

Ephesians: Paul Reveals the Body of Christ—both Jew and Gentile

By Steve Ray

He was under arrest. Those in squalled dungeons had it worse, but chains are never a good thing. He was confined to his own rented quarters with a Roman soldier on guard day and night. Caesar was busy and no little hurry to hear the appeals of a wandering Jewish preacher. Unable to travel and visit his beloved brethren, writing was the next best thing. His intense concern for their well-being moved him to pick up quill and ink.

While imprisoned in Rome, St. Paul wrote at least four letters —“prison epistles”—one to Philippi, one to a slave owner named Philemon, and two to Asia Minor (modern day Turkey): Colossians and Ephesians. These are twin epistles, the first emphasizing Christ the Head, the second Christ the Body.

What did Paul do in captivity besides write, pray, and teach? No doubt he reminisced on his three eventful years in Ephesus—the most important Roman city in Asia Minor. Today it is quite different from the time when Paul walked its cobbled streets with grooves worn in the roads by metal chariot wheels. Today it is in ruins, but in his day it was a metropolitan port city bustling with businesses, bathhouses, and brothels. It was also home of one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World!

Paul could not miss this magnificent temple to his left as he walked up the Acadian Road after disembarking from the ship. Today there is only one marble column left standing on the marshy land to mark the spot of this pagan shrine, and today on top of the single column sets a nest of squawking baby storks. For centuries a Greek goddess had been enshrined here and people came from the whole Empire to worship her, bring gifts, and implore her favors. This wonder of the ancient world was the Temple of Artemis, or Diana as the Romans called her (Acts 19).

Like in Athens, Paul must have told the Ephesians that idols were not living or real—there was only one true God. Apart from these pagan throngs was a community of Jews and a number of disciples. Paul preached and argued daily and founded a church in Ephesus. Hostility was a fact of life, but one of the toughest battles, not only in Ephesus, but in all the Gentile areas, was how to incorporate Jews and Gentiles into one church. While in confinement Paul wrestled with the problem and Ephesians is a resulting masterpiece of logic, revelation, and eloquence. The redemption purchased by the death of Christ frees us from sin and death (Eph 2:1–4). The goal is one covenant family containing all peoples and tongues, slave and free, Jew and Gentile.

Is this Church divided? The Gentiles had been excluded from God and without hope in the world (Eph 2:12). Having confronted his opponents who said Gentiles could not be saved without circumcision, Paul now explains the great mystery, astounding even the invisible spiritual world, the mystery of the Jews and Gentiles formed into one body in one church. They were both incorporated into Christ through their baptism. Christ has torn down the dividing wall (Eph 2:14). How can the Church, the body, be divided—between Jew and Gentile—or today between sects and denominations? Paul says there is

only one—one God, one Lord, one Spirit, one hope, one baptism, one faith, one body or church (Eph 4:4–6). Caesar can claim to be lord, but there can only be one true Lord. Some wanted two faiths, Jewish Christianity and Gentile Christianity, but Paul says that in Christ there is only one faith. Artemis and idols are false because there can be no gods but the one God. Sects and divisions are wrong because Christ is not chopped up or divided into parts or multiple denominational bodies. He has one body—and that one body subsists in the one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

Paul soars high into the heavens in the first three chapters, before swooping back down in the last three, bringing these heavenly mysteries down to earthly realities. Six times he uses the word “mystery”; three times “revelation” or “revealed”. God is revealing mysteries that have been hidden through all of time—revealed not only to men, but also to the angelic powers in the heavens (Eph 3:8–10). We get a glimpse of the mystery of the Trinity in the first chapter. See if you can find it with this simple clue: look for three sections each ending with a phrase containing the words “praise” and “glory”. Notice the content of each section. What is the ministry of each of the persons? How are they each described? How do they work together? Notice another passage where Paul reveals the Trinity in this epistle (Eph 4:4–6).

Even in his “practical section” (the last three chapters) Paul can’t help but momentarily swoop back to the heavens when discussing something usually considered mundane and common—relations between a husband and wife. Paul sees it as a great mystery. Were man and woman created only for each other, or for a larger purpose? Ah yes, Paul says the husband is the head and must love his wife, even laying down his life for her. It’s an illustration of Christ and the Church. Did the Church respond to Christ before he laid his life down for her? No, Christ first loved the church and thus within a marriage a man should first love his wife. Does the Church submit to Christ in a vacuum? No, only after he loved her, made a covenant, and gave his own life for her. Thus it is that a wife responds to her husband—as he mirrors the image and love of Christ. The earthly family reveals something of the heavenly. Speaking of husbands and wives Paul writes, “This mystery has great significance, but I am applying it to Christ and the Church” (Eph 5:32).

One cannot leave this great epistle without noticing the graphic military imagery used by Paul to explain the very real spiritual warfare that is waged against us (Eph 6:10ff.). Drawing from the panoply of the Roman armies, Paul briefly pulls back the curtain on the unseen world and we catch a glimpse of the heavenly warfare, armor, and weapons. Like the Roman soldier guarding Paul, like the legions marching in and out of Ephesus, we need to don our spiritual armor to stand firm and fight against the wiles of the devil.

There are two issues we should chew on a moment before rolling up the scroll of Ephesians, namely, the authorship and destination of this epistle. First, did St. Paul write Ephesians? Though many modern critical scholars attempt to deny that Paul wrote Ephesians, the evidence and ancient tradition affirm the Catholic Church’s constant defense of Paul’s authorship. The ancient manuscripts of Ephesians start off with the words, “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ.” The early Fathers of the Church, those closest to the fact, avidly affirmed Pauline authorship. From the second and early third century

we mention just a few: Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Cyprian, Irenaeus, Origen and many others. The Muratorian Canon, probably written at the end of the second century names Paul as the author. This was reaffirmed at the Council of Carthage (397), and Trent (1546) and again in the Catechism (par. 120). For Catholics there is certainty—St. Paul authored the letter to the Ephesians. We stand on very solid ground!

Second, to whom was the epistle written? The Fathers and the Councils have affirmed Ephesus as its destination. However, the title “To the Ephesians” has provided a bit of intrigue for modern scholars. A few early Greek manuscripts omit the phrase “to the Ephesians” and some speculate it may have been an early “encyclical”, not written specifically to Ephesus. Considering that Paul had spent about three years living in Ephesus, the letter seems somewhat impersonal compared to other more “personal” letters written by Paul. This lends credence to the “Encyclical Theory.”

Others claim that Ephesians was written to the Laodiceans. Paul wrote to them and the letter has since been lost. Paul writes to the Colossians, “And when this letter [Colossians] 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.” So, these considerations present a reasonable case for the “Laodicean Theory.” Paul had never visited Colossae or Laodicea (Col 2:1), which might then explain the impersonal nature of both epistles.

All the questions aside, from the earliest centuries, the epistle has been attributed to Paul and his loyal friend Tychicus carried it to its destination— the once magnificent port city of Ephesus. Ephesus and the Roman Empire have fallen, but the new kingdom, made up of Jew and Gentile and all nations and tongues has thrived for two thousand years The Pope and Bishop of Rome is the oldest institutional office in the world. The one body, the Catholic Church is now over a billion strong, making the Caesar and the Roman Empire of old pale in comparison. This inspired epistle stands as an ever-flaming sword beckoning and rallying all peoples to the light of the Gospel and the truth of, and about the Church.