

Session #1: Ephesians Introduction

Compiled and written by Theresa Lisiecki

Introduction

Today we begin to investigate what is considered by Biblical scholars to be *the most eloquent, the most influential, and the most Christological (theology of Christ) of the letter attributed to St. Paul of Tarsus.* (Agape Bible Study) As we move through our study in these next few weeks we will find that it contains some of the most moving prayers and hymns one can find in the New Testament. My hope is that as we study each of us will accept the spiritual invitation to recognize our personal call to live as God's most cherished children and who are invited to live in the image of Christ. My hope is that we will also hear and seek to understand that living out our baptism means to use the gifts we have been given by Christ and reach out for the spiritual resources around us so as to strengthen and increase our faith in hopes to live as true disciples of our Risen Savior, Jesus Christ.



Who is the Author and Was it Written?

It may seem silly to even discuss the possibility that this document was written by any other person other than St. Paul. But we must understand that even today books, articles, blogs... are written by ghost authors. Having an "underling" do the work can be a part of even today's workplace. Having an important person's name on a piece can give greater credibility. While I have never written anything for the priests I have worked for, there have been times (especially in dealing with a particularly difficult parishioner) when I have dropped Fr. Gary's name as agreeing with me (and only when he does) to lend credibility to my argument. And it almost always works! Throughout the last decades there has been an ongoing "discussion" as to whether The Letter to Ephesians was written by St. Paul while in his first captivity in Rome or by one of his disciples.

Today, in our opinionated, independent and often corrupt world it is no longer acceptable for "ghost authorship" except in very specific situations. But for millennium someone writing for someone else has been an acceptable practice. Why does authorship in the bible matter? Knowing the true author lends credibility and authority to a document. While I am a truly wise teacher (I say with a smirk on my lips and a twinkle in my eye), it would be ludicrous to expect anyone to see my teachings/opinions on par with the greats such as St. Paul. We understand him to be a special conduit of the voice of the Holy Spirit. But if I offer, with proof, that what I am saying was said first by St. Paul then people listen with a different ear. Holding "the name" in authority to validate the content is just another tool in the biblical author's pencil case to communicate the truth to hearts unwilling to hear or accept (such as in my example above dealing with parishioners who believe that a "mere" woman could not truly know). The

problem lies in when the author abuses the use of the authority's name to fortify their argument. Especially when that argument or teaching is counter to what the truth already offered by a conduit of God.

Example of this can be found in the book of 1 Timothy. Up until recent times the authorship of this document along with 2 Timothy and Titus was believed to be written by St. Paul. In the last two centuries, this "belief" has been challenged extensively, to the point almost all scholars believe that the author of these three documents was not St. Paul but some unknown author writing in the late 1st to early 2nd century. It matters because of the impact such words as 1 Timothy 2:11-15 has on its audience, believing these are the teachings of St. Paul. We read:

Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

The original author used St. Paul's authority to address a problem he saw in the Church – Women having authority. Women speaking out. Women exercising authority over men. Women teaching men. In a patriarchal (male run) society this experience of the authority of women must have been excruciating for many men to stomach. Scholars believe that in an effort to shut women down the author (not St. Paul) used St. Paul's name so as to give him and the male Church the authority to silence women in positions of leadership. The struggle of women's roles in the Church continues to be a problem to this day, largely on the basis of this passage from 1 Timothy. Christian churches have oppressed and silenced women and continue to do so and it is only in recent history that there has been an organized effort to push back against this teaching. It matters because now that this truth has been revealed, knowing that St. Paul never said this, the conversation regarding women's authority in the Church today can be discussed more openly and have a lasting effect.

With all this said we have yet to identify who the author of the Letter to Ephesians is. According to popular belief St. Paul wrote this letter during his first imprisonment in Rome around 62 AD. However, many biblical scholars in the last few centuries (approximately about 75% today) have questioned St. Paul as the author and have suggested that the Letter to the Ephesians was written by an unknown author somewhere between 80 AD to 100 AD. The reasons given for the later date and unknown authorship are:

- It's ornate and elevated writing style, which we will see in chapters 1-3
- The "universal" or worldwide view of the Church
- The focus on Christ's cosmic victory over the powers of evil and little focus on the death of Christ

Session #1: Ephesians Introduction

- The absence of any personal connection – no form of address (Dear...), no individual identified or discussed

But even if the majority is correct, that St. Paul was not the direct author of this document, most agree that he did have input into this letter either through personal contact, directly dictating key ideas or the author expanding on a document St. Paul had already written.

Those who sit on the side that St. Paul wrote Ephesians do so for the following reasons:

- St. Paul announces himself as the author of the letter twice: Ephesians 1:1 & 3:1
- While the vocabulary may be different in this document from his other writing so too is the direction and content of the letter. St. Paul is saying things in this letter, things that he has never said before. He has traveled a long and arduous road and is now reflecting on the growing Church in light of those experiences.
- Scholars say the style of this letter is different and those that support St. Paul as the author say, well of course it is. All other letters were sent to a specific individual or individuals about specific problems. Ephesians was always intended as a universal or Church wide document. It is theological statement not a set of answers to a set of problems.
- All the other letters were written in the middle of a busy ministerial life. The letter to the Ephesians was written while under house arrest, giving St. Paul much time for contemplation and revision.
- Shakespeare and other authors wrote in many styles. Why could not St. Paul?

For our conversation, we will make no decision and leave it up to the individual to determine whether St. Paul penned each of the words or worked with a devoted disciple. From the perspective of Christian faith, whether or not St. Paul wrote Ephesians does not change its status as inspired Scripture.

Who is the Audience

Who this document was intended for is also actually in dispute. It seems that in the earliest manuscripts of the document, where some bibles read: *To the saints who are also faithful in Ephesus (1:1)*, the phrase *in "Ephesus"* is left out. This, along with other reasons: the impersonal nature of the letter given St. Paul lived in Ephesus for over two years, leads scholarship to put into question whether the city of Ephesus was the intended audience.

There are two popular theories as to the original destination of this letter:

1. The oldest theory is that this letter was intended for Laodicea which was a community southeast of Ephesus. In Colossians 4:16 St. Paul writes: *And when this letter has been*

read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea. For millennium scholars have search and we have no such letter... unless this letter, to the Ephesians is the identified letter. Those who hold to the theory that the Letter to the Ephesians is in truth the Letter to the Laodiceans, that would explain the lack of identification simply by saying a copy of the letter was sent to Ephesus omitting the identification so as to make the message more universal, and the original letter with the identification was lost.

2. The greater population of scholarship believes that this document was written, more as a catechetical tool to teach the populace and was intended to be circulated from one Church community to another. Scholars call this a “circular letter”, and it was only a couple of centuries later that *in Ephesus* was added later for some unknown reason.

As stated above, St. Paul had lived in Ephesus for over two years, the longest duration of any of his stays (not forced by imprisonment). St. Paul had many friends in Ephesus and much history. Scholars agree that had the letter be intended for Ephesus and Ephesus alone, as many of the other New Testament epistles, then there would be a more personal nature to the letter. We would read personal greeting with names and identification of places.

Before we leave the subject of the intended audience there are a few other things we can ascertain by looking closely at the document:

- This letter was written primarily to Gentiles. We will read in chapter 2:11: *So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—* This also lends credibility to the argument that this letter was not meant exclusively for the community at Ephesus since there was a large Jewish-Christian community there.
- As stated before, this letter was meant for a community or communities that St. Paul/Author did not know personally. We read no personal salutations or comments. We will read in 1:15: *I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason.*

So, in the same way the author of this document is still in discussion so is the intended audience. The difference is that vast majority of scholar agree that while it may have been sent first to Ephesus or ended up in Ephesus, the letter was intended for a much larger audience.

Purpose in Writing

While there will be much to appreciate as we study this Letter and while there are lessons being offered, scholars agree that there is a clear and main theme to understand: the author is calling for, appealing for unity within the church. When we get into chapter four we will read one of my most favorite passages, and one that is heard often in the church: *There is one body*

Session #1: Ephesians Introduction

and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:4-6)
The author seems to be seeking to provide a vision of Christ, the Church and faith that calls all believers to work towards unity.

Date it was Written

As we have already discussed there are basically two trains of thought as to the date of this document. If you side with the group that believes the Letter to the Ephesians was written by St. Paul while in captivity in Rome, this document was written sometime between 61-63 A.D.

If you hold with the theory that this document was written by an unknown author, those scholars date this letter much later: 80-100 A.D.

Main Themes

As has already been stated the main theme of the letter to the Ephesians is Unity in faith, but within that there are basically five subthemes that we will be exploring:

- 1. Christ:** Christ is not Jesus' last name (as some of my younger students believe). The word Christ comes from the Greek *Christos* which is a translation of the Hebrew word meaning *Messiah*. Christ is not a name but a title and appears 45 times in the Letter to the Ephesians. *Ephesians emphasizes what God has already accomplished through Jesus' death, resurrection and exaltation to the right hand of God but also points to God's ultimate plan to bring everything under Christ's headship "in the fullness of time." (1:10)* Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture: Ephesians
- 2. Union of Believers:** Through Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed one the wall that divided Jew and Gentile, death and life, free and slave has been destroyed. The goal of the life of a believer is to choose each and every day to *"grow in every way to him (Christ)." (4:15)* so that at the end of life, the end of time we can hope to share *"the immeasurable riches of his grace..." (2:17)*
- 3. Christian Identity:** Our union with Christ gives each believer a radically new identity. As we read in Galatians 3:27: *you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.* Ephesians will remind us that we have put away the old self and put on a brand-new life in Christ (4:20-24). As believers, we are now members of the Body of Christ (3:6, 4:25, 5:30) and as such are incorporated into God's family as adopted sons and daughters and have become coheirs to the promises of Abraham and his descendants as well as copartners in building the kingdom of God (3:6).
- 4. Holy and Righteous Conduct:** These gifts do not come without a price. Our relationship with God calls us to live life in a new way that matches with our new identity. We are to: preserve the unity of the Church (4:2-3) and use our gifts to

build up the Body of Christ (4:7-, 11-12, 16). We are to live in love in a way the imitates Christ (4:25-26, 29, 4:32-5:2) and renounce our former ways of worldly living (4:17-31; 5:3-6).

- 5. The Church:** Finally, we will study in Ephesians that it is the community, the people gathered who are the Church. And that the Church here on earth is Christ's body, his "fullness (1:23). Christ is the head but built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.

Structure and Outline

1. Part 1: Proclamation of God's Gracious Plan of Salvation in Christ
 - a. Opening Greeting (1:1-2)
 - b. Opening blessing (1:3-14)
 - c. Prayer to know God and to understand His Gifts (1:15-23)
In which the author is calling us all to understand our glorious future and the greatness of God's power.
 - d. Salvation by grace through faith for good works (2:1-10)
We will study that there is a problem with the human condition apart from God's grace. Without it we are nothing. With God's grace, through faith and good works we will know the fullness of salvation
 - e. Reconciliation of Gentiles and Jews in the Messiah (2:11-22)
Through Christ's death and reconciliation all peoples, Jew & Gentile, slave and free are one.
 - f. Paul's commission to preach God's secret plan (3:1-13)
St. Paul defends his right and responsibility to preach the Good News.
 - g. A prayer for Believers (3:14-21)
2. Part 2: Exhortation of Christian Conduct
 - a. Building up the Church (4:1-16)
The goal of unity in building up the Body of Christ
 - b. The new self and a new way of living (4:17-5:2)
How we as Believers are called to live, the key to virtuous living, guidelines for conduct as we seek to become imitators of Christ.
 - c. Children of the Light (5:3-4)
More guidelines and directions for living as God's children.
 - d. Instruction about household relationships (5:21-6:9)
Specific directions for the different members of the family.
 - e. Summons to spiritual battle (6:10-20)
 - f. Closing Greetings (6:21-24)

Session #1: Ephesians Introduction

The Value of Ephesians Today

There are many believers, many Catholics who believe there is no value in studying the scriptures, of opening themselves up to the Word of God. Some see the bible as a dead document for our modern times. Others view the bible as “Pandora’s Box” afraid that if they open the cover chaos will spew into their lives. But I believe, and many others agree with me, the study of scripture, the reading of scripture, the praying with scripture is like sitting and talking with a beloved friend and advisor. Who doesn’t read and re-read love letters? Who doesn’t replay voice messages just to hear the voice of a loved one. For my sixtieth birthday my daughter gave me a box and in that box is sixty reasons she loves me. I can’t tell you how many times I have gone through those messages. While not everything we read in the bible is pleasant or understandable, everything we have there comes as a message of love from God directly to us. Specifically, we look at the Letter to the Ephesians for three reasons.

Throughout time those who believe struggle to understand what it means to be Church, to be children of God. In this present age with its transitions and tensions, with all the distractions and business in life we as Church and individuals in the Church struggle to know not only how to be effective as church (especially as so many young people are leaving the faith) but what is our mission and how do we fulfill it? The Letter to the Ephesians will remind us that the Church is not the hierarchy – Pope, Bishop, Priests, Religious... The Letter to the Ephesians will remind us that if we are baptized then we are the Church and therefore responsible to make faith happen in our world. Ephesians view of the work of ministry is the task and responsibility of ALL the baptized, something that was declared in the Second Vatican Council. *Ephesians was written...(as the) voice of the faithful struggling under new and difficult circumstances to recall and remain faithful to the original inspiration of the gospel.* New Collegeville Bible Commentary by Vincent M. Smiles

We read and study the Letter to the Ephesians because we need to be reminded of the immeasurable gift of what God has done for us through Jesus’ death and resurrection so as to renew our longing for God and live in daily faith and hope. The study of Ephesians will remind and educate us to our share in the promises of God to Israel and the Church, and should help us tear down the walls of division between others helping us to recognize the unity and equality in God of all peoples regardless of race, culture or economic status.

Finally, through our study we will be reminded that there is a code of conduct for those who believe in Jesus Christ. We are all held to a higher standard which humility, gentleness, patience and forbearance are more than just words but attitudes and actions we strive for. They are virtues that if we live out make Christ present in the world.

So, this is the journey we are setting out in these next few weeks. The Letter to the Ephesians will be only the first of several of the Captivity letters of St. Paul we will be looking at. As always please remember that I love questions and pertinent comments in our study.

Reflection Questions:

1. What are your hopes and expectations for this study?
2. Do you think that those who profess faith in Jesus Christ should live differently than those who do not? If so, in what ways?

Catechism of the Catholic Church

Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church

141 The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures as she venerated the Body of the Lord: both nourish and govern the whole Christian life. "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (*Ps* 119:105; cf. *Isa* 50:4).

The Inspiration and the Truth of Scripture

106 God inspired the human authors of the sacred books. "To compose the sacred books, God chose certain men who, all the while he employed them in this task, made full use of their own faculties and powers so that, though he acted in them and by them, it was as true authors that they consigned to writing whatever he wanted written, and no more."

107 The inspired books teach the truth. "Since therefore all that the inspired authors or sacred writers affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully, and without error teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the Sacred Scriptures."

For more read Catechisms 105-108, 132-133

Bibliography:

- [The Catholic Study Bible NAR](#)
- [The New Daily Study Bible: The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians](#) by William Barclay
- [The Navarre Bible: Captivity Letters](#)
- [New Collegeville Bible Commentary: First Thessalonians, Philippians, Second Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians](#) by Vincent M Smiles
- [Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: Galatians & Ephesians](#) by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch
- [Agape Bible Study: Ephesians](#) by Michal Hunt. Agapebiblestudy.com
- [Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture: Ephesians](#), by Peter S. Williams