

Course Outline

A Call to Unity in Diversity for All Believers

Ephesians

UNITY IN DIVERSITY AS A WITNESS TO THE “POWERS”

Introduction

- I. Three Unique Elements
 - a. There are three key problems or distinctives of the letter to the Ephesians that must be explained.
 - i. Second-hand knowledge of audience by author
 1. A variety of features seem unusual in an epistle addressed to a church Paul knew so well (recall his 2-3 year stay described in Acts 19). Like Romans, Ephesians reads like a systematic summary of his theology with no clear reference to any explicit problems or circumstances of the addressees. Chapter 3:2 and 4:21 specifically read as if Paul thought his audience had only a second-hand knowledge about him.
 - ii. Close similarity to Colossians
 1. Ephesians and Colossians are more similar in content, outline, and even at times exact wording than any other pair of letters attributed to Paul. For example, both contain very similar household codes (Ephesians 5:22–6:9; Colossians 3:18-4:1) and pairs of sentences in which up to 32 consecutive words in the Greek are identical (Ephesians 6:21-22; Colossians 4:7-8; cf. also Colossians 1:14 with Ephesians 1:7). Both have the same distinctive style, with long, convoluted sentences (e.g., Ephesians 1:3-14) and the same high Christology and distinctive ecclesiology and eschatology (though cf. 2:20 in which the foundation of the church is no longer Christ but the apostles and prophets).
 - iii. Lack of “in Ephesus” (1:1) in the three oldest, most reliable

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- manuscripts
1. The three earliest and most reliable manuscripts lack the words “in Ephesus” in 1:1 (p. 46, Sinaiticus and Vaticanus).
- II. Three Possible Solutions
- a. Pseudonymity
 - i. The most common theory among scholars at large is that a disciple of Paul, perhaps up to a generation after his life, wrote a “pseudonymous” letter in his name. This is usually seen not as a forgery but in light of an ancient convention in which a writer acknowledged genuine indebtedness to a master by writing in his name.⁸⁰ Indeed, except for the Pastoral Epistles, no letter of Paul has been more commonly attributed to some other author than this one. This hypothesis would explain problems (1) and (2), but would the early church have accepted the letter as canonical if pseudonymous? The only clear evidence we have, admittedly from the mid-second century and later seems to suggest not.⁸¹
 - ii. E. J. Goodspeed proposed an influential hypothesis in which the epistle was pseudonymous but also written as a cover letter for a collection of previously disparate and somewhat neglected authentic Pauline epistles.⁸² This would account for its general nature and lack of original addressees, points (1) and (3), and for the lack of reference to any epistles of Paul in Acts, but why was this letter’s position not retained, then, in the canonical sequence? And the problem of pseudonymity still remains.
 - b. An amanuensis with greater literary freedom
 - i. A number of writers have suggested that Paul gave a different amanuensis greater freedom in his literary composition, one who then tried to copy Paul’s style closely by imitating Colossians (or who perhaps wrote both letters). The style of Ephesians is in some ways closer to that of Luke’s than to Paul’s undisputed letters, and Luke was with Paul during his Roman imprisonment, so perhaps we should think of him.⁸³ This view explains (2) better than (1) and (3).

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- c. An encyclical letter
 - i. A final option suggests that Paul composed the letter as an encyclical or circular letter, much like Revelation (see Revelation 2–3), intended for Ephesus and nearby churches (as also with Revelation). Colossians 4:16 has the intriguing reference to a letter to Laodicea to be read in Colossae (and vice-versa). Could Ephesians be that letter with each church in the area left to fill in its own name in the initial salutation? This explanation could account for (3) and (1), though not for (2). *Perhaps a combination of these last two views, therefore, is best.*⁸⁴
- III. The Work of C. Arnold, Further Historical Background, and Correlation with Acts 19
 - a. What is more, the recent work of C. Arnold has demonstrated the significant role, the theme of Christ’s victory over oppressive, occultic, and even demonic powers plays in this letter.⁸⁵ And that is precisely one of the major accomplishments of Paul’s ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19:11-20). So the letter may be more directly tied to historical circumstances than most have recognized.

Analysis

- I. Greetings (1:1-2)
 - a. Apart from the interesting omission of “in Ephesus” in the earliest manuscripts, the greetings are conventional enough to include them with the first half of the letter more generally (v. 1-2).
- II. Theological Exposition: The Spiritual Privileges of the Church—Making Unity Among Believers Possible (1:1–3:21)—also an Extended Prayer
 - a. The role of the triune Godhead in salvation (1:3-14)
 - i. The thanksgiving (vv. 3-14) comprises one long sentence in the Greek, which divides into three parts, each concluding with the refrain “to the praise of his glory” (vv. 6, 12, 14), and each dealing with one person of the Trinity.

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1. The Father who predestines and elects (vv. 3-6)
 - A. Paul gives thanks for God the Father's role in predestining believers (vv. 3-6)—the next most important reference to this topic after Romans 8-9 (and again, the text has corporate elements ["in Christ," v. 3] and refers to election only to salvation, not damnation).
 2. The Son who redeems by His blood (vv. 7-12)
 - A. He gives thanks for Christ's role in redemption through His blood (vv. 7-12).
 3. The Spirit who seals with a deposit (vv. 13-14)
 - A. Finally, he gives thanks for the Spirit's role as our seal and "deposit" (or down payment) guaranteeing our salvation (vv. 13-14). The combined work of the Trinity gives us every spiritual blessing in Christ "in the heavenly realms" (v. 3)—a recurring term throughout Ephesians for the unseen world where angels and demons do battle. Thus we are assured of triumph in Christ over all cosmic forces.⁸⁶
- b. The certainty of salvation: Unity with Christ (1:15-2:10)
- i. Prayer for understanding God's power over others (1:15-22)
 1. Chapter 1:15 would seem to begin the body of the letter proper, yet Paul continues to write in the form of a prayer, which form continues throughout the theological exposition (cf. 1:18; 3:1, 14, 20-21). It has been suggested that Paul is following the common pattern of praising benefactors in ancient inscriptions via a sustained prayer or encomium—in praise of their virtues—before turning to the resolutions which flow from those often lavish words of thanksgiving.⁸⁷ The prayer of 1:15-23 is that we might understand the greatness of God's power, on the basis of Christ's resurrection and exaltation, over every other power.
 - ii. Future as past: Co-resurrected and co-exalted (2:1-7)
 1. Chapter 2:1-10 begins to enumerate the blessings believers share because of Christ's victory: we too have triumphed over every ungodly power as we are spiritually co-resurrected and co-exalted with Christ (v. 6).

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- iii. Past as present: Saved by grace for good works (2:8-10)
 - 1. This, however, comes entirely by grace through faith (vv. 5, 8-9) even though it will naturally lead to good deeds of gratitude (v. 10).
 - c. The reconciliation of salvation: Unity among believers (2:11–3:21)
 - i. Unity of Jews and Gentiles (2:11-22)
 - 1. This spiritual power should also enable God’s people to be united in Christ, even across racial and social divisions as deeply seated in antiquity as Jew vs. Gentile (2:11-22). Outsiders become insiders (vv. 11-13) as enmity is overcome (vv. 14-18) so that visible unity becomes a reality (vv. 19-22). The key metaphor in this chapter comes in v. 14—“breaking down the dividing wall of hostility”—perhaps a reference to the barrier separating the outer court of the Gentiles from the inner court of the Jews in the Jerusalem temple, which Gentiles violated on penalty of death. Whether or not Paul has this specific allusion in view, he is clearly referring to the barrier of the Law as now destroyed (v. 15).
 - ii. Paul’s stewardship of this unity (3:1-21)
 - 1. In 3:1, Paul again begins a sentence of explicit prayer for his audience’s empowerment, which he breaks off, not to be completed until vv. 14-19, followed by a doxology in vv. 20-21. In between, he realizes that not all of the communities to which the letter is addressed may know of his commissioning in as much detail, so he speaks of his unique call to be a steward of the “mystery,” which, as in Colossians, refers above all to the uniting of Jew and Gentile in one body of believers (v. 6). But here, Paul’s main point is that *this visible unity is itself a powerful evangelistic device* and even a testimony to the unseen, hostile powers (v. 10).
- III. Ethical Implications: The Spiritual Responsibilities of the Church—Making Unity among Believers Actual (4:1–6:24)
 - a. The outworking of salvation: Growing up in Christian unity (4:1-16)
 - i. Not surprisingly, the heart of Paul’s exhortational material commands

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the Ephesians to actualize the unity that the Triune God's power has made possible. Verses 1-16 describe *this unity as maturity, achieved by the faithful exercise of spiritual gifts in love*. Paul follows a targumic rendering of Psalms 68:18 to see Christ's ascension as making possible (from Pentecost on) the provision of gifts for his people (v. 8). Verse 9 has often been used as a proof text for Christ's so-called descent into hell but, in context, is better seen as a reference to the incarnation. The same one who ascended from earth to heaven is also the one who previously descended from heaven to earth; thus, the gift-giver is none other than the exalted Jesus. Sample gifts, particularly for church leadership, are listed in v. 11. Interestingly "pastors and teachers" are grouped together in the Greek, without the repetition of the definite article, to suggest that their functions overlap. The purpose of the gifts is to equip all believers for ministry and build up and unify the church (v. 12).⁸⁸ This maturity, coupled with "speaking the truth in love," will enable Christians to hold fast against every false teaching (vv. 14-16, see especially v. 15).

- b. Walking in Christian morality (4:17–5:16)
 - i. Much as in Colossians 3, Paul then *elaborates on Christian living* (4:17–5:14) with the imagery of putting off the "old self" of falsehood and immorality and putting on the "new self," as one is recreated in the likeness of God (4:22–28, see especially v. 24). One's speech is a major indicator of this remaking (4:29–5:7), which can also be thought of as a transformation from darkness to light (4:18, 5:8–14).
- c. Knowing the Lord's will: Being filled with the Spirit (5:17–6:9)
 - i. Paul prepares the way for his Ephesian version of the *Haustafel* or "household code" (5:22–6:9) with more general injunctions to understand the Lord's will (5:15–17) and then begins an explicit description of what being filled with the Spirit means (vv. 18–21).
- d. Grammar: Subordinate, defining principles through v. 23
- e. Headline for the household code: mutual submission (v. 21)

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- f. See further lecture on gender roles in Paul
 - i. A discussion of Paul's commands to women and men (5:22-33) appears in the section on gender roles in Paul below. The commands to children and parents (6:1-4) are only partially parallel. Here Paul does not merely enjoin submission but commands outright obedience (v. 1). This fulfills the fourth commandment to "honor" father and mother, which is followed by the promise of long life (vv. 2-3). In both Old and New Testaments, this promise must be interpreted corporately; as Israel (or the church, or society) overall followed "family values," the quality and quantity of life was enhanced. Parents, in turn, were not to provoke their children, while nevertheless giving them appropriate discipline and guidance (v. 4). There is no evidence that these commands cease at any age for either children or parents, but the form they take certainly changes as one progresses through life's developmental stages, particularly if one gets married (recall 5:31). And they must be balanced with Christ's clear teaching to serve Him and God even above the closest of human allegiances (cf. especially Luke 14:26).
 - ii. The third part of this household code addresses slaves and masters (6:5-9). Slaves must work diligently at all times and give their best, because God watches them even when others don't. Masters must treat their slaves impartially. There may be a hint here of giving them equal status with freedmen. In cultures in which slavery has (mercifully) been abolished, the same principles may apply, with appropriate differences, to other duly constituted authority structures like citizens and law enforcement agencies or contractually related employees and employers.
- g. Standing firm against demonic realm (6:10-20)
 - i. Acknowledging its existence and need for spiritual warfare
 - 1. Chapter 6:10-20 brings the body of the letter to a close with a climactic discussion of the evil powers of the universe and the believer's victory over them. It does not come without a battle, but we are given the spiritual armor to resist.

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- ii. But stressing victory by means of holy living, not exotic acts
 - 1. This is not, however, some magical, superstitious, or formulaic kind of spiritual warfare replete with territorial exorcisms and the like; it is precisely such practices in Ephesus that the gospel overcame. Rather the pieces of armor are defined as the elements of moral, godly living: truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, and God's Word. It is often pointed out that only the last of these is matched with an offensive weapon.

IV. Closing (6:21-24)

Application

I. Spiritual Unity of Believers Transcending all Human Boundaries

- a. The spiritual unity of believers transcending all human boundaries is God's preeminent will for His people collectively. Some early Christians, when required in court to declare their citizenship, said only "I am a Christian." Christianity thus came to be labeled "the third race," after "Jew" and "Gentile." The enmity in antiquity of these first two races is paralleled in the modern world only by the racism found among some American (or South African) blacks and whites; Protestant vs. Catholic in Northern Ireland; Shiite Muslim and orthodox Jew in the Middle East; Bosnians vs. Serbs; Hutus vs. Tutsis in Rwanda; and so on. Ephesians calls upon Christians who represent these otherwise warring factions to take substantial steps toward reconciliation, at the very least within Christian ranks.

II. Visible Unity of Believers as Key Method of Evangelism

- a. The visible unity of believers despite such diversity may still well be God's preeminent method of evangelism. Massive implications for the importance of networking among diverse churches follow, including institutional cooperation and even mergers, where the fundamentals of the gospel are not compromised. "The church would unduly limit her task if she cared only for the souls of men or for an increase in membership. Rather she has to be a sign and proof of a change that effects the institutions and structures,

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patterns and spans of the bodily, spiritual, social and individual existence of all men.”⁸⁹

- b. A balanced view of spiritual warfare proves equally crucial. Most secular people and not a few professing Christians implicitly or explicitly deny the reality of the devil and demonization. A few overly zealous believers revert to exotic techniques of spiritual warfare or cower in fear at the thought that demons could oppress them anywhere, doubtless in overreaction to the first group. Paul is clearly aware of the existence of the demon world, but he stresses Christ’s, and therefore Christians’, victory over it, simply through the power of godly living. No Christian need fear demonic oppression unless he or she willfully and repeatedly rebels against God’s standards and dabbles in the overtly evil or occult.⁹⁰

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