

Unit 2 Introduction

Introduction to Ephesians

Initial Issues

One of the most significant writings to influence the life and thought of the church is Ephesians. Along with Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon, Ephesians is one of four “prison epistles” traditionally attributed to the apostle Paul. The designation for these writings comes from their association with Paul during captivity, likely in Caesarea or Rome. If Ephesians was written during Paul’s imprisonment in Caesarea (Acts 23—26), a date of AD 56-58 is recognized. If composed in Rome (Acts 28), a date of AD 59-62 is held.

Since the 19th century, a comparison of writing style and theological perspectives in Ephesians with other Pauline writings has resulted in a lack of consensus among New Testament scholars concerning Paul’s direct authorship of this letter. Differences may be accounted for, however, by Paul’s use of an amanuensis or secretary in the letter’s writing, changing historical circumstances, differing emphasis, and his application of theological perspectives to new life situations. In any event, Ephesians as displaying Paul’s thought is well-founded.

Ephesians’ destination seems clear. In 1:1b, the New International Version of the Bible states: “To God’s holy people in Ephesus.” Ephesus was the major political, economic, cultural, and religious center in western Asia Minor during Roman domination in the first century AD.

A problem arises, however, concerning Ephesians’ precise destination. The phrase “in Ephesus” is absent in the oldest and most reliable witnesses to the Greek New Testament. Theories abound for why with a common belief being that Ephesians was composed as a circular letter meant not only for the network of churches in and around Ephesus, but for more widespread distribution extending to churches in the Lycus Valley about 100 miles east of Ephesus. This may include such cities in the Roman province of Asia as Laodicea, Colosse, and Hierapolis.

Ephesians’ teachings are not specific to one congregation, but rather address the broader Christian community which was largely Gentile in composition (2:11-12). These Gentiles came from a Hellenistic religious environment in which the world was seen as governed by diverse unseen forces such as gods and goddesses. While there was no expectation of sole allegiance to any religious system, unseen forces were recognized as vital for a successful life. Attempting to interact positively with them through cultic religious practices, magic, and astrology was common. To followers of Christ, Paul proclaims a message having universal implications.

Message to the Church

Ephesians begins with a typical salutation involving sender, receiver, and greeting (1:1-2). What follows in 1:3-14 is a eulogy or prayer blessing praising God for His gracious actions toward humanity in Christ. These actions involved God’s choosing “us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight” (1:4) and our adoption to “sonship through Jesus Christ” (1:5).

God’s actions through Christ resulted in “redemption through his [Christ’s] blood” (1:7) and “the forgiveness of sins” (1:7) which are foundational for Paul’s understanding of the gospel or good news. In 1:9-10, the mystery of God’s purposes in Christ are revealed as ultimately bringing “unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.” While awaiting the time for ultimate redemption, believers are “marked in him [Christ] with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance” (1:13-14).

In 1:15-22, Paul thanks God for his hearers’ faith in “the Lord Jesus” and “love for all God’s people” (1:15). He prays that God grants them “the spirit of wisdom and revelation” that results in a deepened understanding of the hope to which God has called them (1:18). He prays that they recognize the greatness of God’s power for believers, the same power which God used when raising Christ from the dead and seating Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms (1:19-20). The ascended Christ is above all rule, authority, power, dominion, and “every name that is invoked” both now and forever (1:21). He is the “head over everything for the church which is his body” (1:22).

Following Paul’s prayer, he contrasts the lives of Gentiles (2:1-2) and Jews (2:3) before and after coming to faith in Christ. Before Christ, Gentiles were dead in their “transgressions and sins” living according to “the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air” (2:2). The Jews included in “all of us” were not exempt from “gratifying the cravings of their flesh and following its desires and thoughts” (2:3). While all were dead due to transgressions, by grace, all those who have come to Christ are made alive (2:5). Chapter 2:8-9 reads: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith . . . it is the gift of God . . . not by works, so that no one can boast.” The vertical barrier between God and humanity has been broken down.

In 2:11, Paul then addresses the horizontal barrier between Jews (the circumcision) and Gentiles (the uncircumcision) through reconciliation accomplished through Christ. Before Christ’s death on the cross, the Gentiles were alienated from God and His people Israel with all its covenant promises (2:12). Now, however, the Gentiles

“have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (2:13). Christ “who is our peace” (2:14) has unified both groups into one by destroying the barrier between them creating “one new humanity out of the two” (2:15).

Gentiles are now “fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household” (2:19). The foundation of this household includes the apostles and the prophets with Christ himself as the “chief cornerstone” (2:20). In Christ the whole building is brought together “to become a holy temple in the Lord” (2:21). All believers “are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (2:22).

In chapter 3, Paul speaks of his ministry involving revelation of the “mystery of Christ” previously hidden (3:4-5). Revealed is that “through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members of one body [the church], and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (3:6). The intent of the revelation is that “through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms” (3:10). Because of the reconciling work of God, those “in Christ” may approach Him with “freedom and confidence” (3:12).

In 3:14-21, Paul again prays for believers that they may be strengthened in their inner being through the power of the Holy Spirit (3:16) and “rooted and established in love” (3:17). He requests that believers experience an increasing understanding of God’s deep love and to “be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God” (3:19).

Implications for Life

Referencing his own situation as a prisoner, Paul urges followers of Christ “to live a life worthy of the calling you have received” (4:1). Such a life involves humility, gentleness, patience, and love (4:2). In community, believers “should make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (4:3). The stress on unity and reconciliation is based on the foundational truth for the church that “there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (4:4-6).

Discussions in 4:11-16 indicate that Paul’s goal for the church of “attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” or Christian maturity has not yet been reached (4:13). As such, God has provided apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers to assist in the process of equipping believers for service so that Christ’s body (the church) may “be built up” (4:11-12). Maturity involves no longer being “infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming” (4:14). It involves “the whole body” (the church) growing and building itself up in love, as each part does its work” (4:16).

That maturity in the church is unrealized is reinforced by 4:17-

5:20. Paul insists that believers “no longer live as the Gentiles,” described as being “darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God” (4:18). This way of life contrasts with what they learned about Christ and were taught in Him (4:21).

Believers are to “put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (4:24). As such, they should avoid lying, stealing, unwholesome language, bitterness, rage and anger, brawling, and slander, and wanting to do others harm (4:25-31). They are to avoid “a hint of sexual immorality or any kind of impurity” or greed (5:3). Instead, as imitators of God, they are to be characterized by kindness, compassion, and forgiveness, walking “in the way of love” as exemplified by Christ (5:1-2).

Having nothing to do with darkness (5:8-11), believers are to make the most of their lives in Christ (5:16). Rather than being “drunk with wine, which leads to debauchery,” they are to be “filled with the Spirit” (5:18) and “praise the Lord with music” (5:20).

In 5:21—6:9, the implications of living as children of light are provided for households. Paul employs rules going back to Aristotle which formed the basis of relationships within Greco-Roman households including: husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves (see also Colossian 3:18-4:1 and 1 Peter 2:13-17). Reference to these rules, displaying hierarchal and patriarchal structures of the prevailing culture of the time, gives pause to consider Paul’s declaration elsewhere that “there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all” (Colossians 3:11; see also Galatians 3:28).

Significantly, Paul distinguishes his use of the “household codes” by setting them within the context of mutual submission “to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Relationships are to be characterized by humility, obedience, respect, and most of all love. These traits exemplify the church’s relationship with its Lord and ironically challenge the underlying cultural structures and presuppositions upon which the household code was based.

In 6:10-20, Paul encourages the church to “be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power” (6:10). The church is at war with powers and “spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (6:12). Engaging these powers requires putting on “the full armor of God” (6:13), including “the belt of truth,” “the breastplate of righteousness” “the shield of faith,” and “the helmet of salvation which is the word of God” (6:14-17) or gospel. In every situation faced by the church, prayer is essential (6:18-20).

Final greetings appear in 6:21-24 with Paul’s co-worker Tychicus being designated as the bearer of this letter. A blessing is pronounced on the church concluding with the words: “Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love” (6:24).

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