

THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

Background to the Letter

Among all the New Testament writings, the Letter to the Ephesians is a unique Pauline letter about the church and the mystery of Christ. It is an invitation to celebrate the life of the Church in Christ and to celebrate that life in a manner worthy of Christ.

It deals not so much with the Christian community in the city of Ephesus in Asia Minor as with the worldwide Church, the head of which is Christ (Eph 4:15). The aim of the Church is to be the instrument for making God's plan of salvation known throughout the universe (Eph 3:9-10). Yet this ecclesiology is anchored in God's saving love, shown in Jesus Christ (Eph 2:4-10), and the whole of redemption is rooted in the plan and accomplishment of the triune God (Eph 1:3-14).

The language is often that of doxology (Eph 1:3-14) and prayer (cf Eph 1:15-23; 3:14-19), indeed of liturgy and hymns (Eph 3:20-21; 5:14).

The letter is addressed by Paul to Christians in Ephesus (Eph 1:1), a place where the apostle laboured for more than two years. However the letter has some features that differ from the other Pauline letters and because of this modern scholars believe it was a "sermon" or a "circular letter" sent to a number of churches in Asia Minor, the addressees to be designated in each place by its bearer, Tychicus (Eph 6:21-22).

The principal divisions of the Letter

1. **Address (1:1-14)**
2. **Unity of the Church in Christ (1:15-2:22)**
3. **World Mission of the Church (3:1-21)**
4. **The Life of the Church as Body of Christ (4:1-5:20)**
5. **Daily Conduct, an Expression of Unity (Eph 5:21-6:9)**
6. **Final Exhortation (6:10-20)**
7. **Conclusion (6:21-24).**

Author and Date of the Letter

Paul, who is designated as the sole author at Eph 1:1, is described in almost unparalleled terms with regard to the significant role he has in God's plan for bringing the Gentiles to faith in Christ (Eph 3:1-12). Yet at the time of writing he is clearly in prison (Eph 3:1; 4:1; 6:20), suffering afflictions (Eph 3:13). Traditionally this "Captivity Epistle" has, along with Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon, been dated to an imprisonment in Rome, likely in A.D. 61-63. Others appeal to an earlier imprisonment, perhaps in Caesarea (Acts 23:27-27:2). Since the early nineteenth century, however, much of critical scholarship has considered the letter's style and use of words (especially when compared with Colossians), its concept of the church, and other points of doctrine put forward by the writer as grounds for serious doubt about authorship by Paul. The letter may then be the work of a secretary writing at the apostle's direction or of a later disciple who sought to develop Paul's ideas for a new situation around A.D. 80-100.

Themes of the Letter

The major theme of the letter is the Church and, in particular, its foundation in Christ as part of the will of the Father.

New Life in Christ

The chapters of Ephesians emphasize the unity in the church of Christ that has come about for both Jews and Gentiles within God's household (Eph 1:15-2:22).

The letter offers us a vision of Christ reigning in heaven next to the Father and renewing the earth through his Church.

God's Saving Work

In this letter Paul contemplates and formulates God's saving work in Jesus Christ and the "seven unities" of church, Spirit, hope; one Lord, faith, and baptism; and the one God (Eph 4:4-6).

In offering such reflections to his readers, Paul aims to lead them to a deeper appreciation of God's blessing and to a greater commitment to the gospel.

Therefore the concern of Paul is not with the church for its own sake but rather as the means for carrying on the mission in the world and to continue to unite the human family and create peace within it (Eph 3:1-4:24). The redemptive action of Christ continues to bless and enrich our lives in the present making us participate in his mission to the world. The gifts Christ gives us are to lead to growth and renewal (Eph 4:7-24).

More than in any other Letters here Paul gives us a majestic presentation of the truth that the mystery of Christ is also the mystery of his Church. She is the new creation, a universal community and her life comes from the Trinity since all her members are children of the Father, the body and the bride of the Son and the temple of the Holy Spirit. She has the task to gather all the nations into one family in Christ. This union of the glorified Christ with his Church, his mystical body was the first experience Paul had at his conversion on the road to Damascus.

Exhortations

Paul gives practical suggestions on all aspects of human life and relationships in order to live a life according to God's plan. He exhorts the Christians to keep the unity of the Church, to acknowledge the lordship of Christ and to live a life worthy of their Christian calling.

Paul in his own words

"Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with all the spiritual blessings of heaven in Christ. Thus he chose us in Christ before the world was made to be holy and faultless before him in love, marking us out for himself beforehand, to be adopted sons, through Jesus Christ. Such was his purpose and good pleasure, to the praise of the glory of his grace, his free gift to us in the Beloved, in whom, through his blood, we gain our freedom, the forgiveness of our sins. Such is the richness of the grace which he has showered on us in all wisdom and insight.

Ephesians 1:3-8