

Unit 2 Introduction

Paul's Exalted Christology: An Introduction to Ephesians

The Pauline Epistle addressed to the church at Ephesus is often grouped together with Philippians and Colossians under the designation Christological epistles. Much of Paul's highest and finest Christology is expressed in these three powerful letters. Each of the letters has a bold affirmation of the gospel, a joyful and thankful reflection upon the community of faith, a significant expression of the exalted Christ, and a clear call to walk worthy of God.

Historical Background

Written from prison, Ephesians likely was written from Rome near the end of Paul's life in the early 60s AD. Because Ephesians bears so much similarity in thought and language to the epistle to the Colossians, some scholars have speculated that an anonymous author or editor, after Paul's death, used Colossians as a blueprint to create Ephesians. Yet those similarities may be explained by recognizing that the time of composition of both letters may have been very close, with both letters indicating that they would be delivered to the respective churches by Tychicus, Paul's emissary.

The city of Ephesus was the capitol of the Roman province of Asia, a major commercial and political center for the entire region. It contained a temple of much renown dedicated to Artemis, one among the pantheon of pagan gods, and was also a center for many Gnostic religious groups and groups that practiced magic and astrology. Ephesus became a leading center for Roman emperor worship in the first century, although that became a much greater problem at the end of the century than it was during Paul's lifetime. Paul visited Ephesus after he left Corinth during his second missionary journey (Acts 18) and began preaching the gospel in the synagogue there. After a short stay, Paul left and Apollos arrived, powerfully preaching the gospel as well. In time, Apollos went to Corinth and Paul returned to Ephesus, preaching in the synagogue for three months, and then continuing his ministry in the public marketplace for two years thereafter, leaving only after the public uproar created by the silversmiths, who feared that Paul's ministry might threaten their livelihood (Acts 19).

Structure and Style

While it bears a clear letter structure very similar to all other Pauline Epistles, Ephesians may have been written as a circular letter with a much wider audience in mind than a single congregation.

There are some Greek manuscripts that lack the name of a specific recipient in 1:1, and not a single individual within the congregation at Ephesus is mentioned anywhere within the letter itself, which would seem most unusual in a letter addressed to the congregation that Paul pastored longest, unless he intended this message to be given to multiple congregations in and around Ephesus as well as to the specific congregation within Ephesus. Furthermore, many of the significant theological concepts found in Ephesians are stated in more general terms than is typical in the earlier letters, and there are no specific problems or opponents mentioned in the letter. The style of Ephesians is lofty and the language of worship and praise is present throughout the entire letter.

Chapter 1: Christological Blessing

After the rather typical salutation in 1:1-2, Paul utilizes a blessing as the foundation of his thanksgiving section, and it is a thoroughly Christological blessing from beginning to end. Declaring that God has blessed us in Christ in the heavenly places, he recounts the numerous implications of our redemption in Him. Christ is the ultimate vehicle of God's grace to us, providing all knowledge, wisdom, and mercy to us and providing a rich heritage for us in himself (1:3-14). Paul boldly proclaims that Christ is even now seated at God's right hand in the heavens, above all rule and power and authority and dominion, with the name above all other names that have come or that ever will come (1:15-21).

Chapters 2 and 3: The Mystery of God's Great Work through Jesus Christ

Building upon that exalted Christological blessing, Paul provides his most comprehensive ecclesiology throughout Ephesians. The epitome of Jesus' authority is expressed in the declaration that He is now established as the head of the church which is His body (1:22-23). That concept is unpacked in detail in chapter 2 where Paul describes the work of Christ as that which takes two totally different and distinct entities, Jews and Gentiles, and unites these two into one new, transformed people to the glory of God. Using the powerful image of the wall of separation that once differentiated between those who were aliens, strangers, outsiders, and those without hope and without God from those that were children of God, heirs, family, insiders with promises and the presence of God, Paul declared that in Messiah Jesus the two groups were welded into one new and

unique people of God! The two opposing people groups addressed throughout the Pauline Epistles, Jews and Gentiles, have now been molded into a single new temple of God, built upon the foundation of prophets and apostles with Christ Jesus as the capstone that holds this entire new structure together as a dwelling place of God. This is what the church now looks like through Christ!

In chapter 3, Paul explains that the mystery of what God was doing through Messiah Jesus was given to him by revelation (3:3-4) through the Holy Spirit as part of his equipping to be a faithful apostle to the Gentiles. And this gracious gifting is what enabled Paul, “the Jew’s Jew,” to preach the unfathomable riches of Christ to Gentiles! (3:8) This illuminating proclamation embodied the revelation of the will of Creator God, through the church, to all of the powers that be (3:9-13), and the fullness of the glory of God will continue to be manifested in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever! (3:14-21)

Chapters 4 and 5: The Call to Walk Worthily of God

Out of this awareness, Paul calls the church to walk in a manner worthy of their calling (4:1). This new walk should be characterized by humility, gentleness, patience, showing forbearance in love, and concludes in 4:3 with an admonition for a diligent preservation of the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace, which demonstrates the new unity of the Spirit as we are aware that there is indeed one body, one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all (4:1-6). While acknowledging the variety of different gifts given by grace to the various members of the body to perform different functions within the body, the emphasis remains upon the growth into the head of the body, Christ, who holds the entire body together and builds it up in love (4:7-16).

Ephesians 4:17-32 provides a major contrast between two distinct kinds of humanity. The old humanity that the Christian is to lay aside (4:22) is akin to the life still being lived by Gentiles ignorant of God’s saving activity (4:17-18). The old humanity is characterized by hardness of heart, sensuality, impurity, greed, lust, corruption, deceit, lies, theft, bitterness, wrath, anger, slander, and malice. In Christ, that kind of humanity and selfhood is to be taken off and put away (4:22). A new humanity and selfhood is to be put on by those who

have been redeemed in Christ Jesus (4:24). The new humanity is characterized by truth, spiritual renewal of the mind, righteousness and holiness, diligent labor, edifying speech, kindness, tenderheartedness, and forgiveness.

The entire fifth chapter of Ephesians is a description of the walk of a holy people set in contrast with the walk of those who are disobedient and unrighteous. The command to walk in love in Ephesians 5:2 is set in context by the command to be imitators of God and the reminder that Christ loved them and gave himself up for them. In 5:35, the Christian walk is set in opposition to sexual immorality, impurity, greed, filthiness, empty chatter, and coarse jesting, none of which is considered appropriate behavior. In 5:5, Paul states that none of the sexually immoral, nor the impure, nor the covetous, nor the idolater have any share in the kingdom of God. In 5:6-14, he stresses the difference between those who walk in the light in direct contrast with those who walk in darkness. In 5:15-18, he admonishes the Ephesians to look carefully how they walk, not as fools, but as the wise who understand the will of the Lord. God wills that residents of His community would go on being filled with the Spirit rather than dissipating themselves in drunkenness! And those who continue to live and walk in the Spirit mutually submit themselves to one another in reverence to Christ (5:21).

Chapter 6: The Challenge to Stand Firm in the Faith

Paul’s concluding admonitions include the charge to put on the whole armor of God so that they might be able to withstand the forces of evil arrayed against them, standing firm against the marshaled forces of evil and darkness. Truth, righteousness, faith, salvation, the Word of God—these are the weapons and implements of defense that will enable the church to prevail and permit the powerful gospel to continue to be given voice. And that gospel continues to be the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Gentiles, united together in Christ as one new people of God—the church.

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