

The Household of God: Paul's Missiology and the Nature of the Church

by Kevin Higgins

Editor's Note: This article was presented to the Asia Society for Frontier Mission, Bangkok, Thailand, October 2017.

When I began this paper on the topic of οἶκος (Greek, house or household) and its applications for mission, I assumed my focus would be upon οἶκος (oikos) as a social structure and the implications of that for church planting. As I prepared, I decided to focus on Paul's letter to the Ephesians as my main source.¹

The more I read and meditated on that great text, the more depth and mystery and complexity I discovered beyond the sociological meaning of the term οἶκος, for Paul uses a number of terms with the same root: οἶκος, οἰκεῖος, οἰκονομία, οἰκοδομή, and οἰκοδομέω. So, I have expanded my study of οἶκος to include these related terms and concepts in Ephesians.

However, I also made note of a number of insights into Paul's missiological method in this letter. In some ways, knowing the larger context of Paul's way of doing missiology may serve to help us better understand the place of the church in his thinking and vision. Therefore, before I focus my reflections on οἶκος, I want to outline the missiological method I see in Paul.

One result of this study of οἶκος is that it has actually forced me to reconsider some of the terms we use in mission, and specifically how we describe the sort of movements we want to see God initiate in this day and age. I'll make some suggestions in my conclusion.

Ephesians and Paul's Missiology

There are a number of things in Ephesians that shed light on Paul's way of doing missiology. I will mention five.

Doxology: passing on truth by praying and worshipping

Paul's method of teaching what we might call doctrine is very different than we might expect. The first three chapters of the letter to the Ephesians are sources of some of the deepest and richest truths in scripture: grace, God's eternal purposes, the role of Jesus in God's plans, the work of the Spirit, redemption, the nature of the church, and more, all painted in vibrant color.

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But notice how Paul does this: he says he is praising and blessing God (1:3; 3:14, 20) and that he prays for certain things (and then proceeds to immediately pray for them in 1:16ff.).

It is very difficult to tell when the praising and praying ends and the teaching begins. It is all woven together. It's as if Paul is teaching doctrine as he prays and worships—he's praying and worshipping as he teaches.

Context: teaching in the thought and vocabulary of the audience

Paul's vocabulary is unique. Even a brief comparison between the letters of Galatians and Ephesians, or indeed, Ephesians and almost any other letter of Paul, reveals a very different style of writing and use of terms. Over the years the main argument against Pauline authorship has to do with this difference in vocabulary and literary style.

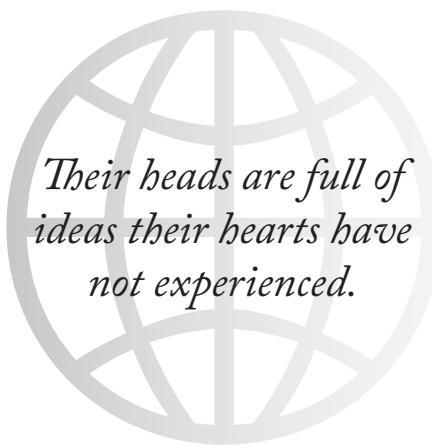
In general, scholars who write our commentaries are not engaged in cross-cultural work, and they often fail to grasp one of the most basic lessons we see here in Ephesians: that communication has to change to fit an audience. Paul's shifts in thought and style are due to his experience as a skilled and articulate cross-cultural apostle.

Holistic: believing, doing and being are all one thing

There is a pattern in Paul's letters that we find very clearly exhibited in Ephesians. The normal outline of Paul's letters is an opening section that might be called teaching or doctrine, and then a second major portion that might be termed application. So the first three chapters of Ephesians are more focused on big truths of the gospel, and then chapter 4 opens with a "therefore" and a call to live lives worthy of all that Paul has just described. This same pattern is clear in Colossians as well (compare 3:1ff.), and the same pattern shows up in Galatians and Romans, though in different proportions (there's not such a clear half and half pattern; see Romans 12:1ff.).

The implications of this for holistic approaches to understanding the nature of "truth" are crucial. The generations after the New Testament show a gradual process of separating theology from life and application, so that by the time of the creeds we see mere statements of conceptual truths. Most of the later Confessions developed in the reformation period are the same (though even more detailed and elaborate than the creeds).

One result of this has been the multiplication of Christians whose heads are full of ideas that their hearts have not experienced. This affects our approach to mission and discipleship. Recent focus on obedience-based disciple making methods are perhaps a counter-balance



to this but seem in danger of going to the opposite extreme. Paul integrated deep spiritual truths and the practical implications for life.

Scripture: most often Paul makes indirect reference to scripture, and seems more focused on working out the implication of who Jesus is, what God has done in and through Jesus, and what that means for the people who follow Jesus.

Ephesians is full of biblical themes, but notice they are generally referred to in indirect ways: creation, fall, evil, Adam, Abraham, Israel's history, law, blessing, temple, and (perhaps) the conquest of the land (applied to "spiritual warfare"). What I find fascinating is that if a reader knows those

stories and those references, the text is powerful and rich. *However, even if the reader does not know the original stories the truths still make sense.*

Two implications from this stand out. First, it is a brilliant way to communicate, and provides an example of how we can balance two different approaches, one which is explicit with all the biblical background so that the gospel makes sense within its scriptural themes; and the other which focuses almost fully on simply making it clear to a new audience. Paul somehow manages to do something quite profound in combining these objectives.

Second, what this highlights is that for Paul the truth to be passed on, the truth to be contextualized, the truth to be taught and lived, is the truth that is in Jesus. Paul is an expository teacher. Normally an expository teacher works through biblical passages line by line "exposing" their meaning. But Paul is an expository teacher of *all that God has done in Christ.*

I am still thinking through all the implications this may have for my own understanding and ministry. On the one hand, we need to be focused on scripture, we need to be biblically rooted and digging deeply into the richness of the scriptures as we seek to know and follow Jesus, and to help others to do so. On the other hand, those same scriptures do not actually teach us that process.

Paul's letters all present the holy life as a Jesus centered life, and his teaching seems to be the application of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done, explained over and over to different groups of believers in different contexts dealing with different issues. It is certainly the case that the scriptures are crucial: I would not have discovered this insight about how Paul uses scripture apart from my study of the scriptures! But it is also possible to focus on teaching scripture in such a way that the result is disciples who know the Bible but not Jesus.

Motivation: in Paul the motive is that God's people would be "filled up with all the fullness of God" and that the church would be his fullness

I would be interested to know how Paul would think about the focus in frontier mission on "finishing the task" and on church planting and disciple making movements. I would imagine there would be much he would affirm. He himself was focused on going where he was not building on the work of others so I think he would encourage the focus on engaging unreached peoples. He planted churches everywhere he went and I think he would find much to praise in the emphasis in mission on CPM and DMM efforts.

But I can also imagine him quoting from Isaiah 49 and declaring that, as good as all this is, it is "too small a thing." For Paul, as he describes his aims in Ephesians, the aim of all he did, and, indeed, the aim of God in his redeeming work, was "fullness." In Colossians Paul speaks of God's fullness in Christ, but here in Ephesians Paul describes God's purposes in the believers themselves: that they be filled up with all of God's fullness (3:19), and that the church be "the fullness of him who fills all things" (1:23).

Perhaps one way we might imagine Paul's reaction to the current focus on church planting among the least reached would be to affirm what we are doing, that we are doing well, but that some of us are missing the deeper purpose of it all: the restoration of humanity, a renewed Adam (4:24) and indeed all of creation (Romans 8:19–23).

All of these five dimensions above set the overall context of Paul as a missiologist; yet, it's the last point in particular, of Paul's view of the fullness of Christ among believers, that serves as a bridge to the next focus of this article: Paul's view of church.

The Household of God

As I mentioned above, I will be focusing on Paul's use of the term οἶκος, and

Notice that there is an overlap in Paul's use of language in regards to οἶκος, and that the relational and physical weave together.

his use of related terms, in describing some aspects of his view of the church. This section is largely an expanded word study, and I will define each term one at a time, and then make some concluding comments. I will include some ideas on how this family language in Ephesians ties into the nature of the church as God's household.

Οἶκος and Οἰκεῖος

The most basic meaning for οἶκος is "house," a place for habitation, and so literally a place to dwell. It can refer to specific houses, and also to a king's house (Matthew 11:8). It is used for God's house (a place for prayer, worship, etc.) and thus, the temple (Luke 11:51).

In addition to these more physical ways of designating the term οἶκος it refers by extension to the family line of an ancestor. Scripture can speak of "the house of David" as indicating his descendants, not just his living family, and not merely the building he slept in.

Οἶκος also has that more restrictive usage and can refer to those living within a physical structure, house, and so can mean simply *family* (Luke 10:5).

Finally, the term is also used of a community of believers as a spiritual house for God's indwelling (1 Peter 2:5).

The term οἰκεῖος refers to those belonging to or standing in relation to a household, that is, members of a family, or relatives (1 Timothy 5:8; and in the New Testament period this would have included slaves as well). This is the opposite of πάροικος: a stranger, or alongside, in the sense of not being part of the family. So, in Ephesians 2:19, Gentiles are no longer πάροικοι (strangers), but οἰκεῖοι (members of the family).

Generally, we are likely to use this sense of belonging when referring to the church as God's family, or perhaps

less intimately as "God's people." This is certainly correct as far as it goes, but in the context of Ephesians it is perhaps too narrow.

One theme in the letter is that the Gentiles are now included in the inheritance (1:14 and 3:6), and that as adopted children (1:5) the Jews and the Gentiles are now one family with access to the same father (2:11–18, and also 3:14; 4:6). In this family, Jesus is "the beloved" (1:6), the rightful heir, and by implication the older brother to us all (so in Colossians, explicitly, the first born, 1:15).

Thus, while it is true to say we are God's family, it is also important to note that this includes all the connotations of the original context as well: family, yes, and also lineage, people, descendants. In other words, the church as God's household implies something much more than just a metaphor of belonging to a specific group of people in a specific place and time. It is more universal, more "catholic" in the original sense of that term, and has application forwards and backwards in time, and sideways through space: it includes all of the people in Christ before and after us, and wherever in the world they may be.

Before we dismiss any non-relational meaning for οἶκος we should also note that the connotations of a physical building are not ever fully absent from Paul's thinking. The section 2:19–22 is the clearest statement of church as God's family, οἶκος: "you are no longer strangers and aliens but you are fellow citizens, . . . of the household of God." At the same time, the metaphor is tied directly to physical structures, as the Gentiles are "*built* on the foundation" of the apostles, and growing into a "holy temple."

Thus, rather than seeing the relational-family dimension of οἶκος as excluding

the physical building dimensions, it is important to notice that there is an overlap in Paul's use of language, and that the relational and physical weave together. This bridges our discussion to the other words in Ephesians which share οἶκος in their roots.

Οἰκοδομή and Οἰκοδομέω

These are noun and verb forms of the same conceptual idea: building. Both terms are used literally (to build or make something) and metaphorically (similar to personal development, for example). So, οἰκοδομή can mean an actual building or structure (Matthew 24:1), and the resurrected body in the future can be described as something built or made (2 Corinthians 5:1). But it can also be used figuratively for the act of encouragement, and also, for the church as a "place" where God dwells (1 Corinthians 3:9).

Οἰκοδομέω in a similar way can be used literally: constructing houses, temples, tombs, etc. (so, Luke 6:48) as well as for those who do the building (Matthew 21:42). But again, there is a figurative use as well, including the establishment of a community known as the house of God (1 Peter 2:5). Or it can be used for the process of spiritual growth and development of the spiritual community and each member within the community (1 Corinthians 14:4). Encouraging to do what is right is also a way that οἰκοδομέω is used (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

In Ephesians 2:19ff. the Gentiles are being built (a participle from οἰκοδομέω) on a foundation. On that foundation is a structure (from οἰκοδομή), and the Gentiles are being built into that same structure (again, from οἰκοδομέω).

In other words, Paul sees the church as the household of God, and by this he means family, and also something being built, a temple, a place where God dwells, and a house where a father lives with a household. These are all metaphorical images for the nature of

the church as people of God and the overlapping connotations can not be separated neatly.

In other words, it is certainly true that Paul is not describing the church as an organization, or a building (literally). But it is overly simplistic to only emphasize the nature of the church as relationally or sociologically a household.

I want to comment further on this, because many advocates of what have become known as insider movements have emphasized οἶκος as a social structure, even the fundamental social structure, "into" which churches can be planted. I am one of those who hold this view, and I am not retracting it here. But it is clear from this brief



look into Ephesians that there is much more to the story, a deeper mystery to the nature of the church as the οἶκος of God. These emphases are not mutually exclusive, and indeed need to be kept together.

Another term with οἶκος in the root needs to be looked at before closing.

Οἰκονομία

Οἰκονομία, literally something like "house law or rule," relates to the task of a steward in overseeing or administering a household, something akin to management (Luke 16:2). Paul makes use of the term to refer to God's own arrangements for mankind's redemption, God's plan, arrangement, and

purpose (Ephesians 1:10 and 3:9). He also uses it for his own apostolic role in God's redemptive work, like a trusteeship (Colossians 1:25).

As such, in the context of all we have just explored, οἰκονομία might be understood as describing the overall establishment and development of this new reality that is the people of God, the house or family of God, the "line" of God, the new order and *nation* of God. That is, while Ephesians uses very different terms, the underlying truth seems very much in keeping with what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God.

Concluding Thoughts

I wrote earlier that I thought this paper would lead me to discussions of the family as a social structure for church planting. But this study pushed me more deeply into the mystery (Paul's term) of the gospel. The gospel certainly refers to our salvation (Ephesians 2:8-10), but for Paul the mystery of the gospel refers ultimately to the church as the expression of a new humanity.

So, while Catholic and high church Anglican theologies of the church run the risk of *institutionalizing* the "body of Christ," and protestant teaching about the church risks *intellectualizing* the concept (turning it into mere metaphor), Paul's letter to the Ephesians presents an *incarnational* understanding, a deep and mysterious spiritual reality.

In his letter to the Ephesians Paul is describing how the promised blessing of Abraham for all the families (οἰκοί) of the earth now brings the Gentiles into the one οἶκος (as family) in and through and with Jesus, the beloved heir. We catch this indirectly in 1:3 where he says God has "blessed us with every spiritual blessing..." One result of this blessing in Paul's vision is that we all will grow into the fullness of Christ (4:13), and this growth into Christ is described as the development into "a building" (again, from

οἰκοδομῇ 4:16). The process of such building and developing, what makes it all happen, is love (4:16). Paul takes all this back before Abraham to creation and describes the whole process of God's work in and through Christ as making us into a "new man," the new Adam (2:15).

But Paul goes deeper. This new reality, the church, the household of God, is also the dwelling of God (an echo of David and Solomon), God's temple (Paul here shifting his use of οἶκος, to a building, not a family).

In short, Paul is summing up the entire Old Testament within a few chapters. And then he pushes beyond anything that the Old Testament may have envisioned. Ephesians portrays a future in which all things will be summed up or brought under the headship of Jesus, the same Jesus given as head of all things to the church, and the church which is the fullness of the one who fills everything. That church is already raised with Jesus and is seated already with him in the heavenly places.

And all of this leads me back to what I hinted at in my opening comments. How does all this consideration of οἶκος impact how we talk about "movements" and how we focus on our mission task? To cut to the point, might we need to reconsider just how we speak today of church planting movements, disciple making movements, or insider movements? Does the emphasis in Paul on household and family, and on the full outworking of God's original intention to bless humanity from Adam to Abraham and to all peoples, require us to reconsider what terms we use?

Perhaps we need to consider language more relevant to the biblical language and the biblical promises. I'd like to suggest "family blessing movements." Don't we need to see that our task is not so much "mission" as it is "blessing?" Perhaps we need to see ourselves not so much as missionaries but as

"blessionaries?" Or, letting this roll out, perhaps our discipline is really not missiology, but "blessiology?" I offer these latter with somewhat of a "wink." But, the "family blessing movement" suggestion is offered as a serious contender for new terminology that can capture the overall purpose of God through both Old and New Testaments.

So, the apparently simple term "οἶκος of God" has taken us into a reality that is bigger, wider, deeper, and more mysterious than most of the discussions among mission leaders concerning church planting, movements, and what constitutes a "church." May our experience of οἶκος come to match our growing understanding of what it means for God's purposes today. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Some scholars note that the letter may not have been intended only for Ephesus, based on evidence in various manuscripts of the letter. Some of the copies do not include mention of a location at all, and there is a distinct lack of evidence of any personal relationship between Paul and the readers, which would be odd given how much time Paul spent in the city. It seems likely that the letter was intended for a wider usage, perhaps to be carried and read in a number of cities. But I maintain the tradition of referring to it as "Ephesians."