

Paul's Understanding of the Church in the Epistle of Ephesians as a Model for Today's Church

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Summary

This article analyzes Paul's view of the church in the epistle of Ephesians and how this view should affect the life and work of the churches that have a Reformation background in Croatia. In the first part of the article, the author points out some problems that are present among such churches, like the negligence of the catholic or universal dimension of the church, an inadequate understanding God's purposes and intentions that God has for his church, an inadequate understanding of the scope that Jesus' sacrifice has on the life of a believer, and finally, an inadequate view of the relationship between salvation and membership in the church. Therefore, the author offers theological corrections in those areas. In the second part of the article, the author offers guidelines and implications that should surface from the proper theological understanding of the church that Paul presents in Ephesians. These implications refer to church growth, proper relationships with individuals who are gifted with various gifts and ministries, rejection of the mentality "Jesus – Bible and I" and the need for the development of unity and fellowship among the churches.

Key words: churches with a Reformation background, the relationship between the church and salvation, the purpose of the church, unity of the church.

Introduction

To speak about the Church – its work, organization, worship activities and ministries – after nearly 2000 years of existence is, in some sense, very delicate because Christians have many different and occasionally opposing ideas about the Church and its function. Just taking divisions among the churches that have a Reformation background into consideration,¹ it seems that to speak about “the Church” is almost an impossible mission. However, since the Holy Scriptures, as the only infallible and inerrant guide of the Christian faith speak about that subject, we too can think, observe and argue about what the Church *is* and how it should function.

I suggest that possible reasons for the diversity of ideas about the Church can be found in two elements. The first element is the very nature of the Scriptures which does not systematically elaborate or expose theological topics that are in it. The topics encountered in the New Testament are limited in scope, whether because of the author or the recipients, or simply because of the purpose which a particular document has. Therefore, the New Testament authors speak about their topics partially and from a particular point of view, and they do not expose their overall theology or provide answers on every possible question that can be asked based on the text. The other element is the fact that Christianity did not start with this generation. That means that previous generations of Christians have become members of various Christian traditions that had already developed particular understandings of Church life and ministry. In accordance with these traditions, there is a tendency or habit to observe certain biblical verses that speak about that Church without too much critical thinking, be it a particular Church practice or doctrine, and whether or not it truly reflects a proper and sound understanding of the Scriptures.

Since one task of theology is to question and bring theological conclusions under healthy inspection (cf. Megliore, 2004, 3), as well as to think about and proclaim the *old truths* anew in every new generation, it is always useful and needful to return to the Scriptures and discover how the life and activities of church

1 Churches that have a Reformation background are “autonomous and independent churches that have accepted from Luther’s Protestant teaching that only Scripture, grace, and faith are foundational for humanity’s relationship with God, and from the Radical Reformation inherited teachings about discipleship, a belief that faith has to precede baptism, an awareness of the practical need for doing Christ’s mission and zeal for evangelization” (Jambrek, 2007, 92). Likewise, these churches accept the principle that church has to be separated from the state and the principle that church is always in the process of reformation and change (Jambrek, 2007, 92). For more information in Croatian about such churches, see Stanko Jambrek (2003), *Crkve reformacijske baštine*. Zagreb: Bogoslovni institut.

communities can genuinely and completely reflect God's plan and purpose for the Church. If such theological reflection is not present, there is always a danger of accepting certain beliefs that do not necessarily reflect God's intention for the Church and to develop an attitude that has no place for the acknowledgment of mistakes. However, the final goal in theological inquiry is not a defense of one's ideas and concepts but a full discovery of the truth.

In line with that, this article will explore how Paul's understanding of the Church based on the epistle of Ephesians can help today's Christians, as members of the Church, truly live and fulfill God's purposes for the Church because only a correct understanding of God's plan and the role that God has planned for the Church can correct bad and negative occurrences that can be found in today's churches with a Reformation background. In the end, true belief is not manifested on some declaratory level, but is shown in the lives of believers, in the everyday activities and practice of what is called the Church – through mutual relationships.

The Picture of the Church in Ephesians

To study the theology of the Church based on the epistle of Ephesians is not a small challenge because the average believer in churches with a Reformation background² is faced with concepts that can possibly go beyond his or her usual ideas about the Church for several reasons: a) it is my impression that churches were so eager to emphasize a *local* dimension of the Church, that in doing so, they have greatly neglected a *general – universal* dimension of the Church. By stressing the autonomy of the local church and the idea that every local church possesses the fullness of the Church, there is a tendency to forget that the local church is not the Church, but that the Church exists beyond the walls of some local church or particular denomination; b) by stressing the fact that the Church exists to evangelize, teach, testify for the Gospel and the like, it is often forgotten that the Church as a whole (in its entirety) has not only this earthly dimension and purpose, but a cosmic one as well; c) by stressing the individual dimension of salvation between God and individual, churches often neglect the overall influence of Christ's sacrifice, and; d) by stressing the individual dimension of salva-

2 Further in this article, use of the noun "churches" refers to churches that have a Reformation background and not any other churches or denominations. I want to clarify this so that other members of different church groups do not think that I am calling out their denomination as well. This article is focused on a discussion about a particular group of churches, but that does not mean that I do not recognize that other churches are also churches in their full right or that I am attaching the idea of the "Church" solely to one particular group.

tion, churches often neglect the fact that the gift of salvation is not connected or concerned with only the individual, but with the Church as well.

Contrary to previously mentioned insufficient understandings, the epistle of Ephesians reveals the general dimension of the Church which has a cosmical dimension and represents the first step in God's overall plan for creation. Also, it shows the universal effect of Christ's sacrifice and the picture of salvation that includes not only the relationship between a person and God, but the relationship between a person and the community of believers. Therefore, in the rest of this article, I will present an exposition and clarification of the aforementioned ideas, and after that, I will offer some principles and guidelines of how today's churches should act and behave if they want to be faithful to the picture of the Church that Paul presents in Ephesians.

The Uniqueness of the Church in Ephesians – Catholicity of the Church

What is unique about this epistle is that Paul is not talking so much about a local church, but the Church in general, and he uses a metaphor of a Body with Christ as the Head. In other words, Paul is not talking from the standpoint of any local or individual church community of his time, but he is speaking about the Church as a Body, that is, about the total number of church communities that make that Body which is spread all over the world. In doing so, he does not make any distinctions between them. Furthermore, Christ is presented as the Head that governs this living organism. If that is the truth, the question must be posed as to what the significance and importance of such claims are.

The Problem of Heritage

Since churches have a certain historical genealogy (that is, they are not a product of coincidence – they did not just come into existence), it is inevitable that certain historical events shape and influence particular ideas and attitudes about the Church. The conflict between the Reformers and the Roman Catholic Church can be observed as the conflict of an individual or a group of individuals that tried to change the overall Church. Since the Roman Catholic Church had failed, this individual or group of individuals were determined to step out from the collective and, in doing so, they became the backsliders of the universal Church. Because of their position, they were forced to defend their *individuality* (their right to exist as Church) by moving the theological focus from the *collective* to an *individuality*. This is a very simplified picture of the Reformation, but my point is that this mentality holds the trademark of such churches. Accordingly,

it is possible that in one particular city there can be several churches that have no contact or fellowship between them. In principle, they are "one in Christ" (on some high-spiritual-metaphysical declaratory level), but they act as individuals that have no responsibility or connection with each other. I believe that such a situation is possible or even accepted as normal because of two reasons: the first is connected with the Reformation, and the second reflects a dislike toward outside authorities which is one mark of the Enlightenment.

Craig Allert explains the mentality that marks evangelical Christians which originates from the Reformation in the 16th century: ". . . many contemporary evangelicals continue to manifest the attitude of protest. This attitude of protest has become part of evangelicalism as a result of its heritage and tendency to stand against something" (2007, 27). Allert observes that evangelical Christians act under the premise that something in Christianity is wrong and they need to fix it. Therefore, they are always trying to fix or restore something, they are militant in their activities, or they act as separatists. Acting in such a way that the primary task is to preserve some foundational truths from some enemy, evangelical theology is mostly defensive or reactive, and not so much constructive (cf. Allert, 2007, 27). On the other hand, Richard Lints points out that evangelical Christianity in great measure reflects ideas and attitudes that come from the period of the Second Great Awakening (Charles Finney, Dwight Moody) that reflected the tendency to dislike outside authorities and emphasized individuals and the idea that God's revelation comes directly to an individual through his or her personal experience. In this way, an individual is an arbiter of what the Bible says or does not say (cf. Lints, 1993, 36-37). Lints thinks that such an emphasis on individualism and dislike toward authorities is not so different from the Enlightenment that questioned the existing authority of the Church and God's revelation: "External authorities were jettisoned and divine authority was internalized - a strategy not altogether different from that of the Enlightenment" (Lint, 1993, 37-38).

If today's evangelical Christianity truly is based on such a separatist-reactionary heritage that emphasizes individualistic Christianity, is it strange that today's church communities have no great need for fellowship, and do not act or practice Christianity outside the walls of their local church or their denominations? Is it strange that particular church groups or individuals inside one local church cannot agree about almost any question, and divide among themselves with little no regret? Is it strange that, although the *catholicity* of the Church is declared, this *catholicity* is, in reality, degraded to a number of individual local churches that more or less successfully live their own lives?

On one hand, the Reformation was the success of an individual over the collective because it was shown that individual church groups or groups of

church communities can legitimately exist apart from the collective. In time, however, such an emphasis on individualism led to the current situation where local churches in one place or city act like they do not depend on each other and like there is nothing that connects them together. Of course, I am speaking about the lack of unity, fellowship, cooperation, and sense of mutual dependability as well as mutual arguments, divisions, strife, competitive spirits, etc.

The problem of the churches in Croatia today³ is the fact that they are individualistic and locally geared, but that only represents one half of the Church's identity. Not one church has a right to neglect the general or universal dimension of the Church, and by that I mean this: church communities predominately act according to the principle of denominations or as independent local communities, but this eventually leads to a lack of cooperation and mutual fellowship because each local community has the potential to predominantly act independently. Such a *modus operandi* can lead to the loss of the vision that any one *local church* is not *the Church*, and the sense that the unity and fellowship of the Church is not based only on the fact that the Holy Spirit lives in God's people, but also on the fact that the Church lives and acts in the sphere of the Kingdom of God can be lost. That means that all progress and every success of any local church is the progress and success of the Church in general as well of the Kingdom. The same goes for the failures.

The problem of the churches and theologies that are marked with such a separatist-reactionary mentality is the fact that they always end up as a victim of their own mentality because as they try to correct one extreme, they end up (often unconsciously) in another extreme. In other words, in a desire to correct one injustice, they go to another injustice or untruth. Then someone else appears with the desire to correct this newly developed extreme, and if they are not careful, this person, group of people or movement can end up in another extreme, and so on. So when a reactionary mentality is merged – separation and going to extremes with individualism as the mark of the times – it is no wonder that the universal dimension of the Church that Ephesians speaks about is recognized and proclaimed on a declaratory level, but *de facto* is present very insignificantly or not at all among the churches in Croatia.

The Catholicity of the Church

Ephesians reveals an astonishing catholic dimension of the Church which has

- 3 When I speak about this subject, I speak in general, meaning that not every church of Reformation heritage in Croatia acts exactly as I am describing or that all churches in everything are doing the same wrong things. My observations are general, and I do not focus on any one particular church or church group.

its origin in God's intention and Christ's sacrifice. The universality of the Church is seen in descriptions that Ephesians uses for the Church. *Biologically*, the Church is described as the *Body* where different members are connected together and grow (4:16). Christ is the head of the Body (1:22; 5:23-24), he is the savior of it (5:23-24), and he loves and nurtures it (5:29). Furthermore, *architecturally* the Church is presented as the *holy temple* with apostles and prophets as the foundation and Jesus Christ as the cornerstone. This is the place where the Holy Spirit dwells (2:20-22). The epistle reveals a *psychological* description of the Church as a *new person* (2:15; 4:13), and a *sociological* view in which the Church is described as the family of the bride of Christ (5:23-32) (cf. Hoehner, 2002, 111).

Furthermore, the Church is not a product of coincidence, but was planned by God, and that plan in the past was a *mystery*, but now is revealed in Christ. Paul begins his speech about the mystery in the first chapter in the eulogy (1:3-14) where he talks about God's plan of bringing together⁴ all things in heaven and the earth in Christ (1:10). This description talks about the final goal which God has for his creation and which will be consummated in the fullness of time, that is, at the end of time (1:10). Until God accomplishes bringing all things under one head – the Christ – the Church already has one head, that is, the Christ, to whom it is submissive as he guides it (1:22). But what creation awaits in the future is already present in the Church where Jews and Gentiles are brought together in Christ. Paul describes what that bringing together looks like in 2:11-22 where he speaks about the reconciliation between two nations who have the same access to God because of Christ's sacrifice. In this way, the adversity between two nations was canceled and they became one new person, one new nation and fellow citizens and members of the household of God by having one foundation and the temple where God dwells. In the third chapter, Paul expands his speech about the mystery stating that "the Gentiles are fellow heirs, and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (3:6, ASV).

Finally, the epistle makes special effort to connect and emphasize the relationship of Christ's sacrifice with the Church. Hence, it is written that Jesus is "the savior of the Body" as a whole (5:23), not the savior of particular believers. It is also written that Christ "gave himself up for it; that he might sanctify it, having cleansed it by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself a glorious *church*, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish" (5:25-27, ASV). Such an understanding of Christ's sacrifice presents a challenge for the tradition of the churches that have a Reformation heritage because they emphasize that people

4 MKJV translation says "... to head up all things in Christ..."

should receive Jesus Christ into their lives as “their personal Lord and Savior,” or that Jesus needs to become one’s “personal Savior.” The challenge is in the fact that although Jesus needs to become one’s personal savior, he is also the savior of the Body because he gave himself for the Church. That means that salvation, although it is something individual and personal between God and a particular person, definitely includes fellowship with other saints. Therefore, participation in the life and work of the Church represents one part or one aspect of *salvation*, not anything less.

Although the Scriptures testify to God’s love for the world which caused him to give his only Son (John 3:16), and although Paul in Galatians 2:20 points out that Jesus “gave himself up for me” (ASV), that does not exclude the truth that Christ’s sacrifice has a connection with the Church as well. The epistle of Ephesians speaks about the love story between God and his Church for the last 2000 years, and that story reveals that Christ did not only give himself for the Church, but he also gave various gifts (4:8-11) so that the Church would come to a place of maturity and fullness (4:12-16). The analogy of marriage as a picture of relationship between Christ and the Church (5:23-33) only adds to the significance of the previously mentioned emphasis.

The Purpose of the Church in God’s Overall Plan

To see the purpose which God has for the Church is extremely important if one wants to see a change in the way believers in churches live and embody the idea of the Church. Since the purpose of the Church does not come from humans, but it is established by God, recognizing this purpose should produce positive shifts in mutual relationships among the churches and in relationships among believers inside particular communities.

It should be recognized that the purpose of the Church in Ephesians goes beyond the usual ideas about Church mission and purpose because the usual view of the Church mission, purpose and duties is often understood through the very practical activities that churches do:

What are the objectives of the Church? ... Some speak in individual terms of the cultivation of the Christian life or the salvation of souls; others state their goal to be the building up of the corporate life of the Church or of some part of it; again the goal is defined as the “communication of the vital and redeeming doctrines of Scriptures,” or it is otherwise described by reference to the Bible as the ultimate source of all that is to be taught and preached. Elsewhere the end is defined as the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments; or, again, as the development of the life of prayer and worship. Perhaps most frequently the goal set forth is increase of belief in Jesus Christ,

of discipleship to him and the glorification of his name. These multiple aims of churches and schools are again multiplied as one proceeds from grand statements about the purpose of the large organizations to the specialized goals of boards and departments, of courses and classes, of rural and urban congregations, of ministries of preaching and education and pastoral work and of preparation for such particular functions. The multiplicity of goals corresponds to the pluralism in the Church that is made up of many members, each with its own function; that stands in many relations to God, who is complex in his unity. . . (Niebuhr, Williams, Gustafson, 1956).

But the purpose of the Church in Ephesians is so much more than the collection of various activities because it is connected with the purpose that God has for the overall creation.

God's purpose for creation is clearly stated in Ephesians 1:9-10: "making known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he purposed in him unto a dispensation of the fulness of the times, to sum up all things in Christ, the things in the heavens, and the things upon the earth; in him" (ASV). Hoehner explains the meaning of this text by saying that sin caused the chaos in the universe, but God's intention is to restore the universe into its original condition. Accordingly, the restoration of creation occurs in Christ and includes all animate and inanimate creation (cf. Hoehner, 2002, 221-23). Therefore, these verses describe the results of Christ's reign that will happen in the future at the end of time. However, the implementation of this purpose has been enabled by Christ's death on the cross (1:7; 2:16) and his ascension (1:20-21; 2:6-7) because everything was submitted under his feet and he himself is the head of the Church; he holds the victory over demonic forces that control human lives (2:1-6). But in what way is the purpose of the Church connected or related with the purpose God has for creation? James Dunn observes the following:

At the heart of God's universal purpose from eternity has been the retrieval of humanity from its state of death, the abolition of the divided state of humanity, and the bringing of all things to unity in Christ.... This reconciliation of Jew and Gentile within the gracious purpose of God was at the heart of the divine mystery which Paul in particular had been given the commission to unveil to all (ch. 3). The fact that the church is so much the medium now for the outworking of this purpose of God makes its unity and its proper working as facilitated by the ministry gifts given it all the more important. Only as it functions as the body of Christ and grows up into Christ can it fulfill the universal and cosmic role earlier ascribed to it (4:1-16) (Dunn, 2007, 1167).

God's intention of restoration begins with individuals who are made alive in Christ and rescued from their spiritual death, from the dominion of demonic forces, and who do not live according to the sinful nature but perform acts of

love (2:1-10). God rescues individuals, but reconciliation and restoration also embraces the interpersonal and interracial relationship of all people who are part of the Church (2:11-22), and that unity will one day be established in the whole universe. All of this means that the Church is the first fruit of God's intention and a media through which God's intention is realized in today's time. That also means that the Church should be a foretaste of Christ's reign, and be a visible presentation to creation of how it looks to live under Christ's lordship.

From that follows that the purpose of the Church is this: "so that now to the rulers and powers in the heavenlies might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God" (3:10, MKJV). That does not mean that the task of the Church is to preach to these powers, but that the Church is a media through which the wisdom of God is being manifested (the verb is in passive voice), and that wisdom is the harmony between the Jews and the Gentiles. Such harmonious coexistence represents a testimony to the powers in the heavens (cf. Hoehner, 2002, 459). Because of that, the unity of the Church in relationships and activities is highly important because only in this way can the Church accomplish and fulfill the role that God has intended for it.

The Overall Influence of Christ's Sacrifice

The teaching about Christ's sacrifice in Ephesians often goes beyond the usual thinking about the influence and significance of Christ's sacrifice, and my opinion can be proved by observing relationships and behaviors that are present among the churches. Namely, this epistle testifies that Christ's sacrifice has an influence on every aspect and level of human existence and changes it in accordance with God's intention. Although human existence has not yet been made perfect, Christ's sacrifice skips nothing nor leaves anything intact. Such an understanding of Christ's sacrifice represents a forceful impulse to the churches and individuals to allow the blessings of Christ's sacrifice to manifest itself in its fullness. In accordance with that, Ephesians testifies that Christ's sacrifice brings change into the life of an individual, family, church, or nation and destroys the dominion of demonic forces that rule over humanity.

Hence, the first area that Christ's sacrifice changes is the fallen human state described in verses 2:1-3 where Paul describes the human character, social environment, and individual responsibility of the people (cf. Dunn, 2007, 1169). From this text, it can be seen that a person without Christ is spiritually dead because of sin and transgression, and the social environment in which a person lives is under the influence of the "Prince of the power of the air," which Stott understands as a "social value-system which is alien to God" (1997, 73). All this

unquestionably speaks about the activity of demonic forces. Finally, because of their life conduct which is marked by living in the passions and following the desires of their flesh, people are morally responsible to God and they are under judgment. Yet, in 2:4-10, Paul describes God's response to the fallen human condition. If believers were once dead in their sins, they are now made alive in Christ and their environment is no longer under the Prince of the power of the air, but now they are seated with Christ in heaven. If they just lived out the passions of the flesh, the life of believers is now characterized by the good works which God had ordained so that they should walk in them.

The second area that Christ's sacrifice changes is the life and relationships in the family, and Paul talks about that in 5:21-6:9. It is noticeable that relationships in the family are put into the context of discipleship and relationship with Christ because family members do not have absolute freedom in acting and dealing with one another. What is especially odd is that if compared with modern times where the emphasis is on human *rights*, Paul here is putting emphasis on mutual *duties* and responsibilities. Therefore, a wife should submit to her husband *as to Christ*, and her husband must love her even as *Christ loved the Church*. Children must obey their parents *in the Lord*, and fathers must raise their children with discipline and the admonition *of the Lord*. Slaves must obey their earthly masters as if they *obey Christ*, and their masters must treat their slaves with the knowledge that they themselves have a *Master in heaven*.

The third area affected by Christ's sacrifice is the life and work of the Church which should live worthy of its calling and be marked with unity and growth (4:1-16). Only in this way will the Church be able to fulfill God's purpose mentioned in 3:10. But the context for this part of Ephesians represents Paul's prayer for the church in Ephesus in 3:14-21 where Paul prays for strength with the power of the Spirit in the inward person, for the knowledge and filling with the love of God, and the manifestation of God's effective power in them. So this prayer serves as an introduction and instigation for all the things that Paul goes on to say in 4:1-16 are possible to achieve. In 4:1, Paul speaks about living worthy of the calling, the same expression he used in 1:18, but he does not define what the precise content of the hope of this calling is. In 4:4, he mentions again "the hope of calling," but even here he does not elaborate on the nature of it. Nevertheless, one part of living worthy of the calling includes the unity of the Church. The unity of the Church is grounded in Christ's act of salvation (2:14-18), and it comes from the fact that the Spirit lives in the believers (2:18-22) as well as God's active presence "over all, and through all, and in all" (4:6). Furthermore, the gifts that God has given to believers (4:7), and ministries that various individuals in the Church have (4:11), must act with the purpose of promoting the growth, maturity and unity of the Church. By pointing out that these gifts are Christ's gifts given to the

Church, the Church in general and every local community have an obligation to recognize and encourage individuals to serve with their gifts, and those who are gifted should act in a way to promote harmony, unity, fellowship and growth in the Church.

The fourth area affected by Christ's sacrifice is the area of interpersonal and interracial relationships in the Church (2:11-22). Although the blessings of the messianic reign such as peace, justice, and unity are still things of the future, such characteristics should already be a present reality in international and interracial relationships of the Church. In an astonishing way for the readers of his time, Paul claims that Christ's sacrifice destroyed the barrier that separated Jews from Gentiles. Gentiles who were alienated from the Jewish blessings and privileges, now, by the blood of Christ, have an equal share in this inheritance, and the enmity once present among them was annihilated in Christ's body. All that resulted in the creation of one new human and one new nation that has the same God-given foundation, identity, status and purpose.

Finally, Christ's sacrifice brought the defeat of demonic forces that have governed the lives of believers (1:21-22). Those forces are described in Ephesians as "rule," "authority," "power" and "dominion" (1:21), and they are connected with the spirit that is active in the sons of disobedience (2:2). In 6:12, Paul describes them as "rulers," "authorities," "powers of this dark world" and "spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." Without Christ and under the influence of such forces, people were drawn to live their lives in darkness, and darkness in Ephesians is connected with the vanity of mind, darkened understanding, hardness of hearth, greed, impurity, lust (4:17-19) and other sins and trespasses (5:3-12). Now these forces have been defeated and believers have no more reason to give the control of their lives to these forces. Of course, believers are not immune to demonic attacks (6:10-20), but Christ's death enables them to stand in God's victory.

Salvation and Membership in the Church

Another challenge that Ephesians offers is the connection between salvation and Church membership, or participation in Church life. Again, I believe that average believers in churches in Croatia have a limited view of salvation. Since churches have little or no role in the salvation of an individual, salvation is often portrayed through the relationship between "Jesus – Bible and an individual," but belonging to the church and participation in the life of the church is often viewed as some sort of additional activity that Christians do. Since these are times in which the popular proverb says, "Jesus, yes; church, no," it is no wonder that church as an institution is losing its value. Therefore, it is necessary to pose the question as to

whether or not there is any truth in the claim that outside of the Church there is no salvation because the correct understanding of this claim can correct misconceptions about the Church. I will discuss the Roman Catholic and Protestant views on this matter, and I will end with the exposition of what I believe is the proper New Testament teaching on this topic.

The Roman Catholic View

Kenneth Baker says that the expression, “there is no salvation outside of the Church” originates from the time of Origen and Cyprian and it was always present in various church documents. The Fourth Council of the Lateran concluded that there is only one Catholic Church outside of which there is no salvation, and Pope Pious IX specified that outside the Roman Catholic Church, no one can achieve salvation. Accordingly, the Church is a necessary means for salvation (cf. Baker, 1983, 3:146-47). Furthermore, Baker explains that this does not refer only to those who are physically baptized in the Roman Catholic Church and who remain its members until the moment of their death. Salvation is also available for those who never hear the Gospel because such people are not guilty in God’s eyes due to their ignorance (cf. Baker, 1983, 3:147). Since God wants all people to be saved, God’s grace is sufficient outside the Church as well: “So those who follow God’s will in their own state of life to the best of their ability can be said to have at least an *implicit desire* for the sacraments and the Church. Accordingly, even though they are ‘outside’ the visible confines of the Church, by reason of the faith and love they have they are related to the Church in some way and so can attain to eternal salvation” (Baker, 1983, 3:187).

The Protestant View

Because of many different opinions and divisions, it is hard to make a general presentation of what Protestants believe in this regard; one part of Protestantism rejects any role of the Church in salvation, while others are more liberally oriented inclusivists or pluralists (cf. Kärkkäinen, 2003, 80). Still, in principle, the following attitude can be found: evangelical⁵ Christians reject the notion that the Church can be identified with just one part of the Church because the true Church is present where the Gospel is proclaimed and accepted (cf. McGrath, 1997, 341).

5 The expression “evangelical” has several different meanings. The term can mean: a) Protestant theology as opposed to Roman Catholic theology; b) Protestant theology with an orthodox view of Christianity contrary to liberal theology; c) A movement that embraces different branches of Protestantism and Anglicanism; d) Believers that are members of the Roman Catholic Church but have some convictions and beliefs that are more in line with Protestantism (cf. Kärkkäinen, 2003, 144).

Contrary to the Roman Catholic notion that outside of the Church there is no salvation, Protestantism points out that outside of Christ (without personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior), there is no salvation (cf. Hick, 1998, 26).

The New Testament View

I believe that the expression “there is no salvation outside of the Church” is truthful insofar as it does not limit *the Church* to the Roman Catholic Church (or any other church denomination), and does not claim that the Church is a necessary means of salvation because of its sacramental role. Ephesians says that Jesus is the *savior of the Body*, and not that he is the *savior of the different parts of the body* that lie around scattered like in some horror movie, or *savior of individuals*. That does not diminish the importance of local churches or the importance and necessity of the personal dimension of faith in Christ, but this truth should not lead believers to the point that previously mentioned aspects of faith become the victim of collectivity. Equally, it is not right to, in any way, ignore or dispute the general dimension of the Church and communal or corporate aspect of salvation when the New Testament testifies to them. Accordingly, if Jesus is the savior of the Body, that means that salvation is in some capacity connected with the Church. The New Testament does not account for the believer that belongs to Christ, but that is simultaneously not a member of the Body. The New Testament also teaches that salvation is something that spreads and embraces the communal life of the believers. In other words, people are not saved by church membership, but by faith in Christ. However, once saved, they become the members of Jesus’ Body, and their mutual lives, growth, service within their gifting, and building up of the Body of Christ is equally part of their salvation.

With a tentative reading of Acts, it can be seen how Luke carefully draws a line between accepting Christ and becoming a member of the Church. After Peter’s message in Acts 2:14-36, the reaction of the crowd was this: “When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’” Then Peter tells them about the need of repentance and baptism because that is how they will receive the Holy Spirit. The text goes on to say, “Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day” (Acts, 2:41, NIV). Although this text does not include the word “church,” it presumes an already existing group of apostles and other believers. In Acts 2:47, there is another speech about joining the saved ones to “their number” – community – church. While in chapter 2 there are examples of joining believers to the Church, in Acts 5:14, Luke writes about joining the believers to the Lord (KJV, MKJV, ASV), although this verse can also mean that those who believed in the Lord “were added to their number” (NIV). Finally, in Acts 11:20-24, Luke mentions the

event in Antioch were many people “believed and turned to the Lord” (11:21), and after the visit of Barnabas again there is the expression, “and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.” Taking all these examples into consideration, it is hard not to conclude that for Luke adding to the Lord means adding to the Church and vice versa.

Philippians 2:12 is an especially interesting verse because it speaks about the communal aspect of salvation that is in some capacity neglected in today's churches: “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” Unfortunately, some believers think that Paul here talks about the salvation of an individual believer (whether he talks about justification or sanctification). Because of that, an Armenian theologian, based on this verse, can claim that Paul is talking about individual salvation and how people can accept or resist the activity of the grace of God (cf. Harper, 2002, 4, 223; Olson, 2005, 182). Equally, Calvinist theologians can claim that Paul is not talking about losing one's eternal salvation, but about forfeiting eternal rewards, since the expression “work out” talks about sanctification and not justification (cf. Olson, 2007, 134-35). In this verse, Roman Catholics find support for the claim that sanctification is the process that secures and increases the grace of justification and they speak about the need to earn one's salvation (cf. McCarthy, 2004, 63). Furthermore, it is possible to find in this verse an idea that Paul is urging the Philippians to work on their sanctification in a sense of personal behavior by living faithfully and obediently in everyday life and persevering to the end (cf. MacArthur, 2001, 160-62).

Contrary to all these views, I believe that Ron Rhodes correctly notices that Paul is urging the Philippians to deal with their church problems (their lack of unity – unity was in need of salvation), and in this way bring their *corporate* salvation (that is the Church) into a state of Christian maturity (cf. Rhodes, 2000, 150). Ralph Martin also concludes that, based on exegesis, the only proper conclusion is to say that Paul is not dealing here with personal, individual salvation, but salvation here refers to their corporate life as a church and Paul is urging them to restore their fellowship that had been destroyed by strife and their mutually negative feelings (cf. Martin, 1997, 93). Notice Martin's emphasis on salvation as the “corporate life as a church.”

Taking Rhodes' and Martin's opinions as correct, it is just to conclude that the Church has some role in salvation. However, its role is not sacramental, but originates from its connectedness with Christ. If an individual becomes joined with Christ who is the Head of the Church, by default that one becomes joined to the Body because the Head is not disconnected from the Body. Thus relationships and work for the Gospel are not some optional activities that one can accept or

reject based on his or her preferences, but they constitute one part of salvation. These activities do not contribute to salvation (as if it can be gained or lost), but they put believers under obligation for these truths and realities to be manifested in everyday life as partakers in Christ of blessings, inheritance, salvation and membership in his Body.

Some Implications of the Universal Aspect of the Church (Catholicity of the Church) and Christ as the Head of the Church

After a theological discussion of Paul's view of the Church in Ephesians, in this part of the article I would like to explain the implications that should proceed from it. In other words, I want to express how the Church today should look, act, work and live if it wants to be faithful to ideas that this epistle teaches. I will briefly discuss several topics, including: church growth, proper relationships between individuals that have various gifts and ministries, the danger of an individualistic Christianity, and the necessity of unity and fellowship among local churches.

Church Growth

Christians often talk about "church growth". Entering this expression in Google search yields around 9.490.000 results in about 0.17 seconds. Goran Punda makes an interesting observation in the introductory part of the magazine, *Duhovo vrelo*:

It seems that among evangelical Christians today, an interesting and slightly controversial outlook is present regarding the way of receiving vision for the guidance of God's church and the accomplishment of His will. By that, I mean that the business principles of a secular world regarding guidance and management are embraced and applied to the life and activity of the church without any critical thinking. Therefore, we have many examples where pastors and spiritual workers apply the counsel, principles, and directions of many successful business people, managers and directors of companies to the life of the church all in a desire to accomplish quick success (2007).

Likewise, Kent Ingle notes, "It seems that many conferences about church growth, seminars and modern literature are focused on outside methodologies and techniques" (2011, 23).

Contrary to such ways of accomplishing success, there is a need for pointing out Christ as the Head of the Body (whether his headship has a meaning of source or authority) and the fact that the Church is an organism that continuously changes. Regarding the latter, I agree with the following:

The church ... does not possess the immutability of divine personality. Nor does it have the unalterable quality of propositional truth. The church is a *divine-human enterprise* which, though called into being by God's will, cannot escape the imperfections of its membership. It is a *dynamic organism* that both reflects and challenges its environment. It is a *living body* that alternately thrives and declines. The church does change. Moreover, it needs to change (Harris, Shelly, 1992, 3).

If what these two authors are saying is correct, then the Church has an obligation, depending on the circumstances and times in which it lives, to adjust and synchronize its work and ministry. On the other hand, that same thing represents a challenge because church plans for activity should not be a result of human wisdom and ideas, but God's guidance. That is something well known, but is sometimes hard to accomplish in practice. Since Christ is the authority and source of everything that the Church needs, the Church as a community needs to discover what the Head is doing, where he is leading, and how he wants things to be done.

The direction of the Holy Spirit that Paul received in Phrygia, Galatia and Mysia, and the vision he received to go to Macedonia (Acts 16) are good examples of a mode of operation. Likewise, Jesus showed his dependence on the Father's guidance and recognition of the Father's will in his ministry. Examples of this include his statement to Zacchaeus when he said, "I must stay at your house today" (Lk. 19:5), and the situation at the pool of Bethesda where he healed just one out of many sick persons which he later explained by saying, "Truly, truly, I say to you, The Son can do nothing of Himself but what He sees the Father do. For whatever things He does these also the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows Him all the things that He Himself does" (John 5:19-20). These examples speak to the fact that Jesus did not go around trying to *guess* what the will of the Father was, but he recognized what his Father was doing. In accordance with that, local churches should, among other things, be sensitive to recognize God's activity and what God desires them to do. I conclude this thought with a statement from John Maxwell: "If pastors want to receive a vision, they must hear God's voice. They must pray and seek the Lord. It all starts there – in their hearts. God must put something into their heart and spirit and that becomes material that they must successfully transfer to the leadership so that they can also catch the vision" (2007, 3).

Gifts and Ministries in the Body of Christ

The picture of the Church that Paul offers in Ephesians should impact the understanding and view of believers that have certain gifts and ministries. Although the New Testament includes some negative examples of individuals

who wanted to be first and foremost in implementing their own will in the Church (3 John 9-10), who were cruel in their stewardship over the Church (Acts 20:29), and who wanted positions in the Church for the sake of gaining interest (1 Pet. 5), the opposite truth is also present: Christ as the head of the Church reveals his will by giving to certain individuals different gifts, callings or ministries. The Church has an obligation to recognize, bless and release such people into ministry because God brings his Church to maturity in this way.

Since Christ is the one who gives gifts to his Church in order for it to reach maturity and unity in faith, those individuals who possess such gifts, callings and ministries should not be a threat or competition to one another. If there is no competition in the Kingdom because each individual has a unique God-given part or role to play, any trace of envy, competition, strife or the like are out of place. Equally, those who have gifts, callings and ministries should work in such a way as to promote and contribute to the growth, unity and fellowship of the Church. No one has a right to do anything that would destroy or damage unity, fellowship or anything else that would endanger God's purpose for the Church. Carl Holladay notices an interesting thing:

This difference of perspective helps explain why Paul in the undisputed letters envisions ministerial roles as gifts primarily exercised within local churches (1 Cor 12:4-11; Rom 12:3-8; even 1 Cor 12:27-31 has a congregational focus). Similarly, duly appointed leadership roles are congregationally based (Phil 1:1). Reflecting a more comprehensive, historically distant perspective, Ephesians sees the universal church as having a foundation of "[holy] apostles and prophets," a previous generation of pace setting founders who built a superstructure on Christ, the cornerstone (2:20; 3:5). Accordingly, roles of leadership and ministry in Ephesians are discrete activities that are viewed comprehensively and hierarchically (4:11-12) (2005, 577).

Although I do not agree with Holladay's opinion that when Paul speaks about ministries in Ephesus he presumes the existence of hierarchy, it is noticeable that Paul does not discuss Church ministries on a local level, but on a more universal and comprehensive level. That means that God is not building his Church only on a local level, but more broadly, on the universal level. With this, I want to point out that certain individuals who have particular gifts and ministries given to them by Christ should act and serve beyond the context of the local church. Unfortunately, since the Church is divided by various denominations and occasional prejudices toward everything that does not come from "my tradition," it is easier to miss, not recognize and not accept, such individuals who have such ministries. Of course, that does not mean that everything new or different is automatically correct, but if believers go to the extreme and cocoon themselves inside "our local church" or "our church tradition," there is a chance that God's Church will miss

and reject people that Christ gave as gifts to his Church who were called to work on a more broad level and not just on a local level.

Individualized Christianity

Individualized Christianity is one of the great misfortunes of these times. Such Christianity predominately manifests itself in two ways: first and foremost through the mentality which I called the “Jesus – Bible – I” mentality and through the nonexistence of fellowship between local churches. As previously mentioned, such a “Jesus – Bible – I” mentality reduces the idea of salvation to the individual level between God and individual, while participation in the life and work of the Church is seen as some sort of optional or volunteer activity. Since local churches are not perfect and people can get easily disappointed, more and more Christians have a tendency to not attend any church because they think that all that they need for their Christianity is Jesus and the Bible. I do not justify nor condemn anyone who lives his or her faith in this way, but I am just pointing out that this is not God’s ideal for believers. As I said before, *salvation* is not a theological term that only describes one’s personal relationship with God, but it also describes a mutual life, growth and work for the Gospel (see Phil. 2:12; 2 Cor 6:2).

On the other hand, it is a regretful fact that individualism leads some to the situation where particular local churches in one place or city often act like they do not depend on each other and do not have anything in common. The lack of such relationships is usually justified in two ways: a) by claiming one’s own superiority in comparison with other Christians in a way that “we are the only church in the city” or “we are the only Christians in the city”⁶ and; b) by rejecting any cooperation with others because “that other church” is not part of “our denomination”, or “they teach something that differs from our doctrine.” So Legrand denies the genuineness of spiritual manifestations in Pentecostalism because if the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth, and Pentecostals claim that they are led by the Spirit, then Pentecostals would definitely recognize the mistakes in their doctrine. The conclusion of the matter is this: “the spirit that baptizes these people is opposite to the Scripture and cannot be the Holy Spirit” (Legrand, 1999, 11, 14). Although Legrand comes to his conclusion in the context of charismatic revival in the Roman Catholic Church, such an attitude could cause the end of cooperation among churches even in the New Testament times. For example, New Testament churches that believed that Christ had risen from the dead should have quit their fellowship with the Corinthian church because some members there believed that Christ had not risen from the dead (1 Cor. 15:15-19). The church in

6 One example of such an attitude can be found in Damir Šičko Alić, “Otvoreno pismo o Darku i Marijani Kovačević,” *Karizma* 33, (July 2005), 3.

Thessalonians should probably have been excommunicated because some members had misconceptions regarding the second coming of Christ. Maybe the reason for their misconception was the fact that Thessalonian believers did not receive the same spirit as other believers. Or what should be done with the Galatians who were inclined to accept circumcision? Were miraculous manifestations signs of satanic activity among them (3:1-5)? Maybe they never experienced proper conversion nor received the Holy Spirit because if they had, surely he would not have led them toward the idea to accept circumcision.

I am aware that I am pushing Legrand's argument to the extreme, but of course, the truths of God's word cannot be ignored nor can they be easily skipped over as wrong doctrines. However, differences that exist among Christian denominations and churches (often insignificant and nonessential) often serve as reason and excuse for a lack of cooperation and fellowship.

Unity and Fellowship between Christians and Churches

If the Church is a media, that is, the beginning and the first fruit of the process when all things will one day be "headed up" in Christ (1:9-10, MKJV), and if the purpose of the Church is to manifest the manifold wisdom of God to the spiritual world (3:10), awareness of these realities and truths should inevitably encourage believers and local churches to foster unity and fellowship – unity and fellowship that is not present only in words, but that is visible and manifested in mutual relationships. The lack of such knowledge, or unawareness of these truths, results in factions, divisions and conflicts among Christians. Divisions, quarrels, talk about which church is better or more spiritual, etc., is not a Christianity which reflects the wisdom of God or shows the world how it looks to live under the lordship of Christ. This is obvious.

Strife and quarrels are an indication that this generation does not understand the glorious picture and the purpose of the Church. If believers continue (consciously or unconsciously) to equate *the Church* with the *local church* or *denomination*, or to equate the kingdom of God with the local church (as if the kingdom does not exist outside the walls of one's church), there will continue to be situations in which church communities have no desire or need to work on their mutual unity and fellowship. Because of this, there is a need to awaken the consciences of today's believers for the *catholicity* or *universality* of the Church. The Church is not just "my" local church or "my" denomination, but the Church is made up of all those who belong to Christ. God is not active only on a local level, but he acts universally as well.

From the stand point of the New Testament, the unity of the Church is a fact, and not some unreachable ideal. Unity comes from the fact that the Holy Spirit lives inside the believers who are, in turn, responsible to keep and nurture

this unity (Eph 4:3). Hence, the Church should be aware that it stands at the beginning of the process of creation's restoration which God has planned and executed in Christ, and therefore, relationships and behaviors of the churches should reflect this God-given purpose. This unity, as previously stated, should mark families (Eph 5:21-6:9), life, work and the activities of the church (Eph 4:1-16), and the international and interracial relationships of those who are members of the Church (Eph 2:11-22).

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to stress that every generation, and so it is with this generation, has an opportunity to change things for the better or to at least show a desire for positive changes. The Church is a living organism that is ever-changing and it represents the communion of a perfect God with an imperfect people. Yet, the Church is also an institution which is initiated by God and has God-given purposes, goals, gifts, principles of work and directions which it needs to keep. It is not a human product, and as such, it should not participate in the fulfillment of human intentions, goals, and desires. Still, the reality is often different from the intention.

I am convinced that change among the churches can occur if believers would, among other things, become aware, based on the epistle of Ephesians, of the vision that God has for his Church because precisely this epistle speaks against many things that churches practice and believe (and I pointed out some of these mistakes in this article). The necessity of discovering the universal/catholic/general dimension of the Church which is, in some capacity, neglected among churches is the need of these times. In accordance with this, local churches should inevitably start to question their own activities and beliefs according to the standard of God's word. If that questioning never happens, there is a danger that everything will remain the same because it is easier to live in line with one's own habits and traditions than to change oneself and one's mode of operation.

Individualism kills and fellowship produces growth – that is the lesson that this epistle teaches because, speaking about the Church, Paul says, “In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord” (Eph 2:21). The expression “joined together” *sunarmologeō* means to fit something together in harmony (cf. Hoehner, 2002, 409). The idea behind this expression is that God is the one who collects and joins people together in a proper and harmonious way so that the Church as a holy temple can grow in the Lord. If that is correct, it means that the Church can grow only if it is connected or joined together. For that matter, divisions and individualism produces stagnation and they make Church static. Another idea that comes from this verse is that

Paul is talking about Church growth on a universal level, and not so much on the local level. Again, the discussion about Church growth among the churches of a Reformation background is usually reduced to the growth of a particular *local church* (that is, how *my* local church can grow) and focused on growing in *numbers* (that is, how to gain new converts).⁷

However, Paul here is not talking about the growth of one particular church community but has the growth of the universal Church as the Body of Christ in mind. There is a dilemma about the expression “whole building” because some think that it means “each, every” which would mean that Paul is talking about “each building.” Some believe that the correct meaning is “whole building.” In the first case, the idea is that Paul is referring to *each local church* that grows into a holy temple which represents God’s dwelling place, while in the other case of “whole” or “entire”, the building represents the universal Church (cf. Browner, Johnson, 2007, 244). Hoehner argues for the second interpretation for the following reasons: “First, the context is talking about one structure on one foundation and as opposed to many structures. Second, in the NT there are instances when the anarthrous constructions are rendered ‘all’ or ‘whole.’” After presenting several cases where the adjective *pas/pasa/pan* has a meaning of “all, whole, entire,” Hoehner concludes that these examples are sufficient proofs that this adjective means “wholeness” (cf. Hoehner, 2002, 408).

That points to the fact that when Paul talks about church growth, this growth is not limited to the growth of local churches, but describes the growth of the universal Church. In other words, when one local church grows, the whole Church grows because, as McIntosh says, “Growth of the universal church takes primarily as local churches faithfully win people to Christ and assimilate the new converts into their body” (McIntosh, 2003, 32). McGavran also correctly observes that “Denominational pride often prevents us from seeing that when our branch of the church loses members to a more vital branch, we are awakened and stimulated to greater effort, and the universal church prospers” (McGavran, 1990, 4).

Therefore, it is sad if the idea of church growth is limited and understood only locally and if competition and adversity among the local churches continues. Also, it is tragic if the transition of an individual from one local church to another is portrayed as some “loss” for that locale without noticing that the growth of one local church produces the growth of the universal Church. In other words,

7 Based on my personal study of the New Testament, I observed that the idea of church growth is not focused on growing in numbers, but primarily is focused on the growth of believers/church in maturity and Christ-likeness. Unfortunately, today when the topic of church growth is discussed, the emphasis is mostly on growing in numbers. In itself, this is not something bad, but the emphasis of the New Testament is on the growth in maturity.

everybody wins. By accepting the vision of the Church offered in Ephesians, such negative things can become a matter of the past. Churches that have a Reformation background truly have an opportunity and challenge to convert from their separatist-reactionary heritage, to abandon individualism as the *modus operandi* of their church practice and accept the picture of the Church that is portrayed in the epistle of Ephesians.

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Ervin Budiselić

Pavlovo poimanje Crkve u poslanici Efežanima kao model za današnju Crkvu

Sažetak

Članak analizira Pavlovo gledište o Crkvi kojeg iznosi u poslanici Efežanima te promišlja kako i na koji način bi to gledište trebalo utjecati na život i djelovanje crkava reformacijske baštine u Hrvatskoj. U prvom dijelu članka, autor ističe probleme među crkvama reformacijske baštine koji se sastoje od zanemarivane sveopće dimenzije Crkve, nedovoljnog razumijevanja svrhe i namjera koje Bog ima za svoju Crkvu, nedovoljnog razumijevanja utjecaja kojeg Kristova žrtva ima na život vjernika te pogrešnog razumijevanja odnosa između spasenja i Crkve. U skladu s time, autor nudi teološku korekciju tih stavova. U drugom dijelu članka, autor ističe smjernice i implikacije koje bi trebale proizaći iz ispravnog teološkog shvaćanja slike Crkve koju nam Pavao nudi u Efežanima, a koje se tiču crkvenog rasta, ispravnog odnosima prema pojedincima koji imaju različite službe i darove, odbacivanja mentaliteta "Isus - Biblija i ja" te potrebe razvijanja jedinstva i zajedništva među crkvama.