

Sermon - Ephesians 1: unity in Christ

Based on Ephesians 1

- Today I'm starting a sermon series on the letter to the Ephesians.
- The lectionary gives us excerpts from this New Testament letter over seven Sundays.
- However, it is a good opportunity to study the whole text, and so we are omitting the Old Testament readings, and Psalms, to make better space for this.
- In our tradition the Gospel reading is never omitted, and so we will hear that for each of these Sundays - but I won't be speaking to it.

Forgeries

- Before we reflect on today's passage, which is the whole of chapter 1, it is helpful to have a good look at who might have written this letter, and why it is relevant to do so.
- Given that it starts off by saying: *Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus (Ephesians 1.1)*
- it would seem obvious that the apostle Paul wrote this letter, along with many other letters such as those to the Romans, the Galatians, the Corinthians, and so on.
- However, for a variety of reasons, the majority of critical scholars now think that it was written by someone else, who passed it off as a letter by Paul.
- There was a theory that this was an accepted approach by students of a great teacher - however, this theory has since been refuted.
- There is sufficient evidence amongst writers of early documents that forgeries - documents written in someone else's name - were regarded as not being acceptable.
- Nevertheless, if forgeries were convincing enough, then they *would* be accepted - and it is only later research that has discovered them to be forgeries.
- There are a number of books in the Bible that are now regarded in this way - that is, pretending to have been written by a different, better known person than the actual author.
- The letters that we assume Paul wrote, but which scholars tend to think were written by others, are: 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus.

Forged documents as Scripture

- At this point I want to provide some reassurance.
- Just because these letters were probably *not* written by Paul, in spite of the text saying so, this does *not* mean that we reject them. Far from it.
- God's Spirit regularly makes use of the least valued and least expected.
- We know this about Jesus himself, when we look at the circumstances of his birth, and how he likewise valued and called people without qualifications or standing, who would go on to proclaim the Good News and establish the early Church.
- Also, while the New Testament canon was only formalised in 367AD, there had been ongoing debates since the early 2nd century about which apostolic writings used by different church communities were to be regarded as authentic scripture.
- So there was enough acknowledgement amongst the early churches that the letter to the Ephesians was valid scripture - that is, that its doctrine was sufficiently in accordance with all the other apostolic writings, and that God spoke to the life of the church through its text.
- Today's church thus depends on the prayers, debates and discernment of those early Christian communities, that led them to accept this so-called letter to the Ephesians as holy Scripture.
- And so it is appropriate that we do so too, even while we acknowledge that Paul was probably not the author.

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Why not Paul? Why not Ephesians?

- What is it about this letter that makes it unlikely to have been written by Paul?
- Without going into all the technical details, the writing style and sentence construction of the original Greek is significantly different to the letters confirmed as genuinely by him.
- Paul's other letters are always to specific communities and address specific issues, whereas this is very much a general letter, that appears to have been written for the wider church - at least, for all the churches in the north-east region of the Mediterranean.
- 'Hold up!' you might think, 'it actually says *'To the saints who are in Ephesus'* in the first verse. How can this have been a general letter?'
- Well, the earliest physical copies discovered only have the words *'To the saints who are faithful in Christ Jesus'*.
- Tellingly, one of them has in the margin at *that* point in different handwriting, *'are in Ephesus and'*, so that subsequent copies then read: *'To the saints who [are in Ephesus and] are faithful in Christ Jesus'*.
- For the sake of convenience, however, it is easier to continue to refer to this document as the Letter to the Ephesians.
- One of the other reasons why the author probably wasn't Paul is theological:

Paul uses the actual term "salvation," and the verb "save," only in the future sense. For Paul, being saved refers to what will happen when Christ returns and delivers his followers from the wrath of God that will soon hit this world ... For the author of the Ephesians, however, salvation is something that has already taken place. Just as Christians have already been raised up with Christ, they also have already been saved: "By grace you have been saved" (2:5)

p409, Bart Ehrman, The New Testament (5th ed, OUP, 2012)
- I'll be talking about the reason for this shift in theological thinking between Paul and later Christian writers next Sunday.
- Nevertheless, this important shift is probably one of the reasons why this text was regarded as relevant enough to retain in the New Testament canon.

1.1-3 Blessings on the Sovereign God!

- So now we come to the text itself.
 - Bishop Tom Wright, a renowned New Testament scholar, has made his own translation of the text.
 - The first three verses, entitled *Blessings on the Sovereign God!*, are:
 - *From Paul, one of King Jesus' apostles through God's purpose, to the holy ones in Ephesus who are also loyal believers in King Jesus: may God our father and the Lord Jesus, the king, give you grace and peace!*
 - *Let us bless God, the father of our Lord Jesus, the king!*
 - *He has blessed us in the king with every spirit-inspired blessing in the heavenly realm.*
- NT Wright, 'Paul for Everyone: The prison letters - Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon' (SPCK, 2002)*
- Tom Wright highlights that the appropriate context for all Christian prayer, reflection and exhortation [is] the worship and adoration of the God who has poured his love upon us.
 - And that at the centre of any description and acknowledgement of God should be the Son of God, anointed by God to achieve God's purpose, and having done so is proclaimed as Lord and King.
 - It is this context that the author establishes from the start, from verse 3, which begins a hymn of praise.

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1.4-10 The Choice and the Plan

- I'll continue this hymn simply with Tom Wright's translation, which makes it very accessible.
- Verses 4 to 10 he entitles *The Choice and the Plan* - the choice being God choosing us, and the plan being God's plan to effect his choice through Jesus.
- Here's how Bishop Tom interprets these verses:
 - *He chose us in him before the world was made, so as to be holy and irreproachable before him in love.*
 - *He foreordained us for himself, to be adopted through Jesus the king.*
 - *That's how he wanted it, and that's what gave him delight, so that the glory of his grace, the grace he poured on us in his beloved one, might receive its due praise.*
 - *In the king, and through his blood, we have deliverance – that is, our sins have been forgiven – through the wealth of his grace which he lavished on us.*
 - *Yes, with all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the secret of his purpose, just as he wanted it to be and set it forward in him as a blueprint for when the time was ripe.*
 - *His plan was to sum up the whole cosmos in the king – yes, everything in heaven and on earth, in him.*

1.11-14 The Inheritance and the Spirit

- The dominant concern of the author of Ephesians is the unity of the church under the headship of Christ.
- The churches that this letter was written for were predominantly made up of converted Gentiles, and the author was writing from the perspective of a Jewish Christian - as Paul would have.
- The author was wanting to ensure that the Gentile Christians remained united with the Jewish Christian churches, especially since it was through the Jewish faith that God effected his purpose through Jesus.
- This emphasis in including the Gentile Christians with the Jewish Christians in their inheritance can be heard in Tom Wright's translation of the rest of the hymn, which he entitles *The Inheritance and the Spirit*:
 - *In him we have received the inheritance!*
 - *We were foreordained to this, according to the intention of the one who does all things in accordance with the counsel of his purpose.*
 - *This was so that we, we who first hoped in the king, might exist for the praise of his glory.*
 - *In him you too, who heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed it – in him you were marked out with the spirit of promise, the holy one.*
 - *The spirit is the guarantee of our inheritance, until the time when the people who are God's special possession are finally reclaimed and freed.*
 - *This, too, is for the praise of his glory.*

1.15-23 Knowing the Power of the King

- The final part of the chapter is both an affirmation of the faith of the recipients of the letter, and a prayer that they might see and know the power of the King.
- In the interpretation of Tom Wright:
 - *Because of all this, and because I'd heard that you are loyal and faithful to Jesus the master, and that you show love to all God's holy people, I never stop giving thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.*

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- *I pray that the God of King Jesus our Lord, the father of glory, would give you, in your spirit, the gift of being wise, of seeing things people can't normally see, because you are coming to know him and to have the eyes of your inmost self opened to God's light.*
 - *Then you will know exactly what the hope is that goes with God's call; you will know the wealth of the glory of his inheritance in his holy people; and you will know the outstanding greatness of his power towards us who are loyal to him in faith, according to the working of his strength and power.*
 - *This was the power at work in the king when God raised him from the dead and sat him at his right hand in the heavenly places, above all rule and authority and power and lordship, and above every name that gets itself talked about, both in the present age and also in the age to come.*
- This prayer concludes by specifically naming the relationship that the church has to Christ:
 - *Yes: God has 'put all things under his feet', and has given him to the church as the head over all.*
 - *The church is his body; it is the fullness of the one who fills all in all.*
 - The rest of the letter explores the consequences of this relationship, providing a perspective on the universal Church's common unity found in Christ, and a description of how a community of Christians - growing in their faith - might act in that faith.
 - In the end, no matter who it was written by, or who it was written to, the Letter to the Ephesians is a celebration of the Church in Christ.
 - And so we give thanks that God inspired the early Church to retain this as part of our Holy Scriptures.