

# The Measure of the Maturity of the Fulness of Christ

When writing to the Ephesians, Paul identified true maturity as being the goal of the varied gifts of ministry which Christ gave to his people.

And he gave some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, <sup>12</sup>to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, <sup>13</sup>until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature man, to the measure of the maturity (or *stature*) of the fulness of Christ. (Eph. 4:11-13)

If there is a measure of maturity, it is the maturity of the fulness of Christ. There must be growth, but the description of that growth is in terms not of numerical or even personal growth but of the body fully functioning in love.

.. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. <sup>15</sup>But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, <sup>16</sup>from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. (Eph. 4:14-16)

The issue is that of the truth. Most translations of verse 15 have 'speaking the truth in love we must grow' and while speaking is no doubt an element of the truth, the language used by Paul was '*doing* the truth in love'.<sup>1</sup>

The truth is not a topic for discussion but is the way things really are. So functioning in the truth in love, let us grow to maturity. And the truth is the fulness of Christ.

If all this seems strange, or convoluted, it may be because we have not seen the true being of the church. In Ephesians 1:10, Paul wrote that it is God's purpose to gather up all things in Christ. In verses 20-23 he stated that God raised Christ from the dead and seated him at the place of supreme authority, with all rule, authority and dominion under his feet, making him head over all things *for the church which is his body, the fulness of him who fills all in all*. In Ephesians 3:19 he expresses his prayer that the readers may be filled with all the fulness of God; in 4:10 the ascension and exaltation of Christ are so that he might fill all things. So we must say that Christ has fulness, the fulness of God, and that it is his function to see all things filled from that fulness.

The church is Christ's body. As such it is not distinct from him. If it is his body, then what Christ is the church is. For instance:

God... *raised him* from the dead and *seated him* at his right hand *in the heavenly places*, (Eph. 1:20)...and *raised us up* with him and *seated us* with him *in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus*. (Eph. 2:6)

It could not be otherwise. Chosen in him before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4) we see ourselves as being the body of Christ from eternity, so that even the creation of the male and female in Eden has no true meaning apart from Christ and his church (Eph. 5:31-32). That is why the actions of wives and husbands are to be not merely

---

<sup>1</sup> αζληθευαοντεθ δε; εζν αζγααπη', which the RV mg has as 'dealing truly in love', and the Jerusalem Bible as 'If we live by the truth and in love...'

patterned on but are to be expressions of the truth of the church and of Christ (Eph. 4:22-27).

However, while the church *is* the body of Christ, it must *be* what it is. Hence, 'doing the truth in love, let us grow up in every way into him who is the head'. That does not mean that somehow the church is not in the head, any more than a body can be alive apart from its head. But it does mean that all things must be brought into conformity with the truth.

The interrelatedness of the body to the head is a matter of great significance<sup>2</sup> as the language of Ephesians 4:15-16 shows. Christ the head continually gives to his body and the body responds in rich growth, but that growth is not passive; the body of Christ, which is Christ himself, builds itself up in love. The body is alive to its head and the head is alive in his body and so the whole body has his fulness.

## THE FULNESS OF CHRIST

To look to the church being filled to all the fulness of Christ is an amazing prospect if we understand what it means for Christ to be full. We should, therefore, begin by recognising that 'Christ', though nowadays used as a name, is in fact the title of the function which Jesus had in Israel and in the world.

*Christ* is the Greek form of the Hebrew *Messiah*. Translated it means 'anointed' and was a normal word for someone set apart for a particular task by being anointed with oil. Priests and prophets are described as 'anointed' in Israel. The anointing of priests was especially seen in Aaron and his sons (Ex. 29:7; Lev. 6:20; 8:12) and later Zadok (1 Chron 29:22) The anointing of prophets is seen in Elijah being told to anoint Elisha as his successor in 1 Kings 19:16. Underlying these practices was the recognition that the anointing was the outward and visible sign of the reality that it was the LORD who had anointed them, as in Leviticus 7:36 and, possibly, Isaiah 61:1. The patriarchs also were described as God's 'anointed ones', his 'prophets' in Psalm 105:15.

Mostly, kings were anointed in Israel. The earliest reference to this is in Judges 9:7-15, 'The trees once went out to anoint a king over themselves' (vs. 8. cf. vs. 15). Saul was described as 'the LORD's anointed' (1 Sam. 24:6, 10); Solomon was anointed (1 Chron. 29:22) and even Absalom was anointed (2 Sam. 19:10). Cyrus the Persian king is called the LORD's 'shepherd' (Isa. 44:28), a title used of kings in the ancient world, both in Israel and beyond, while in the next sentence (Isa 45:1) he is called the LORD's anointed, for he would accomplish the purposes of God for Israel (Isa. 45:4). It mattered nothing that Cyrus did not know God (Isa 45:4-5).

The most significant of Israel's kings to be 'the anointed' was, of course, David. In 1 Samuel 16:3 Samuel was instructed to anoint the one whom God indicated as his choice. In all the process, Samuel was wanting to know which one was 'the LORD's anointed' (1 Sam. 16:6). When Samuel anointed David the major issue was that the anointing with oil was the occasion by which 'the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon him from that day' (1 Sam. 16:13). As Israel's anointed, David was more than a hero. He was the representative of Israel: his victory over Goliath, for instance, was Israel's victory.

---

<sup>2</sup> See Siew Kiong Tham, 'The Body of Christ and the Human Body', Monday Pastors' Study, August 2001, available at <http://www.newcreation.org.au>

What is most important here, is that at no point were any of these figures regarded as other than fully human. Jesus was fully human. The Word became flesh. He was born of a woman, born under the law. There was no 'Jesus' prior to his birth<sup>3</sup> and there was no Christ prior to his anointing with the Spirit at his baptism. 'God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power' (Acts 10:38).

## ALL FULNESS IS FROM GOD

Paul wrote:

For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, <sup>10</sup>and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. (Col. 2:9-10)

God never intended humanity to be empty. Such phrases as 'mere mortals' or 'just human' convey a totally inadequate picture of humanity. Christ was filled with God and those who are brought to participate in him are likewise participants in that fullness. But Christ's fullness was not something 'mystical', something religious; it was no more and no less than God's intention for men and women. Geoff Bingham<sup>4</sup> has quoted the French theologian F. Godet as saying, 'Man is a vessel destined to be filled by God and as he is filled so he is expanded and as he is expanded so he is filled'.

Scholars may rightly debate the meaning of words like fullness, but there remains something very simple about it. When God created Adam, he breathed into him the breath of life and the man became a living being. And he was a living being only as he continued to be filled with breath, or spirit, from God (see Ps. 104:29-30). All that is needed for life comes from God, who 'himself gives to all men life and breath and all things' (Acts 17:25).

God is called 'the fountain of living waters' and humanity is filled as it drinks deeply of God's own fullness. It was the twofold evil of Israel that they 'have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water' (Jer. 2:13). On the other hand, the evil of humanity can never eradicate the truth of creation. It has been said that the image of God is irreducible but reversible. So the truth of the image remains in operation and for that we are glad. What is more, there are expressions of the truth of this seen in the deep longings for God himself and the sweet satisfaction which we see often expressed. For instance:

O taste and see that the LORD is good; happy are those who take refuge in him. <sup>9</sup>O fear the LORD, you his holy ones, for those who fear him have no want. <sup>10</sup>The young lions suffer want and hunger, but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing. (Psalm 34:8-10)

How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings. <sup>8</sup>They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. <sup>9</sup>For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light. (Psalm 36:7-9)

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. <sup>11</sup>Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. <sup>12</sup>Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. (Psalm 51:10-12)

O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. <sup>2</sup>So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,

---

<sup>3</sup> 'Jesus' was a common enough name, being the name 'Joshua' in different form.

<sup>4</sup> He was uncertain of the source. His reference to Godet was in an unpublished paper, 'The Emptying & the Filling: Studies in Kenosis and Plerosis'.

beholding your power and glory. <sup>3</sup>Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. <sup>4</sup>So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

<sup>5</sup>My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips <sup>6</sup>when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; <sup>7</sup>for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy. <sup>8</sup>My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me. (Psalm 63:1-8)

Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you. <sup>26</sup>My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. (Psalm 73:25-26)

## THE EVIL OF ANTI-FULNESS

It must be said, too, that the reversal of the image is expressed in the perversity of idolatry. But even so, it is the suppression of the truth and not its expression (Rom. 1:18-23). In other words, there is no authentic existence in this. Jeremiah's statement was because Israel, who had known that 'All my springs are in you' (Ps. 87:7), now said 'to a tree, "You are my father," and to a stone, "You gave me birth." For they have turned their backs to me, and not their faces' (Jer. 2:27).

The emptiness of humanity which is not filled with God is a torment. Even if the cisterns are cracked, men and women must have some experience of a fulness of their own devising, but the results are horrible (see Romans 1:24-32 etc). To suppress the truth can only mean that man becomes anti-truth, so that the rich purity of true living is replaced by wickedness (Rom. 1:18) and evil deeds (Col. 1:21). All professed righteousness is as filthy rags (Isa. 64:6), and Isaiah's 'vision' in chapter six brought that all clearly into focus.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. <sup>2</sup>Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. <sup>3</sup>And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." <sup>4</sup>The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. <sup>5</sup>And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Isa. 6:1-6)

The whole earth is *full* of his glory and all the while Israel was refusing that fulness. Even the worship, God's gift (Rom. 9:4), was 'futile' and 'an abomination to me' (Isa. 1:13). It is the deceptiveness of evil that those things which were done appeared to be right and proper and even carried with them some degree of emotional (dare we say 'spiritual'?) fulfilment but were in fact quite empty. Even where no idol was acknowledged, indeed the suggestion would have been angrily rejected, idolatry was firmly entrenched.

It is so easy to see this in Israel and to pass a disapproving judgment on them, but Paul asked the Christian believers in Corinth, 'What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God' (2 Cor. 6:16). The strongest warning is given in 1 Corinthians 10:1-14.

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, <sup>2</sup>and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, <sup>3</sup>and all ate the same spiritual food, <sup>4</sup>and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. <sup>5</sup>Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.

<sup>6</sup>Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. <sup>7</sup>Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, "The people sat down to

eat and drink, and they rose up to play.”<sup>8</sup> We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day.<sup>9</sup> We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents.<sup>10</sup> And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.<sup>11</sup> These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come.<sup>12</sup> So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.<sup>13</sup> No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, my dear friends, flee from the worship of idols.<sup>5</sup>

He then added:

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing (*koinonia*) in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing (*koinonia*) in the body of Christ? (1 Cor. 10:16)

It was possible to be fully involved in the activities without genuine participation (*koinonia*) in the body and blood of Christ.

Article XIII of the Articles of Religion of the Anglican Church is entitled, ‘Of Works before Justification’ but it could equally be said of works done *outside* Justification.

Works done before the grace of Christ, and the Inspiration of his Spirit, are not pleasant to God, forasmuch as they spring not of faith in Jesus Christ, neither do they make men meet to receive grace, or (as the School-authors say) deserve grace of congruity: yea rather, for that they are not done as God hath willed and commanded them to be done, we doubt not but they have the nature of sin.

Hence Paul wrote that ‘whatever does not proceed from faith is sin’ (Rom. 14:23). Of course, faith does not mean assent to details; it is the personal response to the voice of God.

## THE RESTORATION OF FULNESS

Isaiah promised, ‘With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation’ (Isa. 12:3) and ‘the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert’ (Isa. 35:6). If this is so for Israel, then it is for the blessing of all the families of the earth. ‘The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea’ (Hab. 2:14). The whole earth is full of his glory, the heavens declare that glory, but the promise is that all the earth will joyfully acknowledge the glory.

There will be fulness again. But for that to take place there must be a great judgment and a great redemption. And if Israel is to be the channel of that blessing then that means that Israel must find itself in its Messiah, its vicar.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, *full* of grace and truth....<sup>16</sup> *From his fullness* we have all received, grace upon grace. (John 1:14,16).

He is full; as the Son of the Father all the Father's fulness is his. Truth, the great reality of God and so of all things, and grace, the eternal plan and action to restore mankind to that truth, are all in him and so flow from him in overwhelming abundance. As we have noted,

---

<sup>5</sup> The first Letter of John is similar. There is the stress on living in love and so living in God (1 Jn. 4:16) with all that implies, and the letter concludes, quite properly, with the command, ‘Little children, keep yourselves from idols’ (1 John 5:21).

‘in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,<sup>10</sup> and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. (Col. 2:9-10).

The judgment of the world is in him also. Not only does he ‘save his people from their sins’ (Matt. 1:21) but also he is ‘the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ (John 1:29). Thus:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us *in Christ* with the whole spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,<sup>4</sup> just as he chose us *in him* before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.<sup>5</sup> He destined us for adoption as his children *through Jesus Christ*, according to the good pleasure of his will,<sup>6</sup> to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.<sup>7</sup> In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace<sup>8</sup> that he lavished on us. (Eph. 1:3-8)

Here is the church, the body of Christ, blessed in her head. She is his fulness, not because she stands apart from him but because she is in him.

It should be obvious that growth into him (Eph. 4:15) is not the result of human organisation.<sup>6</sup> Human planning invariably brings conflict, as men and women fail to meet each other’s expectations. Growth is the result of ‘doing the truth in love’, and Paul added ‘the truth is in Jesus’ (Eph. 4:21). Growth is through the exercise, not of offices, but of his gifts. These gifts are the personal action of Christ in and for his body in order that he might fill all things (4:7-13). Out of his fulness he will fill all things. So the question must be put: where do we find our fulness? If it is a fulness which we want to control, then we will be fully occupied with all sorts of activities and programs (perhaps!) but if it is the fulness which he gives out of himself, the fulness of God (Eph. 3:19), then the word is clear:

So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.<sup>18</sup> Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled — go on being filled — with the Spirit. (Eph. 5:17-18)

Or, in the words of Colossians 3:16, ‘Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly’. Faith hears the word spoken and responds with all our being. ‘These are the words of the Son of God ... Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches’ (Rev. 2:18, 29).

© Ian Pennicook, 18th May 2002

<sup>6</sup> In the paper by Siew Kiong Tham (see above), there is the following diagram:

Body of Christ or Institution		
Body of Christ	Ephesians	Institution
A living organism	1:1-3	An inorganic structure
Chosen by the Father	1:4-23	Self choice
Incorporated into Christ (Her charter is Christ)	2:1-22	Incorporated by law (The charter is the Constitution)
Invigorated by the Spirit (The Holy Ghost)	3:1-21	Upheld by human effort (The legal ghost)
Union with God	4:1-6	Union with common goals
Ministry	4:7-32	Tasks / sociality
Pastors / elders	4:11	MD / CEO
A family (persons)	5:1-6:9	An association (aims)
Worship / witness	6:10-24	Social activities (club house)

This highlights a modern tendency towards management instead of ministry, offices instead of function and staff instead of gifts, to ensure that growth of whatever sort can be controlled.