Recovering Meaningful Membership in Baptist Churches through Reemphasizing the Lordship of Christ

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The last two decades have experienced a renaissance regarding regenerate membership and church discipline in Baptist churches. This Renaissance began because, though Baptist churches have the fundamental distinction of believer's baptism and a church comprising "visible saints," regenerate membership has largely declined in Baptist churches.[1] A brief recap of church history and why regenerate membership is crucial to Baptists is noteworthy.

Under Constantine's reign, which began in 312, Christianity became state religion in 313, and church membership became compulsory, ultimately jeopardizing regenerate membership. Eventually, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in 380 under Theodotus II.[2] These events attracted more people to the church, and as more came in, the catechesis, which had served as a means of deciphering those genuinely saved before bringing them into the membership of

[1] Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 75.

[2] Robert G. Clouse, Richard V. Pierard and Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Two Kingdoms: The Church and Culture through the Ages* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993), 109.

the church, became substandard.[3] To further seal the church's fate on the loss of regenerate membership, Augustine argued that the church, as seen in the world, is a mixture of the saved and the unsaved and would be separated and purified only in the *eschaton*. He developed his argument from Jesus' parable of the wheat and tares and concluded that the church was a mixed body, *corpus permixtum*.[4]

This view of the church prevailed throughout the Middle Ages, and regenerate membership would not reappear until the appearance of the Anabaptists and the early English Baptist Separatists.[5] Hammett argues that the earliest Baptist confessions reflect regenerate membership as a centerpiece of Baptist ecclesiology.[6] Every aspect of Baptist ecclesiology—church covenants, the ordinances, church discipline, evangelism, and small groups—depends on it.[7]

Despite the good start, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw a decline in regenerate church membership. Christine Heyrmann observed that, contrary to the earlier period, when membership was leaner in churches because of the daunting requirements and responsibilities of membership, in the early nineteenth century, membership in evangelical churches began to increase due to a decrease in piety and the relaxation of

[3] *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity,* Vol. 1 s.v. "Catechesis, Catechumenate"

[4] For a fuller historical background on this subject, see G. G. Willis, *Saint Augustine and the Donatist Controversy* (London: SPCK, 1950).

[5] John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundation for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Kregel, 2019) 99-102.

[6] Hammett, 104-108.

[7] Charles W. Deweese, *A Community of Believers: Making Church Membership More Meaningful* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1978), 13.

standards.[8] Thom Rainer describes this phenomenon as "dumbing down church membership to the point where it is easier to become a church member than it is to join a civic club.[9]

Furthermore, American Christian historians attribute the expansion of American Christianity to the church accommodating popular culture. American individualism has become more evident in the church as evangelical churches relaxed the vetting of faith professions and church discipline.[10] Nathan Hatch traces the church boom in America to the incarnation of church into popular culture. He observes three aspects by which this incarnation occurred. First, the popular religious movement articulated a profoundly democratic spirit. Second, they elevated people's spiritual impulses and failed to subject those impulses to the scrutiny of orthodox doctrine. Thus, preachers from various religious movements fanned the flame of religious ecstasy. Thirdly, religious outsiders had lofty expectations of the various movements, thus putting these movements in an unhealthy terrain of performance.[11]

From an ecclesiological standpoint, Hammett traces the decline in regenerate membership in Baptist churches to assimilation-

[8] Christine Heyrmann, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of Bible Belt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 27.

[9] Thom S. Rainer, *High Expectations: The Remarkable Secret for Keeping People in Your Church* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 1999), 12.

[10] See John Woodridge, Mark Noll, and Nathan Hatch, *The Gospel in America: Themes in the Story of America's Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979); Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South 1785-1900* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[11] Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 25–29 (iBooks).

related problems and other problems such as a rise in the socio-economic status of Baptist members and, more importantly, a decline in believer's baptism and church discipline.[12] Put in perspective, the decline in believer's baptism was not a reduction of those baptized but an increase in the number of pre-teens baptized and a general decline in pre-baptismal training. Hammett observes that, as a result, many Baptist churches have a questionable claim to practice regenerate membership.[13]

However, the last three decades have witnessed a renaissance of regenerate membership and discipline.[14] Among other authors, Hammett has suggested the recovery of some Baptist ideals to revive meaningful membership. These ideals include returning to church covenants, reforming baptism and church membership, and recovering redemptive discipline.[15]

Given the above discussion on regenerate membership and the intrinsic nature of those who should constitute a church membership, reemphasizing Christ's Lordship, a gospel component that is too often under-emphasized, will be

[12] Deweese, 14-15.

[13] Hammett, 122.

[14] These books have urged these practices in recent times. Thomas White, Jason Duesing, and Malcolm Yarnell III, eds., *Restoring Integrity in Baptist Churches* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008); Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010); John Hammett and Ben Merkle, eds., *Those Who Must Give an Account: A Study of Church Membership and Church Discipline* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2012); Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman, eds., *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2015); and Jeremy Kimble, *40 Questions about Church Membership and Discipline* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2017).

[15] Hammett, 123-36.

instrumental in a recovery of meaningful church membership.[16] As stated earlier, crucial to the decline of regenerate membership was the tendency to baptize without a thorough affirmation of conversion and the decline of discipline in churches. Both of these components, as scholars have opined, resulted in individualistic and anti-authority Christians.[17] Wyman Richardson adds a third to this list—a consumerist Christianity.[18] The unsaid but apparent conclusion of these three traits is that Baptist churches became filled with more unbelievers at worst, and unsanctified believers at best, hence the need to reemphasize Christ's Lordship.[19]

Therefore, this paper will argue that reemphasizing Christ's Lordship will further catalyze the recovery of meaningful

[16] Scholars have observed that as important as the ascension and exaltation of Christ is to Christian theology, it is usually often under-emphasized. See Brian K. Donne, "Significance of the Ascension of Jesus Christ in the New Testament." *Scottish Journal of Theology* 30, no. 6 (1977): 555–68; Patrick Schreiner, *The Ascension of Christ: Recovering a Neglected Doctrine*. Snapshots, (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020).

[17] Scholars who are addressing this issues all agree that individualism and anti-authority tendencies in many professing believers have pervaded the churches. See Greg A. Wills, "A Historical Analysis of Church Discipline," *Those Who Must Give an Account*, 131-55.

[18] Wyman L. Richardson, *On Earth As It Is In Heaven: Reclaiming Regenerate Church Membership* (CapeCoral, FL: Founder Press, 2011), 34-44. Richardson describes churches and their members as "museums," by this he meant misuse of the church; "Walmart," by this he meant consumerism; and "ZooRanger," by this he meant individualism in the church.

[19] The obvious question is why just Christ's Lordship and not the whole gospel. Evangelicals never stopped preaching the gospel; however, more emphasis has been placed on the cross and its salvific benefit, while Christ's ascension/exaltation and Lordship has been underemphasized. The result of this imbalance in the gospel presentation to this currently individualist and consumerist generation is the tendency to receive the gospel and be saved, yet refuse to commit to responsibility under Christ in his body.

regenerate membership in Baptist churches. The following sections will examine Lordship of Christ in portions of Acts and Paul's Ephesians. then draw implications for recovering regenerate membership.

The Lordship of Christ in Acts 2:22-24, 32-33, 36-38

On the day of Pentecost, the disciples were praying together when the Holy Spirit came upon them, accompanied by signs Luke describes. These signs attracted the crowd and created an occasion for Peter to address the crowd.

Peter linked the event to Joel's prophecy that God would pour His Spirit on all flesh, and those present witnessed a manifestation of that prophecy. He explained the prophecy as the dawn of a new age, an age in which only those who call on the name of the Lord shall receive salvation. Peter uses *Kurios*, "Lord," to replace Joel's "Yahweh,"[20] the covenant name of Israel's God (vs. 21), and then, he extends his speech to draw the link of this prophecy with the ministry of Jesus.

In verse 22, Peter establishes Jesus of Nazareth as the Lord, whom he had earlier referred to in the previous verse. He does this by reminding them that God attested to Jesus' ministry with signs and wonders, and miracles.

In verse 23, Peter indicts his Jewish listeners in the crucifixion of Jesus, balancing their actions with God's sovereignty. The verse picks up with a demonstrative *τοῦτον*, with Jesus of Nazareth as its antecedent. The structure used here contains

[20] Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts: Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 140.

three qualifying statements before the verb *ἀνείλατε* (to kill). Peter notes that they could kill Jesus because he was *ἔκδοτον* (given up) by the counsel and foreknowledge of God.[21] This theme of God's foreknowledge and Christ suffering recurs in other places in Acts (cf. 3:18; 4:28; 26:22-23). Peter includes the Jews who were listening to him in the killing of Jesus. They were the main culprits as he uses the second person aorist indicative *ἀνείλατε* (you killed). The insistence of the moral responsibility for Jesus' death rested on the Jerusalemites, and this theme runs through Acts (cf. 3:13; 4:10; 5:30; 7:52).[22] But the Jews were not without help in the killing of Jesus. They employed the help of *χειρὸς ἀνόμων* (wicked hands, literally, lawless hands). The sense here could either be Gentiles in general judging from the literal sense of the word or it could more specifically refer to the wicked Roman Empire.[23]

In verse 24, Peter proceeds to discuss the resurrection of Jesus. Peter uses a strange expression in the process of Christ resurrection: *λύσας τὰς ὠδῖνας τοῦ θανάτου*, (loosing the pangs of death). The strangeness of the expression lies in the fact that *ὠδῖνας* (pangs) usually collocates with birth pains but is now used with death. A Hebrew translation variance has been suggested to be behind the text here, such that the sense intended is actually loosing the "cords" of death.[24] On the other

[21] C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Acts of the Apostles.* Vol. I (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 142

[22] F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostle: The Greek Text.* Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 123

[23] Ibid.

[24] John B. Polhill, *Acts.* NAC. (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1992), 113. Marshall notes that the variation would be due to a confusion of חֶבֶל ("pangs") with חֶבֶל ("cords"). Such a variant is found in Ps. 18:5, where the Hebrew text has "cords of death" but the Septuagint translated

hand, it has also been argued that Luke may be using a mixed metaphor since, like birth, the resurrection is Christ's new birth from death.[25] This verse supplies the second member of the early Christian kerygma.[26]

In verses 33-35, Peter moves from the resurrection to the exaltation of Christ, the third part of the apostolic gospel. Perhaps because of the inferential conjunction, *οὖν* (therefore), it is usually subsumed under the resurrection. However, Bruce thinks that the conjunction serves a different purpose. He contends that Peter's average listener would have been asking, "But where is He now if He rose from the dead?"[27] To this pre-empted question, Peter supplies the answer that the resurrected Jesus now is the exalted Jesus at the right hand of God. Moreover, the inferential conjunction marks the conclusion of Peter's whole discourse.[28]Again, by referring to the right hand as the place to which Christ was exalted, Peter's reference may have been Psalm 110:1. The Jewish mind associates the right hand with greatness, strength, goodness, and divinity.[29]

Perhaps more important in this verse is the participial usages in the sentence. Both participles *ὑψωθείς* ("being exalted" to the right hand), and *λαβὼν* ("having received" the promised Holy

"pangs of death." See I. Howard Marshall, *Acts.* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1980), 80

[25] Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964) s.v. "ὠ□ί□."

[26] Polhill, *Acts.* 112.

[27] Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts.* 72.

[28] David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostle.* PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009), 150.

[29] Ibid.

Spirit) are aorist passive participles, thus, the aspect of the action is perfective. The time of the action is most likely past to the verb it modifies, *ἐξέχεεν* (he poured out). Peter here argues that what the crowd has seen, the gift of the Spirit upon God's people became possible because Christ was exalted and has received the promised Holy Spirit. In verses 34, 35, Peter, like he had twice done, strengthens his claim from David's Psalm 110. Bruce notes that this exaltation of Jesus, per Psalm 110:1, "is an integral part of the apostolic message, as it has remained an essential element in the historic Christian's creed.[30]

In verse 36, Peter summarizes with one conclusion for the house of Israel: Jesus is both Lord and Christ. Polhill notes that this sermon seems to return full circle to where it began: this Jesus whom they crucified is both Lord and Christ. This conclusion appears to be the center of Peter's sermon.[31] He adds that with the prompting of Psalm 110:1, he moves his audience to want to call upon Jesus as Lord who will save, leading back to Joel 2:32.[32] This climax of Jesus' exaltation as Lord connects more directly to the salvific prophecy earlier quoted in Joel 2:32. It will, of course, necessitate the response of the audience to whom Peter had been preaching.

Bruce posits that Christ's Messiahship was acclaimed at baptism and confirmed by His resurrection. But He was exalted not only as Messiah but as Lord. Peter's listeners surely must have understood Jesus's designation as *κύριος* (Lord), since that was the same word which the Septuagint used in translating

[30] Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts.* 73.

[31] Polhill, *Acts.* 115.

[32] Ibid., 116.

the Hebrew name for God, Yahweh.[33] As Lord, he must claim ownership over everything and everyone. Following Joel's prophecy, he will save those who call upon Him as Lord. Elsewhere, Peter notes that God exalted Jesus that He might grant Israel repentance and that He might forgive sins (Acts 5:31). Keener notes that Jesus as the Messiah (Israel's King) and Lord at God's right hand demands universal allegiance. These positions demand all of humanity's response: Israel's response in accepting its King and the Gentiles' response in submitting to His Lordship.[34] In verses, 37-38, Peter's Jewish crowd understood his point, and their response was to inquire how they could find salvation

This idea of the exalted Lord's activity in pouring out His Holy Spirit linked with salvation becomes evident in the rest of the book of Acts. Philip evangelizes Samaria and the Jerusalem church commission Peter and John to pray with them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14-18). The Lord requires Ananias to pray with Paul to receive his sight and receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:17). While Peter is yet speaking to Cornelius's household, the Holy Spirit comes upon everyone listening (Acts 10:44). In each of these instances, the exalted Christ saves and pours His Holy Spirit upon people. (Act 2:21, 33). This section has considered the first gospel presentation in Acts and emphasized the role of the exalted Lord. He saves and empowers with His Holy Spirit. Moreover, that He is Lord requires universal allegiance from the world and submission from His

[33] Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts.* 73-74.

[34] Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary.* Vol. I (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 963.

church. The next section will explore Paul's understanding of the exalted Christ.

Christ's Lordship in Paul's Writings

While Paul's phraseology differed from Luke's Acts, Paul understood the gospel to include the Davidic descent of Jesus, the Messiah; his death and resurrection according to the Scripture; and his exaltation as Lord and Christ.[35] Exploring Paul's understanding of Christ's exaltation and Lordship will be helpful for the present study. Many of Paul's discourses suggest an underlying understanding and acceptance of the Lordship of Christ. Paul repeatedly refers to Jesus in his writing as *kyrios*, "Lord," especially in the introduction and conclusions to his letter. The next section will consider Paul's understanding of the Lordship of Christ as it relates to the church in Ephesians.

Christ's Lordship in Ephesians 1:20-23

Paul's discourses in Ephesians speak more clearly on Christ's Lordship to the church as the apostle applies this understanding in this letter. In his thanksgiving and intercession for the Ephesian church, Paul prays that the church may know the hope of their calling, the riches of God's glorious inheritance, and the greatness of God's power for the sake of those who believed (Eph 1:15-19). In verse 20, Paul introduces a relative clause that further describes this power and how, through it, God raised Christ from the dead and made Christ sit "above all heavens," in a place of authority over the powers of the present time and the age to come. In this text

[35] C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Development* Reprint Ed. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1963), 21-23

again, Paul's prayer dovetails with the reality that Christ is exalted and is Lord of all.

Peter O'Brien notes that Christ's exaltation, as implied by his ascension to God's right hand in this text, was an essential and regular element in the early apostolic preaching. Distinguishing the resurrection from the exaltation, O'Brien adds that while the resurrection asserts that "Christ lives forever; the exaltation asserts that he reigns forever."[36] Paul emphasizes the universality of Christ's Lordship and rulership over any imaginable cosmic force to the Ephesian Christians, who perhaps still vacillated between focusing on Christ and on other cosmic powers.[37] In the first part of verse 22, Paul notes that God has put all things under Christ's feet. This clause recalls Psalm 8:6, read in the context of Paul's second Adam theology (1 Cor 15:20-28).[38] Lincoln adds that Paul's discourse in this section draws on a common tradition in the early church that linked Psalm 8:6 to Psalm 110:1.[39]

In the second part of verse 22, Paul applies his Christology in 20-22a to the church. He adds that because of Christ's exalted seat as Lord, God gave (appointed) him as head for the church's benefit. The connection between Christ's Lordship over the entire cosmos and his headship over the church is noteworthy. Baugh notes that "head" is an office, like "king," as suggested by Paul's use of "body" for the church; thus, it refers to Christ's

[36] Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* PNTC (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 171-27, iBooks.

[37] Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* WBC 42 (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 65.

[38] S. M. Baugh, *Ephesians* EEC (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2016), 128.

[39] Lincoln, 67.

authority, not just over the world but in the church.[40] Lincoln differs slightly from Baugh. He notes that Christ's supreme authority over the cosmos is for the benefit of the church. He clarifies that Paul's explicit intent in this text is not to assert Christ's headship over the church; however, a clear implication of Christ's authority over all things for the church's sake is that He is also head of the church.[41] In this text, the headship of Christ must at least implicitly include authority as Paul would later require wives to submit to husbands and liken the church to Christ's bride (Eph 5:23).

F. F. Bruce does not approach this text from the viewpoint of authority or benefit. Instead, he argues for headship as origin and source. He notes that Christ is divinely appointed as the source of the church's life, and that, with the insistence on his universal Lordship, there is the implication that he is also the church's Lord.[42] Headship cannot be viewed exclusively as authority on the one hand and origin on the other; the metaphor is inclusive of both ideas. Paul demonstrates awareness of this inclusivity as he shifts from the language of authority in verses 21 and 22 to the organic language of the church as Christ's body in verse 23, using the headship metaphor as a bridge between the two ideas. He further interprets the head's relation to the body in terms of "inspiring, ruling, guiding, combining, sustaining power, the mainstream of activity, the center of unity, and the seat of life."[43]

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[40] Baugh, 129.

[41] Lincoln, 68.

[42] F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1984), 4281 Kindle Book.

[43] O'Brien, 178 iBooks; J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (London: Macmillan, 1890), 227.

In verse 23, Paul had made the complete transition from Christ's exalted authority to his headship of the church as His body. This verse has two parts to it. A relative clause, "which is his body," begins the verse, and the second part, "the fullness of him who fills everything in every way," has attracted a variety of explanations. In the first part, Bruce notes the organic relation between Christ and his church. He adds that "the church" in Paul's thought is perhaps the universal church, though manifested visibly in the local church.[44] The last past of this verse has attracted considerable debate. The problem that arises with the construction includes deciphering the antecedent of "fulness" and then the clause's voice, whether active or passive. If the antecedent of *pleroma*, "fulness," is body, and the clause is read in the active voice, then Paul would be saying that the church completes Christ. Some of the church fathers held this view.[45] However, given that "fulness" follows immediately after "body," it refers to the church, though the church is the one being filled in the passive sense.

Additionally, in the final part of the clause, the participle may be rendered passive, middle, or middle with an active force. If rendered as passive, then the church is the fulness of Christ, who is being filled by God or by the church. The difficulty with this rendering is that already, Christ is the fulness of God (Col 1:19; 2:9), and it makes little sense to hold that God continuously fills Christ with His presence. Some scholars hold on to this position that God is the one who fill Christ while

[44] Bruce, 4294 Kindle Books.

[45] Origen read the text in this way. See R. E. Heine, *Commenatries of Origen and Jerome on St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians* Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 116-17

Christ fills His body.[46] On the other hand, the church cannot be considered the "fulness" while Christ is still being filled. O'Brien makes a better argument, noting that Paul explains what the believers already share in God's power and glory within the context. They are God's inheritance in whom he displays His glorious riches and incomparable power (v.18, 19). As Christ's body, He empowers and directs them. Thus, Paul refers to them as "the fulness" in that all of Christ's grace is communicated to them as His body.[47] Moreover, the final part of the clause must be understood as middle with an active force such that Christ is the one who fills all things in every way. Paul shares a similar thought concerning Christ in chapter 4:10. Put together, the better rendering of the clause is as follows: "[the church, which is Christ's body], the fulness of him [Christ] who fill all things in every way."[48]

Christ's Lordship in Ephesians 4:7-11

This paragraph belongs to a larger context where Paul describes the unity of the church. The preceding paragraph deals with the oneness of the body. Paul grounds this oneness in seven other ones: one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God, and Father of all (4:1-6). In the second part, Paul continues his discourse on unity and maturity from the angle of diversity. In verse 7, he notes that through "Christ's gift," grace becomes available for each believer. Paul's other

[46] Frank Thielman, *Ephesians* BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 115

[47] O'Brien, 178-81, iBooks.

[48] While this rendering is tentative, as there are those who can disagree on linguistic grounds, this interpretation has more support in recent scholarship. See O'Brien, 181; Lincoln, 77; Baugh, 131; Roy R. Jeal, "A Strange Style of Expression: Ephesians 1:23," *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 10 (1997), 129-38.

references to "grace," *karis*, to the body of Christ comes to mind. Both Rom 12:3-8 and 1 Cor 12:7-11 refer to *karismata*, gifts, which the Holy Spirit gives for the growth and benefit of the body, the church. Whereas some have argued that Paul limits his use of "grace" in this verse to the restricted list he provides in verse 11, the majority of scholars hold a contrary view. They argue that the gift of Christ in this verse is for every believer.[49]

Two other ideas are noteworthy from this text. In 1 Cor 12, Paul attributes the gifts that believers receive to the Holy Spirit. In Rom 12, he attributes the gifts to God. Interestingly, in Ephesians 4, he attributes the gifts to Christ. Paul seems to attribute the giftings in a trinitarian sense. He expresses this idea when he notes that "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone." (1 Cor 12:4-6). Moreover, the word *karis* bears a concrete sense in which God gives gifts or assignments and the capabilities required for them.[50] Held together with the oneness discourse with which Paul began the chapter, in this verse he makes the case that while the church is one, Christ gave each individual who constitutes the church "a grace," preferably "a gift."

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[49] H. Merklein, *Das kirchliche Amt nach dem Epheserbrief* Studien zum Altenund Neuen Testament 33 (Munich: Kösel, 1973), 58-62. Merklein holds this restrictive view of Christ's gift. Other scholars however hold a more open view. See R. Schnackenburg, *The Epistle to the Ephesians: A Commentary*, Trans. J. Heron (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 175; Thielman, 264.

[50] Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. ed. and trans. William F. Arndt, F. Wilber Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker [BDAG], 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. "χάρις."

Verse 8 has attracted debate because Paul introduces it with a quotation formula: “therefore it says;” thus, he is about to quote from the Old Testament Scripture. However, when Paul is done quoting, he considerably alters the wording of the quotation the Scripture (Ps 68:19 [MT], 67:19 [LXX], 68:18 [English translations]). First, Paul changes the subject of the statement from the second person pronoun to a third person, such that the subject no longer reads God (or King, or whoever the victor is) but reads Christ. Second, Paul changes the collective noun “humanity” to the plural “human beings.” Third, Paul changes the verb from “received” to “gave,” such that instead of God “receiving” gifts from humanity, Christ “gave” gifts to human beings.[51] The Jews employed this psalm as a call to rescue His people (1-3). They praise God for His past mighty acts in the exodus, his triumph over kings before the people (4-14). Because of God’s desire for His dwelling, he returns from Sinai to His holy place Zion (16, 17). Then God ascends to Zion, perhaps in the person of the victorious King, leading his captive in triumphal procession and receiving spoils from the conquered people.[52]

Scholars contend that Paul used the Mosaic interpretation in a polemical way, making a lesser to a greater argument. They argue thus: Moses gave the law, but Christ gave grace; Moses ascended to heaven, Christ ascended far above the heavens to fill all things.[53] This position appears more plausible than the

[51] Thielman, 265.

[52] Charles H. Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians* Paideia = Paideia (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 110.

[53] Bruce, *To the Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians*, 342-43; Lincoln, 243.

Targumic explanation or the fact that Paul simply changed the psalm to suit his purpose.[54]

More critical to this paper's purpose is that in verse 8, Paul picks on the concept of Christ's ascension, and building on it, he links Christ's ascension to the giving of gifts to human beings. Bruce notes that grace is given according to the measure of Christ's gifts since Christ is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.[55]

In verses 9 and 10, Paul explores Christ's descent and ascent. Scholars have proposed three views as the interpretation of this text. First, some have interpreted the text to mean that Christ descended into Hades and supposedly released captives (v. 8). Those who argue for this position argue from the phrase "lower regions of the earth," interpreting the genitive possessively or partitively.[56] Within the same view, but contra to partitive or possessive genitive, are those who interpret the genitive appositionally such that Christ descends to the "lower regions, that is, the earth."[57]

The second interpretation views this descent as Christ's descent in the incarnation. Christ descended first, in bodily form, died and resurrected, triumphed, and then finally ascended to His

[54] Thielman, 267.

[55] Bruce, *To the Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians*, 340.

[56] A. T. Hanson, *New Testament Interpretation of Scripture* (London: SPCK, 1980), 135-50; James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (London: SCM, 1980), 186-87.

[57] W. H. Harris, "The Descent of Christ in Ephesian 4:7-11: An Exegetical Investigation with Special Reference to the Influence of Tradition about Moses Associated with Psalm 68:19," Ph.D Diss, University of Sheffield (Sheffield: 1988), 65-78; Thielman also hold this view. See Thielman, 271-72.

dwelling place. Paul shares a similar thought in Phil 2:6-11, and so does the apostle John (cf. Jn 3:13; 6:62).[58] The third view takes the descent as after the ascent; thus, a descent in the Spirit at Pentecost. Christ descended when He poured out the Holy Spirit on the believers on the day of Pentecost. Lincoln holds this view as the most probable interpretation, though he admits the difficulty in interpreting the Holy Spirit's descent as the descent of Christ.[59] O'Brien notes that Paul's focus is Christ's ascent in the context of His giving gifts.[60] The researcher holds to the second interpretation of Christ's descent in the incarnation and his ascent in his exaltation.

The language Paul uses that Christ is "above all heavens" parallels the exaltation language in 1:20-21. Moreover, Paul reechoes the result of Christ's exaltation: "that he might fill all things." Christ fills the universe through the exercise of his Lordship over everything. This Lordship over all things includes his rule over principalities (1:21) and giving grace to his church through whom he fulfills His purposes (4:7, 8, 13, 15-16).[61]

Verse 11 concludes this idea as Paul lists the gifts that the exalted Christ gives to His church. He gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. The purpose of these gifted individuals is to equip the saints for the work of the ministry, whose work will ultimately build up the body of Christ.[62] The

[58] J. Cambier, "La Signification Christologue d'Eph. 4:7-10" NTS 9 (1963), 262-75.

[59] Lincoln, 247

[60] O'Brien, 302, iBooks. He also sees the difficulty of interpreting the Holy Spirit's descent as Christ's descent and so hold to the second view as the most plausible interpretation.

[61] O'Brien, 304, iBooks.

[62] Some scholars have opined that the prepositional phrases used by Paul in verse 12 should be view separately as coordinate clause; thus,

building of the saints would result in the ministry's continuous work and the further edification of Christ's body to the extent that the church becomes mature but keeps growing together as Christ's body (13-15).

Both in Eph 1:20-23 and 4:7-11, Paul's discourse on the exalted Christ communicates two ideas. First, Christ rules and reigns over everything, and being both now and eternally, as well as both terrestrially and celestially. Paul shares a similar thought in Phil 2:5-11, God has highly exalted Christ and given Him a name that everyone must revere. Second, Christ's Lordship over the universe translates into Christ's headship to His body, the church. In each case, Paul expresses the importance of Christ's headship to the church, namely Christ's Lordship over the universe benefits of his body, the church, and Christ continuously exerts his dominion as He enables the church with gifts.

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expressing three different purposes in relation to verse 11. Verse thus will thus read: "for the equipping of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for building up the body of Christ." Scholars who hold this position include T. David Gordon, " 'Equipping' Ministry in Ephesians 4?" *JETS* 37 (1994), 69-78; John J. Davis, "Ephesians 4:12 Once More: Equipping the Saints for the Work of Ministry?" *Evangelical Review of Theology* 24 (2000), 167-76; John C. O'Neill, " 'The Work of the Ministry' in Ephesians 4:12 ans the New Testament," *Expository Times* 112 (2001), 336-50. Other scholars view the three prepositions not as coordinate but as consequential to one another such that the sense of 12 will read "for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry, which will in turn build the body of Christ." See Markus Barth, *Ephesians: Translation and Commentary on Chapters 4-6*, Anchor Bible 34A (New York: Doubleday, 1974), 478-81; John P. Heil, *Ephesians: Empowerment in Love for the Unity of All in Christ*, SBL (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 176.

Implications of Christ's Lordship for Recovering Meaningful Regenerate Membership

This section will present three implications concerning the recovery of a meaningful regenerate membership from the exegeses above. These implications will touch on the three core issues at the heart of the difficulty in recovering meaningful membership: anti-authority, individualism, and consumerism.[63]

First, Peter's presentation of the gospel ended on the note that Christ, the Messiah to the Jews, now sits exalted at the Father's right hand as Lord of all. His Lordship demands the allegiance of all, and every knee will bow to Him eventually whether they like it or not (Phil 2:11). However, those who must follow Him must do so in repentance, faith, and submission. Those who heard Peter preached and followed Christ in repentance further submitted themselves to the apostles' teaching and breaking bread and living with the rest of the body (Acts 2:42). This devotion to following the apostles' teaching reflected that these believers had given up their basic right to determine the trajectory of their lives and had chosen instead to learn of the ways and words of Jesus and to live likewise. The purpose of listening to the apostles would be to learn all that Jesus as commanded and to obey it (Matt 28:19-20). Central to obedience is relinquishing authority over self and yielding it to whoever one obeys.

In many of Paul's letters, he described himself as a slave of Christ. While this may seem like an apostolic cliché, the apostle

[63] These three issues have been highlighted have been highlighted above from a North American perspective.

had given up the right he had over himself. From the moment he met the Exalted Christ, his response was, "what will you have me do, Lord. It is no wonder Paul would later note that he is not just willing to go to jail, but he is ready to die if that is what Christ wills (Acts 21:13). Paul and the other apostles exemplified Jesus' command to disciple to deny self, take up one's cross and follow Him. They gave up their rights to control their lives and submitted their will to the Lord.

In this anti-authoritarian age, people, including Christians, are skeptical of any and every authority. People have become their own gods, trust only themselves, and live only to please themselves. Christians are even more skeptical about their God-appointed leaders, and Christ's undershepherds have become afraid of the sheep Christ called them to tend.[64] As Dever and Leeman note, authority is a gift from God, and suspicion towards all authority is naïve and harmful, as it reveals the extent of degeneration in those who reject all authority. They add that good authority uplifts and empowers, and pastors should represent God's purpose and show themselves trustworthy in the exercise of their God-given authority.[65]

An anti-authoritative generation needs a renewed view of the Lordship of Christ. Evangelistic endeavors should not only get the lost to meet Jesus, the Savior, but such endeavors must also start getting the prideful heart to meet the Christ, the Lord. When converted souls begin to ask the question, "Lord, what will you have me do?" meaningful regenerate membership will become a reality again. Moreover, the gospel encompasses both

[64] Dever and Leeman, xv–xvii.

[65] Dever and Leeman, xvii–xviii.

saving the lost and maturing the saved. The Great Commission of Christ was that His disciples make more disciples. Making disciples includes those both within and outside the church. Whereas it is true that the Great Commission does not command church membership, the apostles of Jesus, who first received this Commission and obeyed it, preached the gospel, made disciples, and started churches comprising regenerate members. Discipleship and church membership belong to the Great Commission. Thus, evangelistic endeavors must begin to reemphasize Christ's Lordship, so must those within the church. Church leaders must confront the anti-authoritative tendencies in their members with the Lordship of Christ. Except the church does that, this age's anti-authoritative tendency will pervade the church, thereby making meaningful membership an unfulfilled dream.

Second, implied in Christ's headship over His church, a theme Paul repeatedly espoused, is the organic union between Christ and His body and communion among members of the body. In Eph 4:1-6, Paul communicates the idea that members should make every effort to stay united in the spirit. In Romans, Paul argued that many parts of the body belong to each other. The interconnectivity and interdependence of the parts of the body make communion imperative (Rom 12:4-5). Paul further expresses this concept in 1 Cor 12:12-26 and notes, at the peak of his argument, that God's choice to set each believer as a part of the body fosters harmony among the members. However, the headship of Christ is crucial to this harmony within the body.

Thus, the self-centered and individualistic tendency among Christians today can only be understood as a disconnect primarily from the head, the Lord Christ, which then reflects a disconnect from other community members. In Paul's language,

such an attitude does not rightly value the body. In recent times, the increasing number of those who claim to be Christians but do not want to associate with any church or denomination is alarming.[66]

It appears as though people want to be Christians but apart from the body. As of 2020, the Gallup Poll shows that among professing Christians, only 24 per cent attend church weekly, 9 per cent almost every week, 11 per cent once a month, 25 per cent seldom attend, and 27 per cent never attend.[67] In a 2019 Pew Research Centre report, they note that between 2018 and 2019, the percentage of those who identified as Christians dropped from 77 per cent to 65 per cent, a 12 per cent decrease. Meanwhile, atheists, agnostics, and the religiously unaffiliated rose from 17 per cent in 2009 to 26 per cent. Of these 26 per cent, 17 per cent do not identify as atheist or agnostic but are part of a distinct group called "the nones," or non-religiously affiliated.[68] This last group continues to grow even now. In another popular article in which Stetzer argues that Christianity is not dying in America, and certainly not in other parts of the world, he admits that these nones are the fastest-growing religious category in the United States and the second-

[66] *Pew Research Center*, "In US., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace: An Update on America's Changing Religious Landscape," Oct 17, 2019, in Religion and Public Life, https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/, accessed 03/11/2021.

[67] "Religion" *Gallup News* https://news.gallup.com/poll/1690/Religion.aspx, accessed 03/11/2021.

[68] "In US Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace: An Update on America's Changing Religious Landscape," Pew Research Center, Oct 17, 2019, in Religion and Public Life, https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/, accessed 03/11/2021.

largest. He further notes that they are not anti-religious, and some of them believe in God.[69]

A clearer understanding of Christ's headship and body should forestall this trend. The Bible does not know or speak of disembodied Christians. Therefore, reemphasizing the believer's connection to Christ, the Lord, and the head of the body vertically should trigger awareness of the need to further reconnect with the rest of the body.

Finally, both in Acts and in Paul, the Exalted Christ pours out His Holy Spirit upon His body, the church. From Paul's perspective, Christ pours out His Spirit for two reasons. First, He fills all things with himself, and the church, His body, fills the earth with His reign by the power of His Spirit. Second, Christ pours out His Spirit and His gifts to empower His church for the ministry work. As they perform this work, other parts of the body mature, and the body grows more fully into Christ, who is the head (Eph 4:7-16). Moreover, Christ's desire that each member of His body has a spiritual ability that will be a blessing to other members of the body (Rom 12:4-8; 1 Cor 12: 12-28). His goal is that each member will be a participatory part of the body

The seeming absence of spiritual giftings-based ministry (Rom 12:3–8) in Baptist churches today begs for questioning.[70] Should it be understood that Christ has stopped empowering

[69] Ed Stetzer, "The Unaffiliated Are Not the Unreachable: Understanding and Reaching the Nones," *Christianity Today*, https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2020/december/unaffiliated-are-not-unreachable-understanding-and-reaching.html, accessed 03/11/2021.

[70] Rainer, 12.

his body for the benefit of one another and to advance Christ's kingdom on earth? Or has the body failed to discern its connection to the head correctly, such that it fails to realize and manifest the poured-out gifts of the Exalted Christ? Sadly, this reality is prevalent in many evangelical churches. People come to church predominantly to consume church activities and not participate.[71] Evangelical Christianity must begin to reemphasize Christ's Lordship expressed in Paul's language as Christ's headship in his church if they hope to see a reawakening of the abilities of the Holy Spirit, which the Exalted Christ has poured out on His church.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that reemphasizing Christ's Lordship, a component of the gospel which is often underemphasized will further catalyze the recovery of meaningful regenerate membership in Baptist church. While a thorough baptismal process and recoverey of Baptist covenants will prove useful, at the heart of the decline of meaningful membership is individualism, consumerism, and an anti-authoritative tendency among Christians. The Lordship of Christ as this paper has argued is the antidote to combat these tendencies. Both in Peter's presentation of the gospel in Acts, and Paul's application of Christ's Lordship to the Ephesian church, Christ's Lordship and headship requires a universal submission from all men, and particularly, an obedience from his church. Moreover, the effects of Christ's headship significantly affect communion within the body and

[71] Bruce Shelley & Marshall Shelley, *The Consumer Church: Can Evangelical Win the World Without Losing their Souls?* (Downer Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 162–74.

functionality of individual parts. The Exalted Christ rules His body as its head, is the source of it, and empowers it for full functionality.

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