

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

*THE EPISTLE TO THE GENTILE CHURCHES.*

JUST as there are double stars, consisting of two suns revolving round and enlightening each the other ; just as in the teaching of Jesus there are pairs of parables, in which the same truth is represented under two aspects, the one supplementing the other—for example, the parables of the leaven and the grain of mustard seed, of the treasure hid in a field and the pearl of great price, of the lost sheep and the lost piece of silver ; so in the apostolic correspondence there are pairs of epistles, so to speak, in which two aspects of the same subject are treated separately, in such a way as to set the whole question in a clear light.

Such is the relation between the Epistle to the Romans and that to the Galatians, as also between the two minor epistles of John ; and still more strikingly between the Epistle to the Colossians and that to the Ephesians.

I.

We have seen that when false doctrine was threatening to invade the Church of Colosse in Phrygia, the Apostle set forth Jesus Christ the Son of God as Himself the Head of the Church, which is His body upon earth. In this way he sought to bring home to the Colossians the futility of the mediation of angels, and the uselessness of those Jewish ordinances under which some were trying to bring them into bondage. On this occasion the Apostle felt himself called to address another letter to several Gentile Churches in Asia Minor, of which the Church of Colosse was one. Paul had not himself founded these Churches, and had never visited them. For this very reason he felt all the more bound, as the Apostle of the Gentiles, to do something for these young Christian societies, which, planted in the midst of paganism, belonged to his apostolic domain.

This more general epistle was intended at the same time

to supplement that to the Colossians. In the earlier letter Christ was set forth as the Divine Head of the Church ; in this, he desired to show to these Gentile converts, that this new society into which they had been incorporated was as the earthly body of the heavenly Head. This was only repeating to the Church, under another form, the sublime truth which Jesus had taught His disciples under the figure of the vine and its branches. This letter is, if we mistake not, that which appears in our canon as the Epistle to the Ephesians.

It may seem strange that we should so describe a letter which we have already said was addressed to Churches, which, like the Church of Colosse, were situated in the interior of Asia Minor, many days' distance from the great metropolis of Ionia. Our reasons are as follows :

One cannot but be struck, in reading the letter commonly called the Epistle to the Ephesians, with the fact that in several passages the Apostle speaks to his readers as to Christians personally unknown to him. Thus in chap. i. 15, he says to them that he has "heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which is among them, and which they show toward all the saints." And in chap. iii. 2, he expresses himself thus : " If so be ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given me to youward " (that is, his apostleship to the Gentiles). In chap. iv. 21, he writes : " But ye did not so learn Christ ; if so be that ye heard Him, and were taught in Him, even as truth is in Jesus." Now Paul never could have written thus if he had been addressing the Church at Ephesus.

Another feature of this epistle seems to make it highly improbable that it was intended for that Church ; namely, the absence of any personal greetings at its close. Can we suppose that Paul would not have mentioned the names of at least some of the members of this Church, with which he abode so long, if this letter was really intended for it? To

these two considerations there is a third to be added, which, from very early times, has struck attentive readers of this epistle. In many ancient manuscripts the words "at Ephesus," in v. 1, are omitted after "the saints which are." This gave rise to a very extraordinary explanation. "*The saints which are,*" was made to signify the saints who possess the true, celestial, eternal existence. But the words thus understood would be a philosophical expression such as we do not find anywhere else in Scripture. Unless we are prepared to admit that the words "at Ephesus" have been expunged for some unexplained reason, we must conclude from this omission that the name of those to whom it was sent, was not mentioned in the original letter, and that the heading, "Epistle to the Ephesians" was added when the collection of St. Paul's epistles was made in the Churches, and that it was based on a mistaken supposition. This we shall now proceed to show.

To whom did the Apostle really address this letter? and how can we account for the fact that their name was omitted in the superscription?

The first question is easily answered. There is so close and continuous a connexion between this epistle and that to the Colossians, that they must have been written almost at the same time and addressed to readers who had much in common. This conclusion is confirmed by the singular expression, chap. vi. 21: "But that ye also may know my affairs, how I do, Tychicus, the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord, shall make known to you all things." This expression, "that ye also," seems to prove, in the first place, that Paul was not addressing this letter to a single Church, but to several, each of which was included in the "ye also"; and the idea is that they should all one after the other, receive from Tychicus tidings of the Apostle. Colosse would certainly belong to the group of Churches which Paul had in view; for he uses a similar expression

in Colossians iv. 7: "All my affairs shall Tychicus make known unto you, the beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord." Tychicus then was to visit in succession all the Churches to whom this epistle was addressed, and to leave a copy of it with them, while giving them at the same time *vivâ voce* tidings of the Apostle. We should naturally look for this group of churches, of which Colosse was one, in the province of Phrygia. Were such Churches actually found there? Assuredly. In the Epistle to the Colossians (ii. 1), Paul says: "For I would have you know how greatly I strive for you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh." The Church of Laodicea, and others, like that of Hierapolis (Col. iv. 13), which had been founded without the co-operation of Paul, in this central district of Asia Minor, were the objects of his peculiar concern. Is it surprising, that while addressing to the Colossians a letter adapted to their particular circumstances, he should have felt anxious to send a second letter to these other Churches to supply the lack of a personal visit?

This supposition is further corroborated by the following fact. In the year 140, a young man of distinction, Marcion, the son of a bishop of Pontus, in Asia Minor, made a collection of the epistles of St. Paul, for the use of the Churches which he founded on a basis opposed to the prevailing orthodoxy. We have a list of the apostolic epistles which he admitted into his canon. Among them was what we call the Epistle to the Ephesians, but it appears as the Epistle to the Laodiceans. It is not impossible indeed that Marcion may have taken this name from the passage in the Colossians (iv. 16), in which the Apostle charges that Church to read the epistle to the Church at Laodicea. But why should he take this to mean the Epistle to the Ephesians? Marcion must have had some more definite

reason for thus describing it. May we not suppose that, in going from Pontus into the west, and visiting on his journey the Churches of Phrygia, he had found this epistle in the Church of Laodicea, as a letter addressed to that Church? If so, it is decisive that this epistle was intended for one, or more than one, of the Churches of Phrygia.

After this, it is easy to explain the omission of any name in the superscription of the letter. All that we have been saying suggests the following reply to the question: When Tychicus left Rome for Asia Minor, he had with him three letters, one to the Colossians, one to Philemon, and this which we call the Epistle to the Ephesians. This, as we have just shown, was to be delivered to the Churches of Phrygia around Colosse, all of which Tychicus was to visit. Now Tychicus possessed probably only one copy of this letter. The Apostle intended that he should have as many copies made at Ephesus as he would require, in order that each Church might have one addressed to itself. The original letter remains in the archives of the Church of Ephesus, just as Tychicus brought it, with no indication to whom it was addressed. In the copies the blank was filled in according to the destination of each letter. Marcion found at Laodicea that which bore the name of that Church, and he therefore, in all good faith, so catalogued it in his canon. But when subsequently the various Churches of Christendom were desirous to possess it, they naturally sent to Ephesus, the great seaport and chief city of that region, for copies. Thus the epistle came to be spoken of throughout Christendom as the Epistle to the Ephesians; and the words "at Ephesus" were added to the superscription, though traces of the original blank left to be filled in, still remained. In fact, the words are omitted in the two most ancient MSS. of the New Testament now in our possession—the Vaticanus and the Sinaiticus.

At the close of the Epistle to the Colossians, Paul enjoins that Church to read the epistle which was to be sent to it from Laodicea, and to send on to that Church its own epistle. From all that goes before, it appears evident that this letter which was to be sent to the Colossians from Laodicea, was no other than our Epistle to the Ephesians, which was the fitting supplement to that which the Colossians themselves had received and which they were to forward to Laodicea.

## II.

Let us now proceed to study the scope of this epistle. Chrysostom said, "That which the Apostle had nowhere else proclaimed, he reveals in this scripture." This is true. In the First Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul refers to a higher spiritual wisdom contained in the gospel; but he adds that he can only speak of it among the perfect. Those whom he thus describes were those who had come to the stature of full grown men in Christ, as he says again in Ephesians iv. 13. This wisdom was nothing else than the apprehension of the Divine plan, and it is this which he sets forth in the epistle before us.

We have seen that the epistles of St. Paul generally begin with thanksgiving, the subject of which is the work of God already accomplished in those to whom he writes, and that this thanksgiving is followed by a prayer in which the Apostle asks that the gracious work may go on in their souls. After this, he passes to the subject he proposes to treat. In the epistle before us he commences with thanksgiving and prayer; but, if I may so speak, he never gets beyond this, and all that he has to impart to his readers is included in the outpouring of gratitude and desire, which runs through the whole of the first three chapters. All that follows from the beginning of chap. iv. is only the

practical application of this true apprehension of the Divine work.

The thanksgiving turns on the treasury of heavenly benedictions which God has opened to these Christians. The Apostle traces this river of grace back to its source in the eternal decree by which God has predestinated believers to salvation and to adoption in the person of His well-beloved Son (i. 3-6). Then he reminds them of the cost at which this merciful design has been fulfilled, "redemption through the blood of Christ" (v. 7); and through the revelation granted to the Church gives them a glimpse of the glorious consummation of the Divine plan—the gathering together of all things, both in earth and heaven, under the sovereignty of Christ, the supreme Head of the universe (vv. 8-10). After having thus glanced at the source, the means, and the end, he goes on to show that this great plan is already in process of fulfilment by the calling of God unto salvation, addressed first to the Jews, then to those Gentiles, who have believed and been sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise (vv. 11-14). This is the beginning of the gathering together of all things in Christ. After thus descending from the heights of the Divine intention to its application to his readers, the Apostle proceeds to offer prayer on their behalf. For after their conversion there is much progress to be made. Have they themselves grasped the extent of the change which has been wrought and yet is to be wrought in them? Have they sufficiently understood the grandeur of the position to which their new faith entitles them? Have they considered the exceptional greatness of the power which has been at work within them to effect this change? It is upon this point the Apostle asks that they may be enlightened (vv. 15-19). It is essential for them to understand that that which has been done and yet is to be done in them, is nothing less than a transformation similar to that wrought by God in the person of



Christ Himself, when "He raised Him from the dead, and made Him to sit at His own right hand in the heavenly places." From this glorious, high throne, Christ is forming for Himself a body here on earth, even the Church, filled with the fulness of His life (*vv.* 19-23). It is a similar work which God accomplishes in believers, when, finding them "dead in trespasses and sins," He "quickens them together with (or in) Christ, and raises them up with Him" in such sort that they live in Him in the heavenly places. This is a fact already accomplished by grace on God's part, by faith on theirs. They are really saved; and that without any meritorious effort of their own, but by the pure mercy of God, who places them henceforward in a new relation to Himself, in which they may abound with good works (*ii.* 1-10).

The Apostle now comes to the principal point on which he wishes specially to insist with those to whom he was writing. Who were you, he says, you whom God has thus dealt with; whom He has raised like Christ Himself, from death to life, from the grave to the throne? Were you aforetime among His covenanted people? Had you any part in the promises? Nay, ye were "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope." Nevertheless God has brought even these Gentiles nigh to Himself by the blood of the cross, and has made them His people. He has broken down for them the wall of separation, the law, which rose between them and the Jews, and has thus brought together in one body these two races—till now so bitterly hostile—the Jews and the Gentiles. In thus reconciling both unto Himself and abolishing the enmity, He "has made in Himself of twain one new man, so making peace." He gives to both access to the throne of grace on equal terms (*vv.* 11-18). So far then from being any more strangers, they are "fellow citizens with the saints and of the household of God,"

and are built up like living stones into the spiritual temple, founded upon Christ and His Apostles, and a habitation of God through the Spirit (*vv.* 19-22).

Such is the greatness of the grace of which they are the subjects. St. Paul adds yet one more point which concerns him personally. In order to effect this incorporation of the Gentiles into the kingdom of God, there must be the creation of a new apostolate in addition to that of the twelve. This apostolate extraordinary is that with which Paul, the writer of this epistle, and now a prisoner, has been invested. Unto him, who accounted himself "less than the least of all saints, was this grace given," that he "should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ"; and that he should make all men see that the Gentiles were fellow heirs, fellow members of the body, and partakers of the "promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (*ii.* 1-12).

He entreats them therefore not to be troubled by the tribulations he has to endure for so great a cause, which are a glory and not a shame to them. And here he again falls into prayer, and from his prison intercedes with God on their behalf. He gives them, so to speak, a glimpse into his prison cell, where on his knees and pleading for these Churches of Asia Minor which he has never seen, he asks for them that they may be strengthened with power through the Holy Ghost, that Christ may dwell in their hearts through faith, that they may be rooted and grounded in love, that they may have the inward illumination by which the gracious work of God will be revealed to them in all its height and length and breadth and depth, that thus they may be filled with the very fulness of God. What can he ask more? (*vv.* 13-21.)

So far extends the utterance of praise and prayer, which, in the other epistles, precedes the introduction of the main theme of the letter, but which in this instance includes it.

The whole of the first part of the epistle forms one hymn, in the midst of which the subject is intercalated. In the second part (iv.—vi.), Paul only draws the practical conclusions from the promises of grace which he has been magnifying. He makes the greatness of their Divine calling a plea for the holiness of life by which these Gentile Christians should walk worthy of it (iv. 1).

And first: as a Church, they are bound to maintain unity in the faith, each one consecrating to the good of the whole, the gifts he has received from the glorified Christ. It is for the growth and prosperity of His body, the Church, that the invisible Head has bestowed particularly the four essential gifts by which the body is to be raised to the perfect stature of its Head. He has thus given, first, apostles and prophets, whose work it is to lay the foundations of the Church; evangelists, by whose ministry it is to be extended; lastly, pastors and teachers, whose office it is to build up that which has been already begun. These heavenly gifts are the means by which the glorified Lord guards His body, the Church, from the seductive influence of false doctrines, and makes it grow up into the fulness of spiritual life (iv. 2-16).

From the life of the Church the Apostle passes to that of individuals. After reminding his readers of what they once were, he sums up all that he has to ask of them under two heads: he charges them to put off the old man, and to put on the new man created in the image of God (vv. 17-24). In order to give vividness to this idea, he proceeds to contrast each member of the new man with its corresponding member in the old. This brings out the eight following antitheses:

Falsehood—truth (v. 25).

Anger—forgiveness (vv. 26, 27).

Theft—doing good (v. 28).

Corrupt speech—words of edification (vv. 29, 30).

Bitterness—love (*v.* 31 ; *v.* 2).

Impurity—chasteness (*vv.* 3–14).

Unwisdom—wisdom (*vv.* 15–17).

Rioting and excess—spiritual joy (*vv.* 18–20).

We have observed these same contrasts in the Epistle to the Colossians (*iii.* 15–17) ; but there all the members of the old man were united as in one body, and contrasted with the new man as a whole.

Lastly, from the life of the individual the Apostle passes to the life of the family, which is to bear in all its relations the impress of Christian holiness. The parallel passage (*Col.* *iii.* 18 ; *iv.* 11) goes much less into detail.

The salient feature in this picture of a Christian family is mutual and voluntary subordination (*v.* 31). The Apostle refers first to the relation of husband and wife, which is compared to that between Christ and the Church (*v.* 22–23). This is the centre of the family life, and around it is formed first the inner circle of parents and children (*vi.* 1–4), and outside this the relation of masters and slaves (*vv.* 5–9).

But this ideal of Christian holiness in the life of the Church, of the individual, and the family cannot be realised without conflict ; and this conflict is not simply that which arises from indwelling and encompassing sin. The Christian has also to fight against invisible foes, devilish suggestions, which cannot be withstood by his own unaided strength. Hence the Apostle invites his readers to put on the various pieces of armour which God has provided for their use. Three of these he describes under the figure of armour to be bound to the body : the girdle, the inward possession of the truth ; the breastplate, the steadfast love of righteousness ; the shoes, the determination to meet the enemy only with the gospel of peace. He next describes three dispositions under the figure of the movable parts of the armour : faith in the Divine pro-

mises, the shield; the glorious hope of salvation, the helmet; the use of Scripture to repel the assaults of the enemy, the sword. Lastly, he urges them to use that which alone can make any of these weapons effectual—prayer. This he asks on behalf of all the saints, and specially for himself, their Apostle, “an ambassador now in chains” (*vv.* 10–20).

Thus will the Church fulfil its task in the world, which is to overthrow the kingdom of Satan, and to set up on its ruins the kingdom of God.

The Apostle concludes, as usual, with some personal details. He tells his readers that Tychicus is coming, who will bring them tidings, and comfort their hearts. His wish is that peace and love may be established among them on the foundation of the faith. He desires that grace may be with all those who love the Lord Jesus Christ in uncorruptness (*vv.* 20–24).

The unity of this Epistle is self-evident. Its one theme throughout is the calling to salvation by grace, addressed as freely to the Gentiles as to the Jews. This theme is explained in the first part of the Epistle (i.–iii.), and enforced in the second (iv.–vi.). It is impossible therefore to regard this Scripture as merely a collation of earlier writings; the piece of the new garment would show some disparity with the old. But there is no such disparity. This observation suffices to set aside the opinion, learnedly maintained by Holzmann, that the Epistle to the Ephesians is only the expansion of a short letter addressed by Paul to the Colossians. He argues that some writer of a later date possessed himself of the shorter epistle about the close of the first century, and manipulated it into what we call the Epistle to the Ephesians. A work thus composed of two heterogeneous elements could not fail to betray its origin by the want of that very directness,

logical sequence, and unity which are so marked in this Epistle.

Critics of the same school point to the many parallel passages in the Epistle to the Ephesians and that to the Colossians, and ask how these can be explained, except on the hypothesis we have mentioned, supplemented by the following. The supposed writer of the Epistle to the Ephesians, after having amplified Paul's original letter to the Colossians into what we call the Epistle to the Ephesians, afterwards manipulated also the original letter, using his own Epistle to the Ephesians in the process. In this way the mystery of the resemblance between the two canonical Epistles is explained.

It seems to us that the problem can be solved in a much simpler way. It is not impossible that two completely independent and original writings may coincide on certain points, both in substance and in form of expression. If they treat of two very similar subjects, if they are both by the same author, if both were written at about the same time of his life, and under the influence of the same feelings, it cannot be wondered at if there are strong resemblances, both of form and substance, between them. All these conditions are fulfilled in the two letters to which we are referring. It is not difficult for us to picture to ourselves what was taking place at the very time when they were written.

Epaphras has just come from Colosse to Rome. There he finds Paul and Timothy. He tells them of the new doctrine—a fusion of Essenism and Christianity—which is threatening his Church. Paul meditates a while. Then he says to Epaphras: “The best way to cut the roots of this false speculation with its ascetic tendencies, is to remind the Church of Colosse of the supreme dignity of Christ as the Head of the Church, in the presence of which all the glory of the angels vanishes away. Then to show

them that the work of Christ for the salvation of men is complete, that nothing is to be added to it; that baptism into His death is the true circumcision, that the law is henceforth like a cancelled charge, that the cross is the triumphant chariot to which the powers of darkness are bound and led captive. All the legal ordinances and practices enjoined by these false teachers will then be seen to be vain. The Colossians will understand that the true death and the true resurrection are to be found, not in their useless ascetic practices, but in sharing the death and resurrection of Jesus; and that all that remains is to consummate these two spiritual facts by the daily mortification of the old man, and the constant growth of the new."

Epaphras gives his joyful assent to this plan of campaign. Then Paul asks what tidings there are from the other Churches in the district. Epaphras tells him that they are walking in faith and in love (Eph. i. 15). Though they are not exposed to the same dangers as the Church at Colosse, it would be good for them nevertheless to be brought into direct personal relation with the Apostle, and to receive from him some words of encouragement. It would be especially useful to urge upon them the holiness which ought to characterise all the family relations, upon which the heretics were trying to bring discredit by a semblance of higher spirituality in their mode of living.

Paul at once sets himself to his task, with the help of Timothy (Col. i. 1). He first dictates to him the letter which has the most direct aim—the letter to the Colossians. Then, as Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul writes, in his own name only, the more general letter, with no polemical bearing, to the neighbouring Churches, to stir them up to adore the boundless grace bestowed upon them, and to urge them to a life becoming those so highly favoured.

Hence it comes to pass that the central idea of the Epistle to the Colossians is this: Christ the Head, from whom the

body derives all its nourishment; while the central idea of what we call the Epistle to the Ephesians is the Church, the body which Christ fills with His Divine fulness, and raises to sit with Him in the heavenly places. Of these two thoughts, which supplement each other, the second was certainly suggested by the first. The first note struck woke the vibrations of the next; then followed a pæan of Divine harmonies. What could be more natural than that two strains thus suggested, should have many tones in common, though each set in a different key?

But it has been said again: The style of the Epistle to the Ephesians is wholly unlike that of the Epistle to the Colossians, or of Paul's other letters. Instead of the close, argumentative strain to which we are accustomed, we find here the full, swelling notes of a hymn. This rich and abundant phraseology has nothing in common with the broken, concise, uniformly sober style of the Apostle.

Yet there are passages in other epistles, such as the close of the 8th and 11th chapters of the Epistle to the Romans, which show that Paul knew, not only how to teach and to discuss, but how to sing. He says himself to the Corinthians that he thanks God he can speak with tongues more than they all. Now the speaking with tongues was rather song than speech; it was the language of ecstasy. Can we be surprised if, in addressing Churches to whom he had no special teaching to impart or rebuke to administer, Paul should have for once risen to the exalted tones of a hymn, to magnify the grace which had wrought such great things for them?

The Epistle to the Ephesians is indeed a *tongue*, a tongue interpreted by Paul himself, and changed by this interpretation into a prophecy intelligible to all (1 Cor. xiv. 18, 19). The more I read and re-read this admirable letter, the more it strikes me that Paul himself tried to sum it all up in the words of his prayer (iii. 18), in which he asks God to



give his readers to understand the dimensions of the Divine salvation, of that edifice of which God is Himself the builder, "that ye may be strong to apprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and depth and height." *The length*: he describes it in chap. i., where he shows how the salvation of the world proceeds from an eternal decree, which was before all the ages, and the purport of which is to give the sovereignty to Christ in the dispensation of the fulness of the times. *The breadth*: he shows how the kingdom of God is gradually to embrace all intelligent beings: first, Jews and Gentiles—that is, all believers; finally men and angels, the sovereignty of Christ being thus co-extensive with the intelligent universe. *The depth*: he points to Christ going down into the dark abyss of death, to be set again on the highest throne by His resurrection and ascension. *The height*: he bids his readers look upon themselves as henceforth risen in Him, and seated with Him in the heavenly places.

Even Paul never wrote in grander strains than these, and to imagine that after his death another might have penned them in his name is to suppose that somewhere and some-when there arose a second Paul, unknown to the Church, and who has left no other trace of his existence but this single letter. It is far easier to believe that once in his life the Apostle of the Gentiles beheld in raptured contemplation, and magnified in this sublime language, the glorious work committed to him—the work of restoring the unity of the body of mankind, which from the time of Abraham had been divided into two great branches, thus heralding and preludeing the time when all things in heaven and earth should be gathered together in Christ.

This is the keynote of the Epistle to the Ephesians, as of the Gospel of John. The two great Apostles thus meet on the topmost height of the Christian revelation.

F. GODET.