

## INTRODUCTION

### I. Author

Although the Pauline authorship of Ephesians has been disputed by a great number of liberal critics, the text itself establishes Paul as author (1:1, 3:1). Those who accept the authority of the text as binding in itself will be satisfied with this. For a recent review of the critical arguments, see Hoehner, *Ephesians*.

### II. Recipients

#### A. The Debate

The words *in Ephesus* (1:1) do not appear in a handful of early manuscripts. As a result, some scholars favor the idea that the book is a circular letter intended to be read in various churches. However, *in Ephesus* does appear, not only in the vast majority of manuscripts, but in manuscripts found dispersed over a wide geographical area, including Alexandrian manuscripts. Those who hold that the words *in Ephesus* are not original have difficulty adducing a plausible theory for how that reading came to be so widely distributed. On the other hand, if the words *in Ephesus* are original, the explanation is quite simple: a few scribes mistakenly left the words out.

#### B. History of the Ephesian Church

Paul first ministered in Ephesus near the end of his second missionary journey. He enjoyed a friendly reception at the synagogue. When he departed, he left Priscilla and Aquila behind, to continue ministry. The meeting with Apollos where they clarified his understanding of the gospel occurred during this time. (Ac.18:19-26)

During his third missionary journey, Paul again visited Ephesus. During this visit, he laid hands on some disciples of John who had not yet received the Holy Spirit. He again spoke in the synagogue, this time for three months before significant resistance arose. In response to the resistance, Paul withdrew himself and the believers from the synagogue, and taught daily in the school of Tyrannus for two years, with the result that the whole province heard the gospel. During this time, God worked a number of miracles through Paul. It was also during this time that the seven sons of Sceva (an unbelieving band of itinerant exorcists) tried to cast out demons in the name of "the Jesus whom Paul preaches." The demon responded "Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?" then mauled the would-be exorcists. This incident became widely known, and as a result

many of the believers who had formerly practiced magic burned their (extremely valuable) books.

Paul was preparing to go to Macedonia when Demetrius the silversmith stirred up animosity against Paul and the Christians because they were hurting the idol market. Demetrius successfully precipitated a riot, but the city authorities were able to disperse it peacefully. Paul departed for Macedonia and continued on his journey. (Ac.19:1-20:1)

On the return leg of the third journey, Paul bypassed Ephesus because he was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, but he had the elders of the church come to Miletus for a brief meeting. That was his last face-to-face contact with the Ephesian church before he wrote the epistle. (Ac.20:16-38)

### **III. Place and Date**

Paul wrote Ephesians from Rome in the fall of AD 60, during his first imprisonment there. (For a detailed chronology of Paul's life and writings, see Hoehner, *Chronology of the Apostolic Age*, pp.381-384)

### **IV. The Message of Ephesians**

At the transition point between the two halves of the book, in 4:1-6, Paul summarizes all of Ephesians in one brief paragraph. In that one paragraph, believers are commanded to walk worthy of their calling – a calling that unifies them with Christ and with each other. Paul could have begun the book with this command, but he knows his readers cannot walk worthy of their calling until they truly understand the grandeur of that calling. So he begins with three chapters extolling the glories of God's calling on them: the fact that they were once spiritually dead, but now they are unified with Christ, and therefore with each other, in one body—and God planned it that way from the beginning. Having given his readers that background, the apostle can deliver the key command to “walk worthy of the calling with which you were called.” Now, his readers can understand the sweeping ramifications of the command. The practical applications of this single command occupy Paul's attention for the remainder of the book.

#### **A. Outline of the Epistle**

- I. Paul greets his readers as brethren in the Lord (1:1-2)
- II. Believers should walk worthy of their position as members of the unified Body of Christ (1:3-6:20)
  - A. The unity of the body is a doctrinal fact (1:3-3:21)
    1. Gentile believers should bless God because He prepared, executed and ensures Jewish (and Gentile) believers' salvation (1:3-14)

2. Paul prays that his readers will understand the greatness of their calling and inheritance, and God's working in them (1:15-23)
3. Jews and Gentiles alike were spiritually dead, but God made them alive together (2:1-10)
4. Gentile believers should remember that although they were once estranged from God, they have been brought near to Him (2:11-13)
5. Gentiles can come near because Christ reconciles Jews and Gentiles to each other and to God (2:14-22)
6. (3:1-19)
  - a. Paul begins to pray for his audience, referring to himself as a prisoner "for you Gentiles"(3:1)
  - b. Paul explains that his imprisonment on their behalf should not trouble them, because it is part of God's grace to Paul (3:2-13)
  - c. Paul resumes his prayer that God will strengthen them, that Christ will dwell in their hearts, and that they will comprehend the depths of God's love (3:14-19)
7. Paul closes with a benediction ascribing glory to God through the church forever (3:20-21)

B. Believers should walk worthy of their calling (4:1-6:20)

1. Believers should walk worthy of their calling, i.e., they should conduct themselves in a way that preserves the real spiritual unity the Spirit has created (4:1-6)
2. God has given each believer a role to play in order to build up the body (4:7-16)
3. Christ has the authority to distribute gifted people to the church (4:7-10)
4. Christ gives certain gifted people to the church in order to equip every member of the body to minister, in order that the whole body grow into maturity (4:11-16)
5. Believers should no longer live like their pagan neighbors; they should live according to what Christ has taught them (4:17-24)
6. Believers should not grieve the Spirit by disrupting unity; they should act to preserve the unity of the Church (4:25-32)
7. Believers should strive to imitate God to obtain a proper inheritance (5:1-8a)

8. Believers should be alert, as children of the light (5:8b-14)
9. Believers should live wisely, understanding God's will (5:15-6:9)
  - a. Believers should understand that God wants them to let the Spirit fill them with His fruit, resulting in mutual admonition, joyful worship, and mutual submission (5:15-21)
  - b. Mutual submission complements biblical authority: the one under authority submits to the leader, and the leader submits himself to the needs of his followers (5:22-6:9)
    - i. Wives submit to their husbands' authority, and husbands love their wives sacrificially, as Christ did the Church (5:22-33)
    - ii. Children obey their parents, and fathers do not provoke their children to anger (6:1-4)
    - iii. Slaves serve wholeheartedly, and masters give up rule by intimidation, treating their slaves well, as the Lord treats them well (6:5-9)
10. Believers must take advantage of every provision God makes for spiritual conflict in order to prevail (6:10-20)

III. Paul closes by introducing Tychicus, who will inform them about Paul's situation, and wishing his readers grace and peace from the Lord (6:21-24)

## **B. Important Themes in Ephesians**

Suppose you were to study the construction of a skyscraper. You could begin by studying its construction at each level: foundations, basements, ground floor, second floor, and so on to the penthouse at the top. You could also study it according to the materials used to create it: steel, glass, concrete, stone, wood, drywall, and paint, among others.

You can study a biblical book the same way. The message of the book is the whole building. Studying level by level is studying the book's outline: What does the author do first? What does he do next? And so on through the book. You should do this, because language is linear. By definition, a book is an orderly progression that the author wants you to follow from beginning to end.

However, you can also study according to the materials the author uses, and how he interweaves them. In order to create the overall message of Ephesians, Paul weaves together a number of themes. Of necessity, the themes are interrelated; one cannot draw firm boundaries between one theme and the next. However, a diligent student should

notice the themes, how they relate to each other, and how they contribute to the message of the book as a whole.

Signal themes in Ephesians include corporate identity, the mystery, body imagery, and the phrase “in Christ” and its equivalents.

Western interpreters should be particularly careful to note the corporate identity theme. Western civilization, particularly in America, emphasizes the individual, and Western biblical interpretation has followed suit. In Ephesians, however, Paul’s emphasis is on the group. Although certain things need to be individually applied, the focus remains on the group as a whole.

In the early portions of Ephesians, *you* and *we* are contrasting terms. *You* refers to the Gentile believers in the Ephesian church, and *we* refers to Jewish believers. Paul first introduces the contrast in 1:11-14, where he introduces *you* as latecomers to the gospel in which *we* had already believed. Paul continues to use parallel language for *you* and *we* in 2:1-5a, but unites the two groups in Christ in 2:5b-10. The retrospective view in 2:11-13 cements the ethnic nature of the contrast, which is further reinforced in 3:2-13.

Thus Paul carefully begins by considering Jews and Gentiles as separate groups—a view that has a long and hallowed precedent beginning in Genesis 12 and continuing all the way into the Gospels (cf. Matt. 10:5-6, 15:24). But Paul hints at unity even in his opening paragraph, where he explains that although God’s plan has an essentially Jewish flavor, the Gentiles have been included in it (1:3-14). At the beginning of the second chapter, Paul shows that Jewish and Gentile believers alike were dead in sin, and have been made alive *together* with Christ. On that basis, they are now a single entity (2:10). He goes on to explain in the remainder of the chapter how this is possible: since each group is now united with Christ, they are necessarily united with each other in one body.

Gentile salvation is no mystery—it was a fact of life throughout the Old Testament. Melchizedek was a Gentile; Abram was a Gentile; so were Balaam, Rahab, Ruth, and many others. But Paul is not talking just about Gentile salvation in Ephesians. He is talking about *union with Christ as part of His body*, something not offered in the Old Testament, not even to Jews. The idea that Gentiles could not only be saved, but be united with Jews as coinheritors of God’s promises and coregents in the Kingdom is unheard of in the Old Testament, or even in the Gospels. And that is the mystery: “that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel...” (3:6)

The wording “in Christ” is important there. That expression, or its equivalents (e.g. “in the Beloved,” “in Him”) occur 34 times in Ephesians—quite a lot for a book of just over 2300 words (about 3000 in English). Throughout the book, Paul repeatedly hammers home to his audience that their unity with each other, their reconciliation to God, and the many blessings they enjoy as a result all come because they are *in Christ*.