

# *The Epistles of Paul*

## *Week 8: Ephesians*

### **Purpose:**

The second of the group of disputed epistles, Ephesians continues the development of theology for the early church, as well as pushing for church unity. Ephesians is perhaps most known for its familial and social teachings, but that is secondary to the main point of the epistle. Ephesians asks the reader and the church to consider what it means to be united in Christ, despite divisions in society.

1. Have you read Ephesians before? Have you studied it? What did you think?
2. What do you notice that is different between Colossians and Ephesians?
3. What stands out to you most about Ephesians?

### **Key Verse(s) of the Week, Ephesians 4:15-16**

*But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, <sup>16</sup>from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.*

### **Opening Prayer:**

*Through the unity of the Holy Spirit, we are bound in your love and grace. Lead us in the study of your word as we seek your truth. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.*

### **Introduction and Background:**

Like the Epistle to the Colossians, Ephesians falls into the category of “disputed” epistles (along with II Thessalonians). This does not discount importance or theological assertions, but rather is a scholarly statement regarding authorship and date. There is little consensus by scholars as to when, who, and where the letter was written. However, the style, language, and theology so mirror Paul that it is debated as to its origins. Some of these debates include:

- Date:
  - Paul: likely 60-65
  - Not Paul: likely 80-90
- Author:
  - Paul
  - A disciple of Paul writing in his style
- Location:
  - From Paul to the church in Ephesus from Rome
  - A homily or message from an Apostle of Paul in Ephesus to Ephesus

Ephesians continues to push further away from an imminent return of Jesus to a more distant, eventual return. In response to this evolving theology, there is a growing imperative for the local churches to remain united within themselves and other nearby churches. As with Colossians, there are social teachings and communal teachings that help the church to blend in, keeping a low profile in the Roman Empire.

Most noticeable, Ephesians uses some language that seems to connect to Luke-Acts. Whether this is coincidental, intentional, or means a connection to the author of Luke-Acts is unclear. However, it does point to a further refining of early Christian theology.

1. What is most important about the change in the theology of Jesus' return?
2. Do you think there is a connection between Ephesians and Luke-Acts? Why or why not?
3. What social customs do you see in Ephesians that are more problematic today?

## **Today's Focus Passage, Ephesians 4:1-6, 11-16**

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, <sup>2</sup>with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, <sup>3</sup>making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. <sup>4</sup>There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, <sup>5</sup>one Lord, one faith, one baptism, <sup>6</sup>one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all...

...<sup>11</sup>The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, <sup>12</sup>to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, <sup>13</sup>until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. <sup>14</sup>We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. <sup>15</sup>But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, <sup>16</sup>from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

1. What is the main point of this passage?
2. What does it mean to be united? How does this passage encourage the community?
3. What does it mean to be the body of Christ?

## **Discussion:**

The Epistle to the Ephesians continues the push away from an imminent eschatology (return of Jesus) to a delayed or latter one. This is accomplished both by outlining some new social teachings and by encouraging people to see a united message as key to spreading the gospel. Perhaps most importantly, the epistle pushes harder on the blending into Roman society while still preaching the gospel.

The letter itself is divided into a few key portions. First, there is the standard greeting/blessing that opens nearly all letters in the Pauline school. Moving on from here, the letter delves into the mystery of Jesus' nature, as well as the mystery of the church. These two questions are key to an early Christian understanding of the nature of Jesus and to the role of the church. Third, there is a lengthy section focusing on both unity in Christ and on personal/communal teachings. This is where many of the letters more controversial statements regarding gender and home life are found.

To the modern reader these statements are troublesome. And indeed, there is a strong critique to be made regarding the whether the statements on gender roles is meant to be prescriptive. However, these teachings reflected some of the larger arguments ongoing in the early Christian movement, particularly on how the movement could avoid suspicion.

1. What is the most troublesome social teaching from Ephesians? Why does it read differently today?
2. How do the letters of Paul help define early church practice?
3. What does it mean to be united in Christ as an early Christian community?

## **Conclusion:**

Ephesians is both an important work for the early Christian church and one that has become controversial to the modern church. While there is a fair critique regarding gender roles, the information in Ephesians help give context to the early church and how they both grew and kept under the radar in the Roman world. Most importantly, Ephesians empowers the reader to see the nature of ministry as an extension of the ministry of Jesus itself.

*Close in prayer*