PARALLEL GUIDE 29
The Second Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians; The Letters of Paul to the Colossians and Ephesians

Summary

This chapter studies three epistles attributed to Paul, but his authorship of at least a portion of this material is debated. Their contents are an important part of our Christian theological tradition and have greatly influenced our understanding of systematic and moral theology.

Learning Objectives

• Read Second Thessalonians, Colossians, and Ephesians

• Understand the discussions about authorship and dating for Second Thessalonians, Colossians, and Ephesians

• Learn the teaching abot God's call in Second Thessalonians

• Learn the eschatology of Colossians

• Learn the ethical teaching of Colossians

• Discover the importance of the christological hymn in Colossians

• Learn the meaning of the "wall of separation" in the Old Testament and in the New Testament in Ephesians

• Understand the social advice and its basis given in Ephesians

Assignment to Deepen Your Understanding

1. Colossians puts christology on a cosmic scale with its christological hymn. How do you relate this to Jesus whom we know from history? What might be the differences in choosing to say, "I believe in Jesus," "I believe in Christ," or "I believe in Jesus Christ"?

2. The act of thanksgiving marks a theology which operates from being graceful and gracious. What can we do today to be sure our theology begins from grace and appreciation rather than from analysis and condemnation?

Preparing for Your Seminar

The social and cultural advice given in these epistles, especially in Ephesians, may differ from points of view in our society and in the church. Do you agree with this advice? How would you teach about the relationship of men and women in these epistles? Take into consideration questions we face about these relationships in the twenty-first century.

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Chapter 29
THE SECOND LETTER OF PAUL TO THE THESSALONIANS; THE LETTERS OF PAUL TO THE COLOSSIANS AND EPHESIANS

With these three letters we enter a debated area of Pauline scholarship. We have considered in chapter 21 the factors that lead to decision for or against the authenticity of particular letters, questions about the relevance of these factors to this kind of correspondence, and the significance of pseudonymity, where pseudonymity is regarded as established. Here we note how such arguments apply to these particular letters.

The Second Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians

Although 2 Thessalonians is rather sharper in tone than 1 Thessalonians, its general style is so close to it that those who think it is not by Paul usually assert deliberate imitation. Second Thessalonians bears the Pauline mark of authenticity (3:17). The arguments against Pauline authorship mostly concentrate on inconsistency in content. Commentators hold that the description of "the end" in 2 Thessalonians is different from that in 1 Thessalonians. It is. But there are also differences in this respect between 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians. The differences between 1 and 2 Thessalonians may well be understood as "successive responses by a pastor to stages in a community's panic" (Johnson 1986, 267).

It remains difficult to see what motive anyone might have for writing a letter whose differences from 1 Thessalonians are really quite subtle. Pseudonymity generally occurs when authors attempt to present what they regard as authoritative tradition in a new situation. We are bound to ask, what new situation is indicated, what point of doctrine or behavior did this letter make that was so important, yet could not be supported from the genuine Pauline material?

Opening Salutation 1:1-2 Thanksgiving 1:3-4

In this section, and also when we examine the texts of Colossians and Ephesians, we call the author "Paul" for the sake of convenience.

"Perhaps the Thessalonians had modestly deprecated the apostle's enthusiastic commendation of them in his previous letter" (Neil 1962, 1000). On the other hand, hostility to the church from some quarters apparently continues (1:4) and possibly grows worse (cf. 1:6).

The Body of the Letter 1:5-2:12

Section 1:5-12 (cf. 2:9-12) uses the standard language and imagery of apocalyptic literature. There is a degree of violence in this language that does not appeal to most of us, and perhaps with good reason. It is a form of language that Paul himself appears not to have continued to use. Nonetheless, beneath the rhetoric of "flaming fire" and "vengeance" (1:7-8) damnation is actually described by two simple categories: loss of being and exclusion from the divine presence (1:9). If we insist on rejecting the source of our being, we must in the end be given what we insist on (cf. Matt. 25:31-46). Even God cannot bestow upon us the impossible mercy of a joy we will not accept (cf. 2:10).

We may suspect that various elements combined to produce a crisis among the Thessalonian Christians. There was their spiritual immaturity. There was Paul's own teaching about being alert for the end (1 Thess. 5:1-11). There was the continuing persecution, perhaps combined with elements of belief in the classic apocalyptic end-time scenario, according to which it was sometimes taught that suffering by the saints would signify the dawning of God's kingdom (cf. Dan. 12:1; Matt. 24:21, 29). Perhaps someone claimed to have received a word or a "letter in the Spirit" from Paul (2:2). Whatever the precise reasons, the church was in frenzy, claiming that the day of the Lord had come (2:2). Some had stopped working, presumably to concentrate on looking for that day (3:6, 11). The letter seeks to bring calm. First, Paul has already spoken of the situation as an opportunity for growth. In "the churches of God" he says, he boasts (commending the Thessalonians for the very virtues he hopes they will cultivate) of "your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring" (1:4). Affliction is not merely a negative on the way to salvation, but an opportunity for growth, a chance to develop those qualities that will bring them to the fullness of their humanity.

Paul asks them not to be quickly disturbed, but to consider the teaching he has already given them (2:5). The end will involve more than the persecution of one church. It will be a reign of lawlessness personified in a "lawless one" (2:3) who will be destroyed by the Lord's coming (2:8). (On 2:6-7 see further below.) "The coming of the lawless one" will be to deceive sinners (2:9-12). But the Thessalonians do not belong to that category: "God chose you as the first fruits for salvation, through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. . . . So then . . . stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught" (2:13, 15).

Request for Prayer and Support 3:1-5

Paul encourages the Thessalonians to direct their attention away from themselves and their expectations by making a request of his own for prayer and support. The whole world is not Thessalonica. The mission of the church goes on, and Paul has his own problems (3:1-2). But God is faithful and will enable the Thessalonians to be faithful (3:3-5).

Exhortation 3:6-16

Chiefly, Paul warns the Thessalonians to beware of those who have abandoned responsibility for their lives. He points to his own example (3:9). Even in the great eschatological drama, God's call is very simple. It is a call to plain faithfulness. "Do not be weary in doing what is right" (3:13). Those who will not heed this call are not enemies. They are still in the family, but they are to be warned (3:14-15). Finally, Paul can only pray that the Thessalonians will receive "peace" from the God of peace (3:16).

Who or What is "The One Who Now Restrains"? 2:6-7

Obviously this reference was clear to Paul's correspondents (or he thought it was). It is not clear to us.

Something, Paul believed, was holding back the process. Scholarly suggestions include the Roman Empire, God, and Paul's own ministry. The most likely is "God." God is the one who "now restrains" (cf. 1 Cor. 15:20-28). There are difficulties in all the possible solutions, and it would be idle to pretend

that this problem is solved. What matters, in any case, is that Paul evidently wishes to direct his hearers' attention away from speculation about "the end" (including, presumably, speculation about "the restrainer"), and toward growth in holiness and wholeness in their own lives.

The Letter of Paul to the Colossians

In the Letter of Paul to the Colossians we find that Paul is in prison (1:24; 4:3, 18) with Epaphras, who had formerly preached to the Colossian church (1:7; 4:12). Paul is not known to the Colossians personally (2:1). Epaphras presumably has told Paul of difficulties at Colossae, and so Paul sends them a letter by the hand of Tychichus, who is accompanied by Onesimus (4:7-9).

What were the problems at Colossae? We can hardly be sure. Paul speaks of opponents whose teaching is called a merely human "philosophy . . . according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ" (2:8). This "philosophy" appears to involve "circumcision" and other commandments, since both have a part in Paul's response (2:11, 13). It evidently involves festivals, the Sabbath, and dietary rules (2:16). It involves "self-abasement" (or "humility"—Greek: tapeinophrosyne), "worship of angels," and "visions" (2:18). Against these Paul asserts his hope that the Colossians will have "knowledge of God's will" (1:9), his conviction that God has already delivered them from "darkness" to "light" (1:12-13), and his conviction that in Christ alone is the "fullness of God" (1:19), in whom all things, including the angelic powers, were created (1:16; cf. 2:9).

There are elements in what Paul seems to be opposing that remind us of the pagan mysteries, of Gnosticism, and of esoteric Judaism (such as that of the Essenes and the later Merkabah mysticism). Were then the "false teachers" at Colossae actually Jewish? It is impossible to be sure. The connections between this letter and that to Philemon are obvious. Both speak of Paul's imprisonment (4:10; cf. Philem. 9), and both speak of the same friends and helpers (4:10-17; cf. Philem. 2, 23-24).

Apart from general stylistic considerations, questions about the authorship of the letter to the Colossians usually fall under three headings.

First, in its teaching on the church as the body of Christ, Colossians depicts Christ as the "head" of the body (1:18), as does Ephesians (Eph. 4:4-16). This is not the case when Paul pictures the church as Christ's body in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27. Would such a development within Paul's own imagination have been impossible?

Second, the eschatology of Paul's letter to the Colossians is said to be un-Pauline. It is argued that Colossians has a purely "realized" eschatology (see 2:12-13; 3:1), which is unlike the balanced "already/not yet" of the "genuine" Paul (cf. Rom. 8:22-23). But does Colossians have a purely realized eschatology? Is the teaching of verses 2:12-13 substantially different from that of Romans 6:1-11? Do not verses 3:1-4 present precisely the tension between "already" and "not yet" that is held (with reason) to be Pauline?

Third, the ethical teaching of the Colossian letter lacks the sharpness and the radical commitment to freedom of "authentic" Pauline letters. This seems to be the most serious objection. Instead of the intense debate of the Corinthian letters, we find in Colossians an adapted "household code" (3:18-4:1—sometimes referred to

by the German word “Haustafel,” literally, “house table”). Such codes have a background in contemporary Hellenism, both Jewish and pagan, and have parallels elsewhere in the NT (e.g., 1 Pet. 2:18-3:7). This code speaks of wives “being subject” to their husbands (3:18), which ill accords with the equality of responsibility and commitment in marriage stressed by 1 Corinthians 7:2-7. Paul seems to use ethical commonplaces elsewhere when he is addressing situations with which he is not personally acquainted (e.g., his letter to the Romans). At least once, even in 1 Corinthians, he appears to be willing to compromise a degree of Christian liberty for the sake of the church’s reputation (1 Cor. 11:2-16). We have noted the pressure on oriental religions to compromise with Roman mores in the matter of women’s roles in society. Did Paul have to deal with such pressure? Would he have responded as he does here? (cf. 3:18-25 below.)

Opening Salutation, Thanksgiving, and Prayer 1:1-20

Signs of Paul’s anxiety are visible even at the beginning of the letter. He is thankful for the Colossians’ “faith in Christ Jesus,” that the gospel is “bearing fruit and growing” among them (1:4, 5, 6), but he also emphasizes that they had from the beginning “heard . . . truly comprehended the grace of God” from Epaphras (1:6, 7). He prays for them, and twice within a few lines speaks of the “knowledge” he desires for them, along with “spiritual wisdom and understanding” and “fruit in every good work . . . and [growth] in the knowledge of God” (1:9-10). The Father has brought us to the sphere of “light” (1:12) from the “power of darkness” (1:13) and into the sphere of the kingdom of the Son “in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (1:13-14).

Paul’s prayer leads immediately into his subject, which is Christ. The section 1:15-20 is a christological hymn. The distinctive characteristics of the literary style of the rest of the letter do not appear in it, while a cluster of unusual concepts do. Most scholars conclude, therefore, that the hymn has been taken over from another source.

The Christological Hymn 1:15-20

We may display the form of the hymn as follows:

First Strophe

He is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation;
for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created,
things visible and invisible,
whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—
all things have been created through him and for him.

Second (Middle) Strophe

He himself is before all things,
and in him all things hold together.
He is the head of the body, the church,

he is the beginning,
the firstborn from the dead,
so that he might come to have first place in everything.

Third Strophe

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,
and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things,
whether on earth or in heaven,
by making peace through the blood of his cross.

The hymn has a triptych form. The two outer wings balance each other with a carefully devised parallelism of sense. "The church" (1:18b) in the center section seems likely to be an interpretative gloss added by Paul, since it disturbs the rhythm of the Greek; likewise verse 1:16b ("whether thrones . . . ") and verse 1:18a ("that in everything . . . "). These latter notes perhaps were intended to show that the message of the hymn was particularly relevant to the Colossian heresy.

The first strophe celebrates Christ as God's agent in creation. The passage uses the imagery of divine Wisdom (cf. Prov. 8:22; Sir. 24:1-7; Wisd. 7:25-26) and of the divine Word by which the world was made (cf. Gen. 1:3; Ps. 33:6-9; Isa. 55:10-11). According to the rabbis, the world was created "in Wisdom" (cf. Ps. 104:24), and according to Greek philosophy as well as Hellenistic Judaism such as that of Philo, the cosmos existed in the sphere of the Divine Logos (Word).

The middle strophe, as it stands, speaks of Christ's lordship of the church. Originally, it may have built upon what went before by speaking of Christ's lordship over the cosmos: from Plato onward, the idea of the universe as a divine body is common. The third strophe speaks of Christ as universal redeemer. In him "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (1:19). The Greek word translated "fullness" by the NRSV is plērōma—later to become a technical term in Gnosticism. It is used to describe the totality of the inhabitants of the divine sphere, as opposed to the world of gross matter. The divinity of which this hymn speaks is no distant abstraction. It is bound up with Jesus of Nazareth, living and breathing and dying. Through him God has reconciled us to God, "making peace through the blood of his cross" (1:20). "Through the blood of his cross" may again be an explanatory note added to the hymn during the composition of the letter.

The hymn speaks of Christ as God's agent in creation, as sovereign over it, and as its redeemer. These verses resemble the hymn to the Logos at the beginning of the Gospel according to John and the opening to the letter to the Hebrews (John 1:1-18; Heb. 1:1-4). Naturally, all three passages begin with creation and proceed to redemption. In the Hebrew Scriptures we also have first the story of creation (the Book of Genesis) and later the story of redemption (the Book of Exodus). This, however, is not the order of experience, either in the history of God's people or in individual experience. It was first necessary for Israel to experience God as faithful, gracious, and redeeming. This is how God was known by the patriarchs and at the Exodus.

Subsequently it becomes clear that the one who is sufficient for this, who can redeem equally from barren childlessness or from Egypt, is and must be sovereign in creation. So it is with Christ. The believer's primary experience of Christ is one of faith, grace, and redemption. Only later does it become clear that the one who is able to exercise the grace of God in this way, the one in whom "the fullness of God" is pleased to dwell, must also be God's agent in and sovereign over creation. If Christ is God's agent in redemption, Christ is also God's agent in creation.

. . . in Jesus Christ we are not merely dealing with the author of our justification and sanctification as the sinners that we are. We are not merely dealing with the One who has saved us from death, with the Lord and Head of the Church. . . . But at the same time and beyond all that—and the power of His saving work as the Mediator is rooted and grounded in this—He is "the first-born of all creation" (Col. 1:15)—the first and eternal Word of God delivered and fulfilled in time. (Barth 1956, 48)

The Body of the Letter 1:21-4:6

The message of the letter follows immediately from the hymn. Already, through Christ, Christians have been reconciled to God. Now they need only remain faithful to the gospel, of which Paul is a "minister (Greek: diakonos)" (1:21-24).

I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. (1:24)

This is a difficult verse. It may connect with the carefully crafted passage in his letter to the Romans where Paul speaks of "the grace given me by God, to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit" (15:14-16). Both passages amount to a forceful claim to a unique status in the entire work of God in the church; and both are likely variants of a single metaphor based on the liturgy of the Temple: Paul, like a Levite, assists Christ the true priest, by performing as a sacred rite the proclamation of the gospel. The apostle plays his own appointed part in the completion of Christ's sacrifice, which is the offering to God of the Gentiles, who are united with Christ through baptism, in union with his sacrifice on the cross.

The heart of Paul's ministry is, he says, to make known the "mystery": God's glory among the Gentiles (1:25-27). This is Paul's proclamation, and by it he offers "wisdom" to all, so that he may "present everyone mature in Christ" (1:28). For this the apostle strives, and by this the Colossians should live (1:29-2:7). But are they going to retain what they have been given? Or will they allow themselves to be taken in "through philosophy and empty deceit" (2:8)? What follows gives us most of the information—such as it is—that we have about the Colossian heresy (see above p. 401). However, it is not so much the details of the heresy that are important as the ways in which Paul dealt with it.

Paul's primary image is baptism (2:11-14; 3:1-4). As in their baptism, the Colossian Christians died and were raised with Christ, so now they must "seek the things that are above" where the exalted Christ is (3:1). Their true life is now "hidden with Christ in God" (3:3), and so they must "put to death" what has been impure in themselves (3:5). They should "get rid of" their old selves—their former attitudes, fears, and limitations, such as are appealed to by the heretical teachers (2:13-23), the ways they "once followed" (3:7). They should clothe themselves "with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator" (3:10). Christians need no longer discriminate on the basis of status or origin (3:11): rather, they are to let God's compassion "rule" in their hearts (3:15). The sign of true maturity is patient service and love of the community (3:14-15). The basic argument is exactly the same as in Romans 6: baptism into Christ has involved the believer in a new "solidarity." One solidarity makes impossible another. "How can we who died to sin go on living in it?" (Rom. 6:2)

At this point follows the "household code" to which we have already referred. The code is qualified in certain important ways. First, the wife is to obey her husband (not any man) "as is fitting in the Lord" (3:18). This may certainly be read—and often is read—as giving divine sanction for the patriarchal system. But a critical reading must also allow at the very least that it makes the system relative by placing a limitation on it. Let a wife obey her husband and so conform with the mores of the society in which she finds herself "as is fitting in the Lord," but, by implication, only "as is fitting in the Lord." An obedience may be demanded of her (such as was demanded of Perpetua when she was ordered by her father to renounce her Christianity) that is not acceptable. Her first allegiance is to God (Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicity). No one can demand of her an absolute or idolatrous obedience. The same limitation exists in the requirement that children obey parents (3:20) and that slaves obey masters (3:22-24). The master too has "a Master in heaven" (4:1). And what of the husband? For him the prescription is that he must "love" his wife and not be "harsh"

with her (3:19). Strikingly, he is not told that he must “rule” his wife—in marked contrast to much other ethical teaching of the period.

This represents, of course, a compromise of Christian freedom as Paul spoke of it in Galatians 3:28. Why? Paul limited his own freedom and was willing to be “all things to all” for the sake of the gospel (1 Cor. 9:19-23). He also required of others that they limit their freedom to eat certain foods for the sake of weaker members of the church (Rom. 14:15-16). By that same principle he now requires (so long as there is nothing demanded that is contrary to Christ) a deliberate self-limitation in households for the sake of the gospel, in order that the church may be well thought of and nonbelievers won over. When we bear in mind the assumptions of the world in which Paul found himself, we may well think that there was little else in the way of advice or instruction that he reasonably could have given. Before we condemn those who lived in a world whose day-to-day assumptions in many matters were very different from our own, we do well to reflect that voluntary surrender of personal liberty for the sake of others or for the sake of the church may often be appropriate in an imperfect world, and does not dishonor us or Christ, who also surrendered his rights for the sake of others (cf. John 10:17-18).

We must, however, admit that the household codes here and elsewhere in the New Testament have been sadly misused. In the last century they were used by some to claim divine sanction for slavery. In this century they have been used to claim divine sanction for patriarchy. Such uses are not permissible. Compromises that Paul felt obliged to make in his situation are not necessarily or even probably the compromises we should make in ours. Nor should his ad hoc prescriptions be elevated into universal principles, which they are not and were not intended to be. It remains for us to struggle with issues such as where and when compromises are appropriate for us in our situations and what they should be.

The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians

Of the letters attributed to Paul, Ephesians is apparently the least personal. Beyond informing us that Paul is a prisoner (3:1-13; 4:1; 6:19-20), it tells us virtually nothing about the situation of either the author or the recipients. No particular problem seems to have motivated it. Its references to false teaching are no more than warnings against possible deviation. Its salutation (1:1-2), thanksgiving (1:3-14), prayer (1:15-23), and final greeting are entirely formal.

Ephesians is a letter only in the most general sense. It has been described with justice as an encyclical. Important early manuscripts lack even the name “Ephesians” in the salutation (see NRSV; cf. margin). Perhaps it was intended to speak of Paul’s work to a wide circle of Gentile churches, so as to enable them to understand their own role in the history of salvation. It has been called “homiletic,” and it has been described as “a wisdom discourse,” but perhaps its most marked feature is the extent to which it is dominated by prayer. Its style, which is effusive, is not so with verbosity, but rather with the rhythms and passion of liturgy, so that in some respects it reminds us of the style and movement of liturgical texts from the following centuries rather than other writings of the New Testament—even including the letter to the Colossians, although that (as is often pointed out) is of New Testament writings the closest to Ephesians both in style and vocabulary. The style of Ephesians is certainly more expansive and rhetorical than is usual with Pauline letters. This is evident even in the English translations. See, for example, verses 1:3-14, with their elaborate heaping up of nouns and pronouns, and note that in the Greek this passage is actually a single sentence (cf. KJV). While Ephesians is closest in this respect to Colossians, nevertheless, it is no mechanical reworking of echoes from the other letter, but a masterly statement on its own account. If it is not by Paul, then it is by an unknown disciple who profoundly understood him and who was in some respects his intellectual equal.

As always, the most substantial reasons for questioning Paul’s connection with the letter involve its content. The following points are often made:

1) The idea of the future coming of Christ is absent from the letter (but see Eph. 1:10; 2:7);

2) The description of the church “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (2:20) seems to suggest that a generation later than the apostles is looking back; and

3) Ephesians 2:11-3:21 is much calmer than the Galatians letter. The impression given is that the Gentile mission has now normalized.

Although the cumulative effect of these arguments is quite powerful, none of them in itself is conclusive. While the majority of scholarly opinion at present concludes against direct Pauline authorship, still some continue to conclude in its favor (e.g., Van Roon 1974; Marcus Barth 1974; Johnson 1986, 367-72).

1) We find the Pauline emphasis on God’s justification of sinners as an act of free grace (2:5, 8-9), together with the conviction that this was brought about through Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross (1:7; 2:15-16).

2) We find the Pauline understanding of the Holy Spirit as reconciling and transforming, making itself known in the church by different gifts (1:13-14; 2:17-18; 4:1-5:2).

3) We find the characteristically Pauline notion that Jew and Gentile alike have stood in need of reconciliation to God (2:1-3; cf. Rom. 3:9).

4) We find the idea that the church stands as the people of the new age, particularly marked by the presence of Jew and Gentile together in its communion, both together having “access in one Spirit to the Father” (2:11-22; cf. Rom. 15:7-13). 5) We find the Pauline notion of Paul himself called to a unique mission in the bringing of God’s word of reconciliation through Christ to the Gentiles (3:7-19; cf. Rom. 15:15-21).

Opening Salutation, Benediction, and Thanksgiving 1:1-14

The benediction (1:3-14) has been called a baptismal hymn, and indeed it is such. It stresses the preexistence of the church as the company of the redeemed (1:4, 9), yet in presenting this cosmic vision it emphasizes also the centrality of the cross (1:7). The “mystery” (1:9) is that loving purpose of God that has been hidden in the past but is now revealed in Christ. It is, says Paul, a plan to “gather up all things” in Christ (1:10). The first sign of this grace is the presence among Paul’s hearers now of the Holy Spirit (1:13-14; cf. 2 Cor. 1:22).

Does “we” as opposed to “you” (1:12, 13) mean “we” Jews as opposed to “you” Gentiles or “we” who believed while “you” were still unbelievers? Probably the latter. Similarly, in 2:3-4 it is evident that Paul’s (or the author’s) emphasis is on looking back at his life before he heard God call him through Christ rather than on the fact of his having been a Jew.

Prayer for the Hearers 1:15-23

The letter moves from thanksgiving to a prayer for Paul’s audience. Paul asks that they may understand what it means for the church that Christ has been exalted and is Lord of the universe and yet at the same time dwells in the church which is his

body, “the fullness (plērōma) of him who fills all in all” (1:23). This last phrase is difficult and has been

understood in various ways. Perhaps the Greek can be better translated, “who all in all is being filled.” Perhaps what Paul intends is that the church holds the fullness of Jesus in that it is his sphere of influence and that he, as God’s Wisdom, receives the fullness of God (cf. NEB).

The Body of the Letter 2:1-6:21

The section 2:1-10 contrasts the calling of those who are now believers with their past. God’s power has been shown in mercy and pity to those whose existence, apart from God’s saving intervention, was death, a mere following of “the course of this world.” Paul describes this evil condition as the domination of demonic power in the sublunary sphere (2:2)—the almost universal contemporary belief (Chadwick 1962, 983). To it, moreover, Jew and Gentile alike were subject (2:3; cf. Rom. 3:9). From this state, however, all alike have been “made . . . alive together with Christ,” and “seated . . . with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (2:5-6). The source of this joy is, however, simply “God, who is rich in mercy” (2:4). “For by grace you have been saved through faith” (2:8). The phrase “through faith” (Greek: dia pisteōs) for all its slight variation in wording, presents us with the characteristic Pauline ambiguity: God’s faith? Christ’s faith? Our faith? The best answer, as always, is “all of the above.” It is the faithfulness of God that encounters us in the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, calling us and enabling us to be faithful in return (see Chapter Twenty-six on Rom. 1:17b). And this, as Paul continues, “is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one boast” (2:8-9; cf. Gal. 2:16; Rom. 4:5; 5:1).

In verses 2:11-22 the author points to the grace of God extending even to Gentiles. Although they were aliens, cut off from Israel, they have been “brought near” in the blood of Christ and have received a proclamation of peace (2:12, 13, 17; cf. Isa. 57:19). The Hellenistic Jewish text known as The Letter of Aristeas tells how Moses surrounded the Jews “with unbreakable palisades and iron walls” to prevent their “mixing with any of the peoples in any matter” (159). By those “palisades” and “iron walls” the author was referring to the Law. At Ephesians 2:14-16, by contrast, the important thing is that God is reconciling Jew and Gentile in the fellowship of the church so that possession or non-possession of the Law is no longer a “dividing wall of hostility” between them. Paul is not, of course, implying that the Law has been “abolished” absolutely or in every sense: if it were, why would he at once go on to quote from it (see 2:17; cf. Isa. 57:19)? But the Law is being rendered ineffective as a barrier between Jew and Gentile (2:14). Here, too, God’s work is “apart from” the Law, although, properly understood, “the law and the prophets” bear witness to it (cf. Rom. 3:21).

The wall of partition between Jew and Gentile protecting the holiness of the Temple at Jerusalem, with its sign threatening death to any Gentile who trespassed, was no doubt a vivid reminder to every visitor to Jerusalem that possession of the Law was a barrier between Jew and Gentile. Now, says Paul, those who live by faith in Christ’s cross find themselves in the fellowship of “one new humanity in place of the two” so that “peace” has been made (2:15) and the hostility ended (2:16). No doubt this sense of being part of a “third race” was from the beginning an experience of Jews and Gentiles who turned to Christ and found themselves

united where before they had been divided. (Alas, the phrase “third race” has had unfortunate overtones in the history of Jewish and Christian relations. Later abuses of the “third race” concept led to enormous suffering inflicted on the Jews in the name of Christ. So the concept must be used with caution. Equally, however, we must not deny the experience that led to it.)

This divine plan for the union of Jew and Gentile has now been revealed to the apostles (3:1-6). Paul himself is in prison as a servant of this gospel (3:7-13). His sufferings may suggest that God is not trustworthy, but Paul is confident that they have a place in the divine economy. They are, he suggests to his readers, “your glory” (3:13; cf. Rom. 5:3-5).

Paul prays for the Gentiles to “the Father (Greek: pater) from whom every family (Greek: patria—this word might equally be translated “relationship”) in heaven and on earth takes its name” (3:14-15). The vision here is cosmic. The “families in heaven” are most probably the angels. The writer has a picture of all, Jews and Gentiles, gathered with the angels before God’s throne. In a similar spirit the Qumran sectaries spoke of their experience:

> Thou hast cleansed a perverse spirit of great sin
> that it may stand with the host of the Holy Ones,
> and that it may enter into community
> with the congregation of the Sons of Heaven. (1QH 5)

Perhaps there is an element of polemic in the letter to the Ephesians. Paul insists that the angelic hosts, so important in some religious systems, are in fact merely named by and for God. God will strengthen those for whom Paul prays so that they will have no need of any particular mystic, Gnostic, angelic enlightenment. “With all the saints” they will understand “what is the breadth and length and height and depth” and will know something more important than any Gnosis or vision, namely “the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge (gnosis)” (3:16-19).

The gospel requires and deserves a response. “I . . . beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (4:1). The life of the Christian community must be based on the “humility and gentleness, with patience” that are manifested in Christ Jesus (4:2-3; cf. 5:1-2). The power that works in them is the dynamic of God, the Spirit who calls them into one people and gives grace to each as appropriate, for the sake of the whole body (4:4-12).

The standard that challenges Christians is that of Christ himself—“maturity, . . . the measure of the full stature of Christ” (4:13). Identified with Christ in baptism, they are to “grow up in every way into him” (4:15). All this is contrasted vividly with the meaninglessness and hopelessness of life without God’s direction—a life that Christians must regard as forever behind them, forever swallowed up in that life of universal thanksgiving to God the Father “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (5:20) that is now theirs (see 4:17-5:20).

The mark of the entire community of thanksgiving is that its members will be “subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (5:21). In this setting Paul begins the household code. The opening injunction, which repeats the words just used to the entire community, is inevitably qualified by its setting. “Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord” is now merely one example of a behavior that will be universal (5:22). But on this occasion the strongest prescription is actually given to the men. As the “higher” members of the partnership (according to what was then “political correctness”), they are to love their wives “as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (5:25; cf. 5:2). The word used for “love” here is agapē—the self-giving love of God in Christ. And how, we might ask, did Christ love the church? How else than as Servant? In short, even in adapting themselves to patriarchal modes the New Testament writers have subverted and eroded them. In the same way the letter to Philemon, while preserving the forms of a slave-owning society, subverted and eroded the principles upon which it, too, was based. The form of the household code is kept, but its content, if Paul’s words are taken seriously, has been stood on its head. All this does not, of course, justify the patriarchal system or mean that in early-third-millennium societies it can possibly be regarded as a satisfactory basis for relationship between human beings. It does mean, however, that we may profitably listen to those who lived in a society where patriarchy was the norm. We may observe the principles that they applied in either their acceptance or even their implied critique of that patriarchy, and then consider how those principles apply to the society in which we find ourselves—a society that, in its own ways, does not seem to be markedly less violent or more amiable than theirs. Witness the history of the twentieth century!

Sociologists have noted certain patterns of activity when a tradition of revealed truth affects a social situation. Namely:

1) elements of the tradition are accepted into the society;

2) elements of the tradition are accepted but modified by the society;

3) elements of the social situation are accepted into the tradition; and

4) elements of the social situation are accepted into the tradition but modified.

The particular forms of the household codes in the New Testament provide a striking illustration of elements in this pattern.

Finally, Paul sees the union of two in one in marriage as an image of “the mystery” of Christ and the church (5:32). Precisely how this happens, he does not say. But perhaps we shall not go far wrong if we remember that in the Letter of Paul to the Ephesians, the supreme “mystery” is God’s plan to reconcile all things in Christ—in particular, to reconcile Jew and Gentile, making one in place of the two (2:15; 3:4-6).

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The letter concludes with an invitation to its readers to look beyond the confines of the household, and beyond even those of the visible church. The conflict in which Christians are engaged is cosmic. In verses 6:10-20 the language is apocalyptic, reminding us of Isaiah 59:17 and even, a little, of the “War of the Sons of Light with the Sons of Darkness” from Qumran. The Christian’s weapons in this warfare—truthfulness, righteousness, the gospel of peace, and faith—are all gifts of God, and with them the Christian has no doubt of victory (6:17). Therefore Christians will also pray with confidence for their fellow Christians and for Paul, prisoner for the gospel, whose desire is that he may speak boldly “as I must speak” (6:20).

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End of chapter