

EPHESIANS



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The Letter to the Ephesians is sometimes regarded as the crowning letter among the letters of Paul since it sets out most clearly what Paul's thinking is all about. At first glance, however, Ephesians seems to stand out among those letters in that it appears to have a very general character, and lack the sense of closeness and intimacy that we see in other letters such as Philippians. The element of controversy seen in many of Paul's writings seems to be missing. It lacks a personal greeting and personal names, unusual in a letter written to a church in which Paul had worked for more than three years. These appearances are all misleading, however. As we go on we hope to show that it is not as general a letter as many suppose, but is written to a specific set of circumstances that Paul knows well. Nor is the element of controversy missing completely.

Some scholars point to the fact that the phrase "in Ephesus" in 1:1 is mis-

sing from *some* of the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament, and take this as the explanation that the apparent impersonal nature of Ephesians stems from the fact that it was not written exclusively to Ephesus. However, in spite of the problem caused by these few manuscripts, the evidence that links Ephesians to Ephesus is very strong, certainly stronger than the alternative suggestions.

In the same way, doubts are sometimes raised about Paul's authorship of Ephesians, doubts that are based on the language, which involves the use of words that do not appear elsewhere in Paul's writings; the letter's relationship to Colossians, entailing many similarities as well as significant theological differences; and its style, which involves long sentences such as 1:3-14, not generally characteristic of Paul. Undoubtedly Ephesians is a distinctive document, whether by Paul or not. The present writer, however, feels that in the last analysis the peculiarities are better

explained on the assumption that Paul is the writer, rather than on the basis of alternative theories.

What's the Big Idea?

Every writer aspires to have at least one “big idea.” Ephesians may be said to represent Paul’s “Big Idea,” that the salvation brought about through the death and resurrection of Jesus will bring about unity and harmony on a cosmic scale. Paul describes it thus: “The mystery of his will, to be put into place when the times have reached their fulfillment, is to bring all things in heaven and earth together under one head, even Christ” (1:9, 10). The Greek word used for “bringing things together” carries the idea of bringing order out of chaos and setting everything in its proper place.

Believers are part of this process. They were chosen in Christ from the beginning (1:4), and given adoption as sons through grace (1:5), which brings

with it redemption and forgiveness (1:7). As a guarantee of their participation in this consummation of all things, God has bestowed on them the Holy Spirit (1:13).

Paul's Prayer for the Ephesians

After giving thanks for the news that the Ephesians have continued in their faith since he last worked with them, Paul prays for them that they might receive a spirit of wisdom and understanding, so that, coming to know Christ better (1:17) and having a clearer understanding of the hope to which He has called them (1:18), they may progress even more strongly in the faith and recognize their place in the eternal purposes of God.

The Power of God

Above all, he prays that that they may appreciate fully the power that is

available to them through Christ. “Power” is a key theme in Ephesians. If the consummation of all things in Christ is the Big Idea of Ephesians, then the power of God is the key to making that idea a reality. This power was demonstrated in the resurrection of Jesus. But when Jesus was thus raised, it was not to resume his previous earthly life. The power released in the resurrection was able to bring about the exaltation of Jesus and to enthrone him in a place high above all other powers (1:20-22).

Why does Paul speak of power in such graphic terms? To answer this we need to recall that to the readers of Ephesians the notion of who held supreme power was a pressing concern. Ephesus was the capital city of the Roman province of Asia. Symbols of the Roman emperor’s power were to be seen on every corner. Ephesus was also the home of the goddess Artemis, an all-embracing deity who held many Ephesians in her sway. Quite probably many of the readers had themselves

previously been devotees of Artemis. To all the readers it was a great encouragement to know that Christ now held supreme power, far above both the emperor in Rome and Artemis.

Having made that important point, Paul can now go on to demonstrate how this power of God has already begun bringing about unity and reconciliation.

The New Humanity

Addressing primarily the Gentiles among his readers at this point (2:11), Paul reminds them of the change that has been brought about in their lives through the divine power. Their previous situation had been rather grim: “dead in trespasses and sins, following the ways of the world, enslaved by the Spirit of the Air [one of several descriptions of Satan], and, as a consequence, children of wrath” (2:1-3). Now, through the love and power of

Christ, their situation has been totally transformed. In place of their former deadness they have been made alive, and allowed to participate in the previously mentioned exaltation of Jesus. Although still physically on earth, they now live their lives on a completely new plane. This has been brought about entirely by grace, and not by works, even works of religious observance. Salvation is the free gift of God.

But what of the old distinctions? Scholars still debate the constitution of the Ephesian church at this point. To be sure, it was predominantly Gentile, and this section is directed specifically at Gentiles (2:11). But the force of the passage is greatly weakened if there were not still some converts from Judaism in the ranks. If that is so, it greatly illuminates the statement of Paul that the grace of God completely nullifies any sense of advantage felt by Jewish Christians. Even the law, with its divisive outward expressions, is now

a thing of the past, as a new situation is created (2:15). God has in Christ created a new humanity, in which the old divisions and distinctions are obsolete, and in which all who trust in Jesus are brought into a new unity. All believers now have equal access to God (2:18) and are equal members of God's household (2:19). Together they make up a new temple in which God lives by the Spirit (2:22). The unification of Jew and Gentile in Christ is therefore a visible sign on earth of the process of cosmic reconciliation at work.

Proclaiming the Mystery

Speaking personally, Paul reflects how this “mystery”—that is, that Jew and Gentile are now on an equal footing before God—lies at the heart of his ministry and message. This is what he is all about. The word “mystery” causes confusion here. It does not imply that the message is hard or impossible to understand, but refers rather to some-

thing previously hidden or unknown, but now revealed. We know from elsewhere in Scripture that Paul saw his Damascus Road experience as involving God's personal disclosure to him of this message and the commission to proclaim it.

Paul adds the further thought here that the new unity is to be displayed through the church, not just to men and women, but to "the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms," those spiritual powers and deities that hold men and women in their sway. The unity displayed by the church, then as now, is to be a powerful backup to the gospel declaration (3:10, 11).

Rooted and Grounded in Love

All through the letter Paul's declarations and instructions are clothed in prayer. He ends the section by praying a beautiful prayer for the Ephesians. Building on the concept of the Father-

hood of God, he prays that the Ephesians might receive:

- ❖ Strengthening through the Holy Spirit in the inner being
- ❖ The indwelling of Christ through faith
- ❖ Rooting and grounding in love
- ❖ Power to grasp the full dimensions of the love of Christ
- ❖ Filling with the fullness of God

Maintaining Unity

This prayer leads directly to Paul's instruction (*paranesis*) to the Ephesians. The key verse is 4:3, where Paul urges them to "strive to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Having been reminded of the unity already given them in Christ, they are to work hard to maintain it in practice. The word translated "strive" is a very intense word in the original Greek, and implies that every effort is needed because their unity is under threat. The "mini-creed" in the verses that follow reminds us that

“there is One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, One God and Father of us all” (4:5), signaling that it is the Ephesians’ unity of belief that is under threat. It suggests that some are being persuaded by scheming individuals (4:14) that they can combine their new-found commitment to Christ with their old loyalties (to Artemis, to the emperor, or to some other deity worshipped at Ephesus). They are very firmly reminded by Paul that there is “One Faith” and “One Lord.” They are therefore to stand firmly together in Christ and grow to maturity in their faith, so that such temptations to turn back, however attractive, may be resisted.

To help them grow to maturity in Christ, they have been given a diverse ministry, with apostles, prophets, and teachers. Paul is here speaking descriptively of the variety of ministries he observes operating in Ephesus, and is not necessarily endorsing a pattern for all time. It does not follow, for example, that we should look for the equivalent

of “apostles” today, nor maintain a rigid distinction between “prophets” and “teachers.” What he *is* saying is that the variety seen within ministry does not militate against the unity of the church, since all the different kinds of ministry are the gifts of the one ascended Christ (4:7-11).

Behavior that Promotes Unity

Unity in the Church will be promoted by good Christian living. The behavior of the believers must stand in stark contrast to that of the Gentiles (4:17). Here the word “Gentiles” takes on a more specialized meaning than “non-Jews.” It verges on our word “heathen.” In place of Gentile impurity, believers are to live “in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus” (4:21). Like changing clothes, they are to take off the old self and “put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (4:22-24). They are to “put off” falsehood (4:25),

“anger that leads to sin” (4:26), and instead of stealing from one another work usefully (4:27, 28). Unwholesome talk must also be rejected on the principle that in the church talk should always be geared to mutual encouragement.

There follows a round condemnation of sexual immorality in all forms, an emphatic denunciation based on its prevalence not only in Gentile life in general, but even within the religious rituals of the Gentile cults. In short, Christians are to be “imitators of God, and live a life of love” (5:1).

On a more positive note, they are to live as “children of light,” where “light” has its full sense of the moral purity associated with God himself (5:8, 9). Setting out a new, positive principle for Christian living, they are to seek to discover “what pleases the Lord” (5:10). To help them in the task of right living they are to avoid drunkenness and seek instead to be filled with the Spirit (5:18). The central idea behind

this phrase is that of “control.” He who is drunk is under the control of the alcohol he has consumed, and his behavior will accordingly be determined by it. Instead, they are to be under the control of the Holy Spirit, who should determine their behavior. Again there is a reference to the cults prevalent in and around Ephesus, especially that of Dionysius (Bacchus), whose rites included a large consumption of wine.

Instructions for the Family

Paul ends his instructions by including one of his “household codes,” similar to the one in Colossians (and that in 1 Peter). Here he sets out desirable patterns of behavior for different groups within the church: wives and husbands, children and parents, slaves and their masters. The key principle on which his instructions are based is that of “mutual submission” (5:21). All members of the church are to

recognize that, in the new situation brought about by Christ, all of them have responsibilities to each other. This is in fact quite an emancipating principle. For example, the responsibilities of wives towards their husbands are well known (though in Ephesus wives actually did enjoy relative freedom), but the suggestion that the husband has great responsibilities towards his wife was new. In the same way parents are reminded of their duty towards their children, as masters are towards their slaves. While Paul is by no means rejecting the established ethics of the household, he is placing them in a new perspective in Christ. In the church there are no “takers”—only “givers.”

In conclusion, stand firm

I began by suggesting that Paul was facing specific problems in Ephesus. This is confirmed by Paul’s reminder to his readers that they are engaged in close-order conflict, both in a way that

is common to all Christians, and in a way that is exacerbated by their circumstances in Ephesus. Surrounded by many signs of Satan's presence, they wrestle with enemies "not of flesh and blood," but from the realms of those spiritual powers and deities so familiar to residents of the city (6:12). The word translated "wrestle" is a word taken from the wrestling arena, and implies that this conflict is highly individual and personal.

Paul now makes a final application of his theme of power. The readers are to stand firm in the power of God, wearing the armor of God, so that they will be able to stand firm in their new allegiance to Christ in the final hour of testing (6:10-20). It is often noted that the armor listed is essential defensive, which implies that the readers are suffering a fierce assault on themselves. The "sword of the spirit," the Word of God, does, rightly used, enable the Christian speedily to turn defense into counter-attack.

Finally, what he prays for them he asks them to pray for him, that, as an “ambassador in chains” he may proclaim the gospel “fearlessly, as I should do” (6:24).

Postscript

Although prompted by the situation of his readers, Paul in Ephesus gives us a message that is truly universal. Believers of all nationalities and backgrounds are part of a divine plan that has been in operation since the beginning of time. Believers are raised to live on a new plane, “in the heavenlies,” as a foretaste of their destiny in the kingdom of heaven. Meanwhile on earth, God’s limitless, transforming power will enable them to walk with Christ day by day, in unity with Christians everywhere and against all opposition, as they look with eager expectancy for that consummation of all things in Christ.



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