's indwelling. Let us not for a moment think that we too will experience it and keep on experiencing it without serious and persistent prayer.

Olevianus and Ursinus were indeed correct when they wrote that "God will give his grace and Holy Spirit to those only who with hearty sighing unceasingly beg them of Him and thank Him for them" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 116).

Let us pray this prayer in Eph 3 very often, especially this petition in v. 17a, because the extent to which we experience the answering of our prayers, will determine the extent to which we are the church we ought to be and long to be. That is also the extent to which we will make a difference in

our town and in our country, give due praise to God, and bear eternal fruit. It will also determine the extent to which our faith will be the joy of our lives.

Do you know why people become bored in a church? It is because they do not experience that which the apostle is talking about. They do not apprehend what it means to lose your heart, as it were, to Christ for all eternity. Because when that does happen to you, your life is turned topsy-turvy.

2 Prayer does not release us from the responsibility to pursue knowledge of and love for Christ in every possible way.

Ongoing study, meditation, discussion and reading! Certainly! But nothing fixes this burning love for Christ more firmly in your heart than saturating, as it were, your prayers with it. Tell Him in a thousand different ways how you love Him! And just as important, share it with everybody around you!

3. Let us not think that Christ will live in our hearts if we don't obey Him.

This point is so obvious that we need hardly motivate it. Jesus said it all in Jn 14:23: "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him".

Can there be anything more profound and more glorious in life?

Nico van der Walt

- Nico van der Walt subscribes to the historically respected and internationally recognized 1689 Baptist Confession - like most Reformed Baptists worldwide - as well as the Confession of Sola 5, an association of God-centred evangelicals in Southern Africa.
- Subscriptions, changes of address, cancellations and correspondence: E: duplessismh@telkomsa.net; P.O. Box 35289, Menlopark, 0102, South Africa. Tel. 012-804 0316; 083 5544 941.
- www.reformed.org.za www.antipas.org.za www.sola5.org
- Weekly a sermon like this is sent world-wide and free of charge in Afrikaans or English by e-mail to 2000 people who have requested it.
- No copyright. Please duplicate or forward electronically.
- Past E-sermons can be found on the first two websites above.
- We gladly send an introduction to the sermons to those E-addresses you might wish to send us. However, we only put those people on our mailing list who request so personally.