

# Ephesians



A STUDY MANUAL

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# 1

## *Introduction and Background*

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### *Authorship*

The Letter to the Ephesians proclaims its authorship in the first verse: "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God." Again, at the beginning of the third chapter, the writer identifies himself: "For this reason I, Paul . . ." Though ancient scholars never contested Paul's authorship, modern critics (from 1820 to the present) have done just that. These critics claim that the Letter to the Ephesians has a distinctive style and vocabulary from Paul's other letters. Not only is this a subjective argument, but it fails to credit Paul with ingenuity and creativity. These critics would rather paint Paul as a very staid and inflexible writer than give him literary credit for using different words. The circumstances that prompt a letter lead the author in developing and stressing one or more themes. Varied themes normally necessitate new and different words. Furthermore, if Paul had another person writing for him, such as Tychicus (6:21), the style would be different, yet the thoughts would still be Paul's.

Critics base another argument against Paul's authorship on what they believe is a discrepancy with the Book of Acts. Acts 19:1-20:1 records that Paul on his second visit stayed with the Ephesians for three years. During this time the Ephesians came to know him in such an intimate manner that, when Paul finally left, they were saddened to tears and moved to hug and kiss him (Acts 20:37). The critics exploit this bit of emotion by claiming that Paul would have had personal greetings to his beloved Ephesians. In other words, the letter should have personally mentioned his friends as did his Letter to the Romans.

The letter does have an impersonal tone, probably because Paul was not directly addressing the believers at Ephesus. He wrote to all the churches in the province of Asia; the letter was not limited to one church. Rather, Paul intended that the letter be distributed among other churches in the province of which Ephesus was the most known. The Letter to the Colossians verifies this view: Colossians 4:7 says Tychicus will bring additional information to the Colossians; Ephesians 6:21 mentions that Tychicus will make everything known to them. Tychicus was the messenger who carried both letters, which were written at approximately the same time to a destination in the same general area. But don't the words "to the saints at Ephesus" establish once and for all that the letter was directed to the Ephesians? Not really, for two of the earliest and most authoritative manuscripts do not contain the words "at Ephesus."

A third argument against Paul's authorship is theological. Unlike other Pauline letters, Ephesians speaks about the heavenly sphere where the powers and principalities operate and not about justification and dying with Christ. The emphasis, say the critics, concerns both the church and reconciliation between Jew and Gentile, rather than between God and sinners. In an effort to be intellectual, the critics have become as "yellow journalists" and focused on minor variations without seeing the major evidence for Pauline theology. The doctrines of election (1:4), of adoption (1:5), of grace (2:4), of Christian unity (4:4), and of family relationships (5:22-6:9) are all present in this letter as well as letters of uncontested Pauline authorship.

Paul is clearly the author of Ephesians. To state otherwise is to say that the Letter to the Ephesians perpetrates a fraud, for the letter itself presents Paul as the author. For anyone to study a book of the Bible that he or she believes was not written by the person it specifies as its author is an effort in obscurantism. For if the book perpetrates fraud, it does not deserve to be studied. If one part of the letter is false, then no part of the letter can be trusted. Those who study the letter believing it to be a fraud are fools who despise wisdom and instruction (Prov. 1:7). In thinking they are wise with new theories and criticisms, they have become fools (Rom. 1:22)

who not only stumble over their own folly, but also lead others astray to their own detriment.

### *Time and Place of Writing*

The letter indicates that Paul was a prisoner at the time of its composition. Paul mentions that he was a "prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles" (3:1), a "prisoner of the Lord" (4:1), and an "ambassador in chains" (6:20). The Book of Acts speaks about two lengthy periods of Paul's imprisonment. One was in Caesarea (Acts 24:27), and the other was in Rome (Acts 28:30). Both lasted two years, which would have allowed Paul sufficient time to receive information about believers in various churches and correspond with them. Because of the orderly progression of Paul's thought throughout his ministry (mainly systematic and doctrinal), the most likely dating of the letter is during his Roman imprisonment, sometime between A.D. 60 and 63. The Letter to the Ephesians was written at about the same time as Philemon and Colossians and, most likely, immediately after Colossians. Both letters appear to have been sent by way of Tychicus, who visited Paul.

### *Recipients*

Since there is a connection with the Letter to the Colossians, the destination of both must have been in the same general area. Colossae and Ephesus are in the province of Asia. As discussed under the section on authorship, the recipients included not just Ephesians but all believers in the province. Hence, the letter lacks personal references. Paul never intended the message to be restricted to one church, but rather to be disseminated to others.

### *Reason for the Letter*

The Letter to the Ephesians has close affinity with the Letter to the Colossians. In Colossae, there arose a form of false teaching that relegated Christ to a secondary position among the hierarchies of principalities and powers. In this scheme of the universe, Christ was

not supreme, and His redemptive work was partial and incomplete. Paul wrote Colossians to combat this heresy.

Although the Colossian letter stressed the preeminence of Christ, it failed to envelop the theme of Christ's redemptive work in relation to the whole universe. The Colossians were told that God delivered them from darkness and transferred them into the kingdom of Christ (Col. 1:13). But what did it mean to be in Christ's kingdom? What did God expect of believers? And if the church is the body of the preeminent Christ, what is the believers' relation to Christ's cosmic role? Paul did not answer these questions in his letter to the Colossians.

Thus Paul penned another letter to these same people to instruct them further. As a community of believers they represented a new society created by God. This new society existed only because of the shed blood of Christ. God chose the church as a new community to be His earthly dwelling in which and from which His Holy Spirit would operate. The Letter to the Ephesians stresses that God works through those whom He has chosen by grace. Believers, individually and corporately, were created for the purpose of good works (2:10).

As a new community created in Christ Jesus, believers are made part of God's reconciling work in the universe. Although Paul mentions the theme of reconciliation in the Letter to the Colossians (Col. 1:20), he carries it further in the Letter to the Ephesians. If God's purpose is to sum up all things in Christ (1:10) and use His church in the process, the church must be the prime example of reconciliation—hence, the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile into one body (2:16). There is no better way to unveil a new society than by bonding together Jew and Gentile into one new entity (2:15). The world would take notice, for in Paul's time it was unheard of to have Jew and Gentile fellowshiping under the same banner. Only through Christ could this occur.

If the church is to be effective, men must see her conforming to the purposes and precepts of God. If she is to proclaim the gospel of reconciliation, nonbelievers must see a community of reconciled people. For this reason, Paul admonishes his readers and sets down practical requirements for living a life unified in Christ. The com-



munity of believers must illustrate in real life the new work done by God. The church accomplishes this by demonstrating unity, not divisiveness, in the body of Christ, as well as purity and love (4:1-3).

### *Questions for Ephesians 1:1-14*

1. What do you think are the qualifications for being an apostle (1:1)?
2. What do you believe Paul meant when he said God "chose us in Him before the foundation of the world" (1:4)? How do you answer the critics who say this means we have no free choice?
  - a.
  - b.
3. Some people believe that everybody is a child of God. But God only had one Son! How, then, do we become children of God (1:5)?
  - a. See Romans 8:14-17.

- b. But what about Jesus' statement in John 10:34? Jesus quotes Psalm 82:6 in addressing the Pharisees. Does this mean that we are all children of God? Why not?

(1)

(2)

4. What does it mean to be sealed in Him (1:13)?