

A LOOK AT A BOOK: Ephesians

The Church – The Body of Christ

June 3, 2012

Theme

Ephesians was not written in response to a specific circumstance or controversy as were most of Paul's epistles. It has almost a meditative quality. In the theme shared with Colossians – Christ the head of the church, His body – Ephesians emphasizes the church as Christ's body, whereas Colossians emphasizes the headship of Christ. Colossians warns against false doctrine which diminishes Christ; Ephesians expresses praise for the unity and blessings shared by all believers in Christ.

Tychicus

The indication that Tychicus will add further details about Paul's circumstances by word of mouth implies that Tychicus carried the epistle known as "Ephesians" to its destination (Ephesians 6:21, 22). Paul's self-identification as "a prisoner of the Lord" demonstrates both his being in prison at the time of writing and his awareness of the Lord's purpose in his imprisonment.

Relation to Colossians

Paul must have written Ephesians and Colossians at approximately the same time, because the subject matter in the two epistles is quite similar (Christ the head of the church, His body) and because the verses about Tychicus recur in almost identical form in Colossians 4:7-8. Tychicus must therefore have carried both letters at once. (Colossae was about one hundred miles east of Ephesus.)

Ephesian, Caesarean, or Roman Origin

Although Ephesians may have been directed to the region around Ephesus rather than to Ephesus itself, it is hardly probable that Paul wrote from an Ephesian imprisonment. So far as the Caesarean imprisonment is concerned, Paul's reference to preaching boldly as "an ambassador in chains" implies that he was still proclaiming the gospel in spite of his being a prisoner (Ephesians 6:20); yet in Caesarea only his friends could visit him (Acts 24:22-23). In Rome, however, Paul preached to a steady stream of visitors who came to his house-prison (Acts 28:30-31). Like the closely related Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon, therefore, Ephesians seems to have been written during the Roman imprisonment.

Destination not Ephesus

The phrase “in Ephesus,” which refers to the locale of the readers (1:1), is missing in the most ancient manuscripts. Thus Paul omits the geographical location of the addresses altogether. Furthermore, the distant way in which he speaks of his having “heard” about the readers’ faith (1:15) and their having “heard” of his ministry (3:2) and the lack of his usual terms of endearment rule out Ephesus as the destination; for Paul had labored there for over two years and knew the Ephesian Christians intimately, as they also knew him.

Laodiceans?

Some early tradition identifies the church in Laodicea as the recipient of the epistle. The German scholar Harnack suggested that early copyists suppressed the name Laodicea because of the condemnation of the Laodicean church in Revelation 3:14-22 and that later copyists substituted the name Ephesus because of Paul’s close association with the church in that city. Paul does mention a letter to Laodicea in Colossians 4:16. But no manuscript mentions Laodicea in Ephesians 1:1.

A Circular Epistle

More likely, “Ephesians” was a circular epistle addressed to various churches in Asia Minor in the general vicinity of Ephesus. Under this view, Paul’s mention of the epistle to Laodicea in Colossians 4:16 possibly refers to our “Ephesians,” but would not imply that the epistle was addressed only to the Laodicea. Rather, in its circulation to the churches throughout the region the epistle had reached Laodicea and was about to go to Colossae. The circular address of the epistle, then, explains the omission of a city name in the address (1:1). If a single copy of the letter circulated from Ephesus and came back to Ephesus, the name of that city could have easily become linked to the epistle.

Structure

Like Colossians, Ephesians falls into two parts. Ephesians 1-3 is doctrinal and discusses the spiritual privileges of the church. Ephesians 4-6 is ethical and discusses the spiritual responsibilities of Christians.

Heavenly Blessings

After the greeting (1:1-2), Paul launches into a doxology of praise to God for spiritual blessings in Christ “in the heavenly places” (1:3-14). In other words, the believer’s union with Christ entails a share in His heavenly exaltation as well as in His earthly death, burial, and resurrection. The doxology delineates the parts played in salvation by all three members of the Trinity: the Father chose believers (the doctrine of election, v. 4); the Son redeemed them (v. 7); the Holy spirit “sealed” them, i.e., the gift of the Spirit is God’s down payment, or guarantee, that He will complete their

salvation at the return of Christ (vv. 13, 14). A thanksgiving and prayer that Christians may comprehend and appreciate the immensity of God's grace and wisdom follow the doxology (1:15-23). *Read Ephesians 1.*

Divine Grace

To help his readers appreciate the magnitude of divine grace, Paul contrasts their domination by sin before conversion and their freedom from that tyranny after conversion. He also emphasizes the fact salvation is wholly unearned; it comes by divine grace, through faith, and apart from meritorious good works. God's action does produce good works, but they are a consequence rather than a means of salvation. *Read Ephesians 2, 3.*

Unity and Diversity

The practical exhortations begin with a plea for outward unity growing out of the already existing spiritual unity of the church. Yet this unity includes a diversity of function for the growth of the body, or church. Each Christian has a ministerial function, for which leaders of the church are to equip him. *Read Ephesians 4:1-16*

Holy Conduct

Miscellaneous instructions on holiness follow: tell the truth; be righteously indignant when necessary, but do not sin by failing to control your anger; do not steal; avoid obscene speech and risqué humor. *Read Ephesians 4:17-5:14.*

The Filling With the Spirit and Household Code

Scholars have suggested different sources for Paul's metaphor of the church as Christ's body: the Stoic notion that the universe is a body with many different parts, the rabbinic idea that men are the members of Adam's body in a literal sense, the symbolic or sacramental union of believers with Christ's body when they eat the bread of the Lord's Supper. *Read Ephesians 5:15-6:9.*

The Armor of God

Before the farewell, Paul urges his readers to don the spiritual armor provided by God and fight the satanic powers that dominate the world. Perhaps the sight of the soldier to whom Paul was hand-cuffed while dictating Ephesians in his house-prison suggested "the full armor of God." *Read Ephesians 6:10-24.*