

*New Beacon Bible Commentary

**EPHESIANS/
COLOSSIANS/
PHILEMON**

A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition



Ephesians/George Lyons
Colossians/Robert Smith
Philemon/Kara Lyons-Pardue



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EDITOR'S PREFACE

Why a Commentary on Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon?

Despite their present canonical arrangement, these three letters have long been closely associated. For nearly two millennia, church readers considered the overlapping names (e.g., Colossians and Philemon mention nine names in common), places, and situations as an indication that these letters belonged together.

The traditional order of Paul's letters is largely a matter of length and audience. Romans is the longest of the letters addressed to communities; 2 Thesalonians, the shortest. Ephesians is an anomaly, since it is actually slightly longer than Galatians. First Timothy is the longest of the letters addressed to individuals; Philemon, the shortest. Even Paul's shortest missive is longer than most of the secular letters surviving from antiquity.

Modern biblical scholars challenged many traditional assumptions about Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon. In Greek, more than in English, the language and theology of Colossians and Ephesians are strikingly similar. So similar that critical scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries argued that an anonymous admirer of Paul a generation after the apostle's death reworked and expanded Colossians into what we call Ephesians. By the early twentieth century, most scholars assumed Ephesians depended on Colossians. Today, even those who doubt Paul wrote Ephesians challenge the assumption that Ephesians was a plagiarizing repurposing of Colossians.

By the mid-twentieth century, scholars began to question the tradition that Paul wrote Colossians. Even some conservative scholars proposed that he had authorized the letter but left the actual writing to a trusted associate, such as Luke or Timothy.

There are undeniable differences in vocabulary, literary style, and theological emphases between Colossians and Ephesians as compared to the uncontested community letters of Paul—Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, and 1 Thessalonians. But recently, scholars have become far less certain Paul did not write these letters.

The Pauline authorship of Philemon was never seriously doubted, except by the most radical German scholars of the nineteenth century. The nagging question was instead: Why did the church canonize such a mundane, private correspondence? Although Philemon was traditionally classified with the so-

called christological epistles—Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians—Philemon’s most obvious emphasis is not the person and work of Christ. Colossians is clearly christological. But Ephesians is far more ecclesiological than christological. Its clear emphasis is on the nature and mission of the church.

This commentary makes no attempt to resolve these speculative scholarly debates. It merely takes for granted the canonical authority of these letters as Christian Scripture. Nor does it presume an imaginative reconstruction of their historical backgrounds. We simply do not know the precise circumstances that occasioned their writing.

Of course, it is possible that, imprisoned in Rome and awaiting martyrdom, Paul received word from his trusted associate Epaphras of theological problems in the church at Colossae (Col 1:7; 4:12). This might have prompted him to write an encouraging letter to Ephesus and other churches in western Asia Minor. Like most churches founded by the apostle and his delegates, these were mixed congregations of Jewish and non-Jewish Christ-believers. So, perhaps, Ephesians’ emphasis on unity amid diversity was inevitable.

We know Paul lived in an era when slavery was as much a fact of life as high-tech devices are in ours. But we do not know how Onesimus came into contact with the apostle. To survive as a prisoner, Paul depended on the assistance of people on the outside who cared about him. Friends and family, not the state, were expected to provide for the needs of prisoners in the first-century Roman Empire. Perhaps, beyond food and clothing, Paul’s wealthy convert Philemon had made available to him the services of an expendable slave, Onesimus. We know that under Paul’s influence, Onesimus had become a Christ-believer.

Perhaps, the need for messengers to deliver letters to the Colossians and Ephesians became the occasion for drafting the letter we call Philemon. For reasons Paul failed to explain, he had decided it was time to send the changed man back to his former master. Onesimus was to be accompanied by Paul’s representatives and this letter. In it, Paul diplomatically urged Philemon to grant the slave his freedom—to treat him as a brother-believer, not as his property.

This hypothesis might explain why these three letters are included in the same volume of the New Beacon Bible Commentary. Of course, as only imagination, it also may not be correct at all.

Like the brief preface to this volume of the New Beacon Bible Commentary, this and other theories about the world behind the text of these letters greatly oversimplify the complicated and contested issues involved. Serious readers should read the introductions preceding each of the commentaries in this volume for known details.

As the New Testament editor, I assume full responsibility for this preface. I do not claim to speak for my co-authors. We each acknowledge that we are only fallible mortals, offering our scholarship in the service of the church.

We pray that God would grant our readers the spiritual insight and critical judgment to sort through the evidence of the letters for themselves. We may be mistaken in some of our opinions. Who isn't? If we knew which of our opinions were mistaken, we would change our minds. We offer the results of our preparation and study with the prayer that God will use our brief commentaries on these letters for the glory of God and the upbuilding of the church in holy love.

George Lyons
Editor

INTRODUCTION

To the reader: New Testament commentaries aren't intended to break new ground. This brief commentary on Ephesians aspires to present succinctly the best contemporary NT scholarship has to offer on the message of Ephesians. It makes no pretense to being an original reading of the book. It attempts only to be faithful to the biblical text and to make complex issues of interpretation in a difficult book as intelligible and practical as possible. I have consulted all the serious commentaries on every passage. On disputed passages, I note the viable alternatives and state my views or why I find it impossible to decide. On many issues, I leave it to readers of the commentary to decide for themselves.

Wesleyans acknowledge that, alongside Scripture, there are other authoritative sources of Christian theology—tradition, reason, and experience. But Scripture remains foundational. Wesleyans take seriously (but not rigidly) the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura* (“Scripture alone”), especially Luther’s insistence that the Bible is its own best interpreter.

This Protestant principle explains the extensive use of parentheses citing parallel scriptural references throughout the commentary. These are not proof-texts, substantiating my claims. They offer further explanations of the text under study. Readers are especially advised to follow the arrows (→) to pursue repeated themes in the letter, keeping their minds and Bibles always open. Reading these parallel passages helps compensate for the economy of words necessitated by the space constraints imposed on the commentator.

Readers wanting an in-depth historical-critical introduction to Ephesians will not find it here. To appreciate the breadth of scholarly opinions, they would do well to consult several full-length commentary introductions (e.g., M. Barth 1974, 1-61; Lincoln 1990, xxxv-xcvii; Best 1998, 1-94; O'Brien 1999, 1-82; Hoehner 2002, 1-130; Arnold 2010, 21-62; Thielman 2010, 1-30; Winger 2015, 1-164). What follows is only a brief account of the disputed issues and a rationale for my approach.

A. Author

I. Tradition

Ephesians claims to have been written by Paul, who identified himself as “an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God” (1:1). This is identical to 2 Cor 1:1 and Col 1:1 and similar to 1 Cor 1:1 and 2 Tim 1:1 (see Gal 1:1). His name reappears in Eph 3:1, much as it does in 2 Cor 10:1; Gal 5:2; Col 1:23; 4:18; and Phlm 9. And like his other letters, its rhetorical organization conforms for the most part to Hellenistic epistolary conventions.

“Ephesians has the earliest attestation of any NT book” (Hoehner 2002, 2). Both orthodox (e.g., Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Polycarp, Tertullian, Hermas, Irenaeus, and Clement of Alexandria) and heretical (e.g., Ophites, Valentinians, Basilideans, and gnostic texts from Nag Hammadi) authors from the late first century onward presumed Paul wrote Ephesians. It was recognized as a letter to the “Laodiceans” by Paul in the second-century canons of Marcion and as Ephesians in the Muratorian Canon. It was included in the early Latin and Syriac translations of Paul’s letters (see Abbott 1897, ix-xxiii; van Roon 1974, 36-44; Best 1998, 14-20; Hoehner 2002, 2-6). Both internal and external attestation for the Pauline authorship of Ephesians are unassailable.

2. Critical Challenges

Early in the sixteenth century, Erasmus observed that “the style” of Ephesians “differs so much from the other Epistles of Paul that it could seem to be the work of another person.” But he did not reach this conclusion (cited by Thielman 2010, 7). Despite the early and uniform consensus that Paul wrote the letter, during the eighteenth century, Continental critical scholars challenged the tradition of the Pauline authorship of Ephesians (see Hoehner

2002, 6-20; Thielman 2010, 7). During the nineteenth century, F. C. Baur argued on the basis of internal criteria that only four letters—Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians—were authentic. Some of his more radical Tübingen School successors eventually denied Pauline authorship to all of the letters (see Kümmel 1972, 120-43; H. Harris 1975).

Contemporary NT scholars consider seven Pauline letters almost certainly authentic: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. The authorship of Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians, however, is hotly disputed. Most today consider Ephesians deutero-Pauline. Estimates of the strength of the critical consensus range from as high as 80 percent (R. Brown 1997, 620) to as low as 51 percent (Hoehner 2002, 6-20). Nearly all critical scholars deny the Pauline origin of the Pastoral Epistles—1 and 2 Timothy and Titus.

British scholars generally acknowledge the Pauline character of Ephesians. Even those who deny strict Pauline authorship, like C. H. Dodd, claim, “Whether the Epistle is by Paul or not, certainly its thought is the crown of Paulinism” (1929, 1224-25). F. F. Bruce, a defender of authenticity, describes it as “the quintessence of Paulinism” (1977, 424; 1984, 229). But Werner Kümmel, a moderate German NT scholar, claims that “the theology of Eph makes the Pauline composition of the letter completely impossible” (1975, 360). Most critical commentaries from the late nineteenth through the twentieth century—continental, British, and North American; Protestant and Catholic—denied the tradition of Pauline authorship.

Markus Barth’s 1974 Anchor Bible Commentary (4-50) challenged the growing critical consensus. Since then, an increasing number of NT scholars have defended Pauline authorship, including most Ephesians commentaries published to date in the twenty-first century (for the details see Lyons’ “Moving Beyond the Impasse”). Today, even commentators who deny its strict Pauline authorship treat it as the work of an anonymous late first-century member of “a Pauline school” (Best 1998, 270), “the apex of Pauline thought” (Thurston 2007, 87).

3. Impasse

Scholarly decisions about authenticity vs. inauthenticity depend less on the textual evidence than on nonnegotiable prior commitments, philosophical and theological presuppositions, and tolerance for dissonance. Both scholars who accept and deny Pauline authorship agree that the burden of proof rests on those who oppose the longstanding tradition (M. Barth 1974, 40; Mitton 1976, 25; O’Brien 1999, 4, 46).

Often the decisive consideration favoring Pauline authorship is a scholar’s unwillingness to entertain the possibility that early Christians practiced and accepted the literary device of pseudonymity (Best 1998, 10-13; Hoehner

2002, 38-49; Talbert 2007, 7-10; Fowl 2012, 10-11; Winger 2015, 71-77). Were Christians tolerant of the culturally accepted practice whereby a later author used the assumed name of earlier authors to add authority to his writing? They answer No.

The scholarly biases, assumptions, and conclusions as to which of the thirteen alleged Pauline letters are authentic and which are pseudonymous are beyond conclusive proof. Those who reject Pauline authorship for Ephesians claim to do so on linguistic, stylistic, literary, historical, and theological grounds. Beyond its close kinship with Colossians, they typically appeal to differences in the vocabulary, style, and theological emphases of Ephesians as compared to the seven generally accepted letters. Those who defend its authenticity contend that different audiences, problems, purposes, rhetorical genres, and themes may account for the distinctive features of each of the Pauline letters, without presuming different authors. There is no question that Ephesians is different, even than Colossians, the Pauline letter it most closely resembles. But it is no more different than the seven generally accepted letters are from one another (see Lyons' "Moving Beyond the Impasse").

"It is extremely difficult to determine authorship on the basis of language and style" (Hoehner 2002, 28-29). Stylistic and linguistic analysis in biblical studies too often lack methodological constraint, clarity, and coherency. Not all scholars deal with the theological distinctives of Ephesians in the same way. Far too often, personal theological tastes color scholarly assessments of the evidence.

Conclusions on both sides of the debate are extremely subjective. The strength of the case, whether for or against authenticity, "greatly exceeds the evidence from which the deductions are extracted" (Williams 2010, 398). Speculative possibilities based on an accumulation of statistics do not establish probability, much less proof. It is impossible to prove or disprove authenticity on the basis of stylistic diversity (Williams 2010, 401).

4. Neutrality

I agree with Arthur G. Patzia that "the question of the authorship of Ephesians currently is at an impasse, with reputable scholars on both sides of the issue" (2011, 127). Stephen E. Fowl offers an attractive alternative to the scholarly stalemate. He recognizes that

the overwhelming majority of people read Ephesians for broadly theological reasons. That is, they read Ephesians because it is indisputably a part of Christian Scripture. . . . Given the ends for which Christians engage Scripture theologically, the issue of authorship is not particularly relevant. Ephesians plays the role it does in the life and worship of Christians because it is part of the canon, not because it is written by Paul or not written by Paul. The text is canonical, Paul is not. (2012, 9)

The divisive debate about authorship is beyond resolution (Fowl 2012, 16-18) and finally irrelevant to the interpretation of Ephesians (Fowl 2012, 11-12, 27-28).

Most interpreters who conclude that Ephesians was not written by Paul claim their conclusion is merely a matter of sober historical judgment. But such decisions have far-reaching theological implications. Andrew T. Lincoln, an evangelical scholar who denies the Pauline authorship of Ephesians, insists: "Whether written by Paul or by a follower, Ephesians is now canonical; it has the same authoritative and foundational status for the Church's teaching and life" (1990, lxxiii). I agree.

In actual practice, however, most scholars who deny Paul wrote Ephesians marginalize the book within the canon. "The dominance of traditional historical-critical methods has in part been responsible for the fact that until quite recently work on Ephesians was becoming hampered by scholarly 'dead ends' and, therefore, was subject to comparative neglect in Pauline studies" (MacDonald 2010, 538). Many NT scholars treat it as of lesser authority and importance than the pristine Pauline gospel (Wright 2015, 33, 82, 131, 150, 176-77). They imagine that their preconceived notions of what is timelessly true and relevant qualify them to malign, blunt, or interpret away the distinctive message of Ephesians.

But scholars who vigorously defend the Pauline authorship of Ephesians are often equally guilty of refusing to let it speak with its own distinctive accent. Thomas M. Winger, whose recent commentary devotes more than fifty pages to mount such a defense, acknowledges that, ironically, "commentators who deny Pauline authorship (e.g., Andrew Lincoln, Rudolf Schnackenburg) frequently provide more helpful exposition of the text itself, since they feel no need to compress it into their narrow view of Paul" (2015, 24; see 21-77).

My personal sympathies lie with Fowl's approach. I am uninterested in either defending or denying the Pauline authorship of Ephesians. The evidence is insufficient to be persuasive either way. Patzia and Fowl have demonstrated that it is possible to write responsible commentaries on Ephesians without taking sides. Francis Foulkes, who accepts Pauline authorship, would probably agree: "Questions associated with the authorship and original setting and destination . . . are less important for the understanding of this letter than is the case with most other New Testament documents" (1989, 12).

Half a century ago, Henry J. Cadbury observed that most scholars defended or denied the Pauline authorship of Ephesians more out of "unwillingness to admit indecision than out of clear conviction" (1958-59, 93). I am undecided. I have no interest in defending or denying Pauline authorship. Most who do so demonstrate more about their dogmatic prejudices than about their

capacity for critical thought. Because a decision either way does not affect my understanding of the authority of the letter, I remain open-minded.

In the commentary that follows, for lack of a better name, I refer to “Paul” as the authorial voice behind the letter. It seems preferable to the convoluted expression, “the author of Ephesians.” If Paul did not write it, we do not know who did. Whoever he was, he was at least as capable as his mentor. If an intellectual and spiritual equal to the formidable apostle to the Gentiles remained anonymous and unknown to the best minds of the early centuries of the church, who am I to attempt to prove them right or wrong nearly two millennia later?

B. Addressees

Certainty as to the destination of the letter remains likewise impossible. Equally competent text critics have reached vastly different conclusions on Eph 1:1 (→). Many of the earliest and usually reliable MSS of the letter lack the words “in Ephesus” at this point. The letter’s superscription “To the Ephesians” is not original, dating from the late second century.

Some scholars have proposed that Ephesians was written as an encyclical, a circular letter (see 1 Pet 1:1; Rev 1:4) with a blank space to allow Paul’s messenger to fill in the names of several churches near Ephesus to whom it was sent. But this remains just a theory. One more speculative guess seems unnecessary. If the letter was not written to the church in Ephesus, we can only speculate to whom it was written.

On first thought, it seems unexpected that Paul would address a church he founded and spent three years nurturing (Acts 19–20) as if he was unknown to them and they to him (→ Eph 1:15; 3:2; 4:21). But it seems equally unexpected that a later disciple of Paul, who admired him and assumed his name, would have been unfamiliar with this relationship and yet failed to employ it to lend credibility to his pseudonymous work. If nearly a decade had passed since the historical Paul’s last contact with the church in Ephesus (in the early 50s), there would surely have been many new converts with whom he had no relationship (see Thielman 2010, 27).

There is no denying that the letter is far less personal than the so-called authentic letters. Paul “sends no greetings, thanks no one among his readers, reviews no travel plans, and seems to have a limited knowledge of his readers’ circumstances” (Thielman 2010, 11-12). One of the most common designations for his audience in his other letters—“brothers and sisters”—appears just once in Ephesians, and that at the very end (→ 6:23). But this aloof stance may have an explanation in the uniquely liturgical style of this letter.

So, for lack of a better designation, I refer to the original audience of this letter as “the Ephesians,” fully aware that the author may well have had a larg-

er, anonymous audience in mind. The benefit of referring to “the Ephesians” is that it reminds contemporary readers that we are reading another’s mail. Even if we lack the specificity we might prefer, we know enough in general about the world behind the text to prevent us from reading the letter as if it arrived in our email this morning.

C. Genre and Occasion

I. Letter

As with “Paul” and “the Ephesians,” I use the designation “letter” advisedly. Although Ephesians has many of the features of Paul’s other letters, it lacks one thing most of them make quite clear—an explicit historical occasion. “Unlike much of Paul’s correspondence, Ephesians reveals virtually nothing about its specific context. The document makes almost no references to specific events” (MacDonald 2010, 537). It is not obvious why Paul wrote, much less why he wrote what he wrote in this letter. The clues that often specify the occasions of his other letters typically appear early, in their “Thanksgiving” sections (→ 1:15-23). But that it not the case in Ephesians. This, of course, has not prevented interpreters from proposing highly speculative and unpersuasive guesses as to its purpose (see MacDonald 2010, 541-42).

The closest we have to an explanation as to why Paul wrote Ephesians appears in 3:2-4 (→): To explain “the mystery of Christ” so that his readers could “understand” it. This suggests that he wrote not to persuade or dissuade, and not to challenge or correct, but to educate them. He wrote in the genre of epideictic rhetoric to deepen their understanding of and commitment to the implications of the Christian gospel.

The lack of explicit historical information is not a license to fill in the gaps with a new or existing theory. Many interpreters have helpfully called attention to the features of Ephesians that make it more like a sermon or “homily.” But the same might be said about the other letters (Best 1998, 61-62; Foulkes 1989, 20; Witherington 2007, 215-23), all of which are much longer than other known ancient letters and seem to have been written by a Christian preacher. So, the similarity should not be surprising.

Let me be entirely forthcoming: I am personally invested in the continuing relevance of Ephesians for Christian theological and ethical reflection. For this, the issues of authorship and specific audience are ultimately inconsequential. The canonical status of Ephesians, not speculative historical reconstructions, matter to me. I part company with scholars on both sides of the authorship debate—defenders and deniers. But I am particularly uncomfortable with those who conclude that Ephesians is non-Pauline, even subapostolic, and allow this historical judgment to erode the canonical standing of Ephesians and encourage its neglect.

Neutrality on the subject of its authorship, while maintaining its canonical status, may help rehabilitate the letter for the well-being of the Christian church. God knows we need to hear again its clarion celebration of God's ambitious plans for his church, its clear exposition of the optimism of grace, and the urgency of allowing grace to come to expression in good works intended to preserve the essential unity of the diverse church of Jesus Christ for the sake of the entire universe. (See my survey of some of the typical features of Ephesians' vocabulary, style, and theology for a far fuller account of my reasons for preferring a neutral stance in Lyons, "Moving Beyond the Impasse.")

2. Language and Style

There are an unusually large number of lengthy sentences in Ephesians. The opening benediction (→ 1:3-14) with 204 Greek words is the second longest in the NT; the thanksgiving (→ 1:15-23) with 169, the third longest (→ 2:1-7; 3:1-7; and 4:11-16; Col 1:9-20, with 218 words, is the longest). Sentences nearly as long appear in the "authentic" Pauline letters, although they are fewer and uncharacteristic. Lengthy sentences in Ephesians are typically due to:

- expansive, pleonastic, explanatory genitive constructions (see e.g., 1:6, 12, 14, 18, 19);
- redundant cognate constructions (repetitive noun and verb combinations; e.g., 1:6, 21; 2:4; 3:7);
- tautology: mutually interpretive synonyms joined by the conjunction "and" (e.g., 1:4, 21; 2:1, 19);
- long prepositional phrases (e.g., 1:4-5, 11);
- relative clauses and participial constructions; and / or
- frequent adjectives and adjectival expressions (e.g., 1:3, 19).

Because stylistic arguments are typically subjective and arbitrary, we should not be surprised that no scholar argues that the uncharacteristically short, abrupt sentences in Galatians challenge its authenticity (Hoehner 2002, 28).

Ben Witherington, following up on suggestions by Bo Reicke (2001, 52-53) and Andrew T. Lincoln (1990, xliii-xliv; 430-60), notes that these and other distinctive features of Ephesians were typical of the elevated, baroque style of Asiatic epideictic rhetoric expected by audiences in Asia Minor (2007, 4-25, 215-23). Whether addressed to Ephesus alone or sent as a circular missive to nearby churches in the Lycus River valley, this region was likely the letter's original destination (see Thielman 2010, 11-16). Colossians, of course, addressed an audience in the same Asian province.

Several scholars characterize the elevated language of Ephesians as "liturgical" (Kirby 1968; Gnilka 1971; Winger 2015, 53; Patzia 2011, 131-33; Muddiman 2001, 14). Heinrich Schlier described it as marked by the reverence and dignity suited for public worship (1957, 18). There are good reasons

to believe the author of this letter expected it to be read aloud when the church assembled (see Col 4:16; 1 Thess 5:27).

Following its conventional letter opening, Eph 1:3-14 resembles a formal benediction. The thanksgiving in 1:15-23 consists of a prayer report, which resumes in 3:14-21. Ephesians 4:4-6 seems to appeal to the church's creed; 5:19 refers to congregational singing; 6:18-24 concludes the letter with a prayer request, announcement, and final benediction. Similar sections in the other Pauline letters are typically marked by longer than usual sentences.

The balance of Ephesians consists of practical guidance for daily life within mixed congregations and in Christian families. The paraenesis in Ephesians so closely resembles similar sections in the other Pauline letters that interpreters who deny its authenticity sometimes argue that this "betrays the hand of an imitator" (Mitton 1976, 82; see Lincoln 1990, 339). Similarities render it "too Pauline to be by Paul"; distinctive features, "not Pauline enough to be by Paul. But these arguments cancel each other out" (Muddiman 2001, 211).

D. Date

If we cannot be certain who wrote Ephesians, to whom, or why, we should not expect to know when it was written. But the vast majority of scholars of every stripe today dates Ephesians to the last third of the first century AD. Ephesians implies that its author wrote from prison (→ 3:1; 4:1; 6:20) under circumstances reminiscent of those presumed in Philippians (1:12-30; → Eph 6:18-20). Of the known places where Paul was imprisoned (Philippi in Acts 16:23-24; Caesarea in Acts 24; Malta in Acts 27:29—28:14; Rome in Acts 28:16-31), Rome has emerged as the most likely provenance of the letter. Of course, Acts is not exhaustive on this or other details of Paul's ministry (see 2 Cor 6:5; 11:23-25).

If the tradition of Paul's execution by orders of Emperor Nero is reliable, the latest possible date for strict Pauline authorship is AD 67. If Paul did not write Ephesians, its pseudonymous author must have written it by not later than AD 90. The earliest known external attestation of Ephesians as by Paul appear in the writings of Irenaeus (ca. AD 175), with plausible allusions appearing as early as AD 95 in several Apostolic Fathers (Best 1998, 13-20).

There was no mail service in the Roman Empire for private citizens. Paul identified his trusted associate Tychicus as courier of the letter we call Ephesians (→ 6:21-22). The overlap at this point with Colossians (1:7; 4:7-14) and Philemon (23) suggests to some that all three letters were sent by the same couriers at the same time.

Those who argue for Pauline authorship of Ephesians prefer a date in the early 60s; those who argue for pseudonymity, a date in the 80s. Removed from us by nearly two millennia, the difference seems inconsequential. There are

negligible differences in the sociohistorical worlds behind the text during that twenty-year period (Fowl 2012, 12).

E. Distinctive Vocabulary and Theological Emphases

“There are 5,437 different words in the New Testament. They occur a total of 138,162 times. But there are only 319 words (5.8% of the total number) that occur 50 times or more . . . These 319 words account for 110,425 word occurrences, or 79.92% of the total word count, almost four out of five” (Mounce 1993, 17). The homiletic-liturgical style and subject matter of Ephesians help account for its distinctive vocabulary. There are thirty-five NT *hapax legomena* in Ephesians—that is, words that appear nowhere else in the NT (Aland 1975-83, 2:83). It also employs five words twice that appear nowhere else in the NT (Winger 2015, 37). Thus, there are forty Greek words unique to Ephesians in the NT (Aland 1975-83, 2:456; Winger 2015, 50-52). Ephesians contains eighty (R. Brown 1997, 628) or ninety words (MacDonald 2010, 542) not found in the seven generally accepted Pauline letters. Eight of these appear in both Ephesians and Colossians, but nowhere else in the NT. There is no denying that Ephesians is often different from the other letters—especially Romans and Galatians.

And there is no denying that it resembles Colossians (Abbott 1897, xxiii-xiv; Mitton 1976, 57). But for all their similarities, the two differ in the striking emphasis on the Spirit in Ephesians and its near absence in Colossians (see Bruce 1984, 28, 233). The question is, Why these differences and similarities?

For many interpreters, Ephesians’ alleged dependence on Colossians is the single most decisive argument against its Pauline authorship (Lincoln 1990, xlvii-lviii; Lincoln and Wedderburn 1993, 84). The extent, direction, and motivation of the apparent borrowing, however, are far from clear. Best (1998, 20-25) and Muddiman (2001, 7-11), both of whom deny Ephesians’ Pauline authorship, offer evidence undermining the critical consensus that presumes it depended on Colossians.

The unique vocabulary of Ephesians may seem large, but in a letter of about 2,400 words, this represents only 1.5 percent of the total. The *hapax legomena* in Romans make up 1.6 percent. Ephesians has about the same percentage of unique words as 2 Corinthians and only slightly more than the 1.4 percent in Galatians. Ephesians has nearly 200 words more than Galatians, and both have the same number of words not found in the other undisputed Pauline letters. Even those who deny the Pauline authorship of Ephesians admit that such statistics significantly blunt the strength of the argument of vocabulary (R. Brown 1997, 628).

The distinctive vocabulary of Ephesians, like that of the other Pauline letters, probably tells us less about its author than about its key themes (Winger 2015, 50). Thus, it may be more relevant to note its frequently occurring words than its rare ones. Just three terms occur more than five times in Ephesians but fewer than twenty-five times elsewhere in the NT: *gnōrizō* (“make known”), *mystērion* (“mystery”), and *pote* (“formerly”; see Kubo 1975, 181). These words succinctly capture the central message of Ephesians: “The revelation of the mystery that the Gentiles, who formerly were not included in God’s family, have now been incorporated into Christ” (Winger 2015, 53). And God’s “grace” (*charis*) alone made this possible.

By far the most frequently appearing theologically significant cognate group in Ephesians is “grace”—twenty times. Taking length into consideration, Ephesians has far more *char-* cognates than any other Pauline letter. Obviously, “grace is a key theme in Ephesians” (O’Brien 1999, 104; see M. Barth 1974, 113-15). Vocabulary and style can prove neither the inauthenticity nor authenticity of a book. But they can help us understand the heart of its message. The table of contents for the commentary offers my analysis of the organization of the letter.

COMMENTARY

I. LETTER OPENING: EPHESIANS 1:1-23

A. Prescript (1:1-2)

BEHIND THE TEXT

The prescript of Ephesians adopts and adapts ancient Hellenistic epistolary conventions (see Doty 1973; Aune 1985, 158-82). It is much like the introductions to the other Pauline letters: Sender, Recipients, Greeting. Paul mentioned cosenders in all but Ephesians, Romans, and the Pastoral Epistles. He identified himself as “an apostle” in all his letters except Philippians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon. He noted that his apostolic office existed “by the will of God” also in 1 and 2 Corinthians, Colossians, and 2 Timothy.

The word order “Christ Jesus” (→ 2:6, 7, 10, 13, 20; 3:1, 6, 11, 21) appears in all the Pauline letters except Galatians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and Titus, which have “Jesus Christ” (→ Eph 1:2, 3, 5, 17; 5:20; 6:23, 24). Probably no difference in meaning was intended by the word order (Best 1998, 97; Klein 2006, 46; vs. M. Barth 1974, 66).

Paul adapted and combined the normal Hellenistic (*chairein*: “greetings,” Acts 15:23; 23:26; Jas 1:1) and Jewish (*šālôm, eirēnē*: “peace”; see Num 6:23-26; Ezra 4:17) greetings in all his letters except 1 and 2 Timothy. He probably followed existing Christian convention (see 1 Pet 1:2; 2 Pet 1:2; Rev 1:4; so M. Barth 1974, 71). The salutation here is exactly the same as in Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Phil 1:2; and Phlm 3.

IN THE TEXT

■ **I** *Sender*: The name **Paul** is the first word in all his letters. He never mentioned his Hebrew name Saul, which Acts uses for him until he enters Gentile territory (Acts 7:58—13:9). Perhaps this was because the Greek adjective *sau-los* described the salacious walk of a prostitute (LSJ, 1586). His Latin name *Paulos* meant “small,” which contemporary records indicate served only as a last name.

Paul the **apostle** was one who, as a witness of the risen **Christ** (see Acts 1:22; 1 Cor 9:1), was personally called by him (Gal 1:1) to speak and act in his behalf, as his ambassador (2 Cor 5:20) to the Gentile world (Rom 11:13; Gal 1:15-17; 2:7-9; see Rengstorf 1964; Best 1998, 96-98). Paul saw his apostolic task as that of a missionary / church planter (Eph 2:20; Rom 15:20, 23; 1 Cor 3:6-11; 2 Cor 10:12-16; see Fowl 2012, 33; → Eph 3:1-5, 8; 4:11). This was not a career; it was a vocation he had not chosen for himself. He pursued it **by the will of God**—because this is what God wanted (M. Barth 1974, 65; see 1 Cor 9:16-17; Gal 1:15; → Eph 1:5, 9, 11; 5:17; 6:6).

Recipients: Paul addressed his letter to **God’s holy people**. That he used this designation of the Corinthians (1 Cor 1:2) is evidence that **holy ones** did not refer to a spiritually or morally elite group within the church. He regularly used this to refer to all Christians as God’s chosen people (see Exod 19:6; 23:22; Lev 11:44; 19:2; 20:7; Dan 7:22). God’s people are set apart for his service. This is their privilege; their responsibility is to attain in practice the moral holiness God intends for them (→ Eph 1:4; 5:26; Foulkes 1989, 52).

With **also the faithful**, the apostle identified the same Christian readers (see Eph 1:13, 15, 19; 2:8; 3:12; 2 Cor 6:5; 1 Tim 4:10, 12; Titus 1:6), not a second more trustworthy group (see Col 1:2; vs. Kirby 1968, 170 and n. 86). “God’s people are those who have put their faith in Christ . . . and who live out that faith in obedience to the Lord” (Patzia 2011, 145-46).

It is doubtful that **holy ones** referred to Jewish Christians and **faithful ones** to Gentile Christians (vs. Witherington 2007, 225-26). Only in Rom 15:25 and 31 did Paul refer to Jewish Christians in Jerusalem as **the holy ones** (“the Lord’s people”).

Paul’s audience was both **holy** and **faithful**, but only as they were **in Christ** (see Eph 2:19-22). The expression **in Christ** appears 34 times in Ephe-

sians (11 times in 1:3-14 alone; twice Paul's normal practice). It stresses the living fellowship and intimate relationship all believers enjoy with Christ. Scholars (see Allan 1958; Wedderburn 1985) have given enormous attention to Paul's frequent, distinctive, and diverse uses of **in Christ** throughout his letters (164 times; e.g., Rom 6:11; 8:1; 12:5; 1 Cor 1:2, 30; 15:18, 22; 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 1:22; 3:28; 5:6; Phil 1:1; Col 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1; → Eph 1:3; 2:5-6).

For the expression **the faithful in Christ Jesus**, we might say simply **Christians**. The precise nuance of the expression "in Christ," like "Christian," is far more complicated and contested than most appreciate (M. Barth 1974, 69-71; Lincoln 1990, 21-22; Talbert 2007, 35-40). Some (Deissmann 1972, 137-42; Schweitzer 1968, 225) too narrowly limit "in Christ" to mystical experiences transcending reason. Paul assumed that personal connection and communion with Christ was possible. Christ is more than "the object of belief." God's faithful people are "united with" Christ, partake "together of his new life," and are incorporated into his body (Bruce 1984, 251). "In Christ" expresses the believers' corporate solidarity in and with Christ" (Klein 2006, 46). "They live within the sphere of existence that Christ defines" (Thielman 2010, 34). But Christians are not absorbed into a nameless divine force field, nor do they lose their own personality (see Best 1958; Best 1998, 153-54).

Until the nineteenth century, most interpreters assumed Paul wrote the letter to Ephesus (Ellicott 1897, 1). The earlier and more reliable Greek manuscripts discovered in this era lacked the phrase **in Ephesus** (Metzger 1994, 532). Thus, recent commentators usually consider this place reference a secondary addition (e.g., Lincoln 1990, 1-4; Best 1998, 98-101; notable exceptions: Arnold 1993, 243-45; Hoehner 2002, 144-48; Thielman 2010, 11-16, 36).

A relative clause, **who are**, appears between **the holy ones** and **also the faithful ones**, even in Greek manuscripts that omit **in Ephesus**. Some speculate that Ephesians was written as a circular letter in which the original left a blank at this point to allow the courier of the letter to insert the names of various cities to which it was sent. No manuscripts survive with a blank space or another place name. But the theory may explain the impersonal character of a letter to a church Paul should have known intimately (see Acts 19:1-41 and 20:13-38; → Introduction).

■ **2 Greeting:** With the words **Grace and peace** (*charis* and *eirēnē*) Paul implicitly prayed that his readers might be corporately granted the spiritual power, well-being, and wholeness of God's undeserved favor and love revealed in Christ. The second-person plural (**to you**) referred to the readers as a social group, not individuals. **Peace** and **grace** appear again in the letter's closing (6:23-24) and are prominent throughout Ephesians (**grace:** → 1:6, 7; 2:5, 7, 8; 3:2, 7, 8; 4:7, 29; **peace:** → 2:14, 15, 17; 4:3; 6:15).

Paul identified these gifts as **from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**. By making both **God** and **Lord** objects of the same preposition (**from**), he assumed their essential equality (vs. M. Barth 1974, 73). Paul could refer as easily to “the grace of God” (Eph 3:2 KJV) as to “the grace of Christ” (Gal 1:6); “the peace of God” (Phil 4:7) as to “the peace of Christ” (Col 3:15). Whenever he identified God as **Father**, he always mentioned Jesus as **Lord** (Schrenk 1967, 1007). But he never joined the Holy Spirit with them in a trinitarian greeting.

FROM THE TEXT

The author of this letter—whether Paul or a disciple writing in his behalf—claimed to speak with the authorization of God himself. He identified his first readers—whether in the church in Ephesus or in other unnamed churches—were distinguished by three characteristics: (1) They belong to God. (2) They are believers who are sustained by their trust in God. (3) Their essential identity is their shared relationship with Christ.

Christians are not self-sufficient. Whatever their location, they live “within the realm of Christ’s rule—and that realm is the church” (Lohfink 1984, 127). “If Christ’s lordship is to have any material reality in the present, then there must also be a community of people whose faith and practice, whose hopes and desires, whose very life and death—all are shaped by their allegiance to their Lord” (Fowl 2012, 34).

B. Blessing (1:3-14)

BEHIND THE TEXT

As an introduction to Ephesians, the blessing anticipates much of the message of the entire letter. It emphasizes God’s choice of believers, his eternal purposes, his adoption and redemption of believers, the revelation of his once hidden plan to bring all things together under Christ, and the assurance the Holy Spirit gives that these divine promises will be realized.

But the blessing does not explicitly mention two major themes of the letter: the church or the ethical instructions of its second half (Best 1998, 111-12). Nonetheless, the redeemed community (“we” / “us” / “our” / “you” / “your”) is “the church” (in 1:22; 3:10, 21; 5:23, 24, 25, 27, 29, and 32). And “love” (1:4) is the central, unifying emphasis of Paul’s call to holiness in chs 4—6 (4:2, 15, 16; 5:2, 25, 28, 33; 6:23, 24).

Several key terms here presume ancient cultural practices, unfamiliar to most today:

- The Greek noun translated “redemption” in 1:7 originally referred to the price paid to restore property to its original owner. In the LXX,

it describes God's deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage (Exod 6:6; 15:13; Lev 25:25-27; Num 18:15; Deut 7:8; 9:26; 13:5; 1 Chr 17:21; Isa 48:20; 52:9). "Redemption" was the price required to free a slave (Exod 21:8; Lev 25:47-49).

- A number of esoteric Eastern cults nearly contemporary with early Christianity were called "mystery religions." For these, *mystērion*, "mystery," referred to practices, rituals, and speeches known only to the initiated—secrets for insiders only. But in Eph 1:9, as in all twenty-seven NT instances of the term (twenty-one in the Pauline letters), it refers to a revealed secret (previously known only to God) intended to be universally known. In these last days, God disclosed the onetime secret (e.g., Rom 11:25; 16:25; 1 Cor 2:1, 7; 4:1; 15:51; Eph 3:3, 4, 9; 5:32; 6:19; Col 1:26-27; 2:2; 4:3; 2 Thess 2:7; see J. Armitage Robinson 1907, 234-40; M. Barth 1974, 123-27; Caragounis 1977; Bockmuehl 1990; Hoehner 2002, 428-34).
- The verb translated "marked . . . with a seal" in Eph 1:13 presumes the ancient practice of using distinguishing stamps or brands to identify personal property—livestock, pottery, slaves, documents (see 4 Ezra 6:5; 2 Tim 2:19; Rev 7:2-8; 9:4; 22:4).
- The Greek noun *arrabōn* ("deposit") in Eph 1:14 (see Gen 38:17-20) means "pledge." In commercial dealings, it was the standard term for a down payment—earnest money, an advance installment on "a greater whole, . . . of the same kind as that whole, [which] functions as a guarantee that the whole payment will be forthcoming" (Lincoln 1990, 40). In modern Greek, *arrabōna* is an engagement ring (Bruce 1984, 266 n. 97).

In form and content the blessing in Eph 1:3-14 resembles typical Jewish "benedictions" (see Gen 14:20; 24:27; 1 Kgs 8:15, 56; Pss 41:13; 66:20; 72:18-19; 89:52; 106:48; Tob 3:11; 13; Sg Three 29-68; Luke 1:68-79; 1 Pet 1:3). It is a hymnlike expression of prayer and praise, eulogizing God for his blessings. In 2 Cor 1:3-7 a "benediction" *replaces* the "thanksgiving" section, which normally follows the greetings in Paul's letters (except in Gal 1:6-10 and 1 Timothy). Notably, the benediction in Ephesians *precedes* the thanksgiving (1:15-23).

The benediction is one long, complicated sentence in Greek (204 words). Redundancy and repetition in form and content were expected in the flowery epideictic rhetoric of Asia Minor (→ Introduction). Effective speakers deliberately extended a sentence "with relative clauses, participles, and prepositions rather than dividing it into separate sentences" (Witherington 2007, 229). Other lengthy sentences in Ephesians include 1:15-23; 2:1-7; 3:2-13, 14-19; 4:1-6, 11-16; and 6:14-20. The KJV divides Eph 1:3-14 into two sentences; the

NASB, five; the NIV¹⁹⁸⁴, RSV, and NRSV, six; the NABRE and NIV, seven; the NEB, eight; and the GNT, fifteen. Such divisions attempt to make English sense of the passage. No consensus has emerged as to how best to analyze this sentence (O'Brien 1999, 90-92).

In 1:3-10, Paul blessed God for his blessings to “us,” apparently referring to all Christians. But in vv 11-12 we seems to refer to “Jewish Christians” in contrast to “you” “Gentile Christians” in vv 13-14. On this basis some translations divide the benediction into two paragraphs, vv 3-10 and 11-14.

The similar phrases—“to the praise of his glorious grace” (v 6), “for the praise of his glory” (v 12), and “to the praise of his glory” (v 14)—lead some interpreters to propose a threefold division of the passage: the work of the Father, election (vv 3-6); of the Son, redemption (vv 7-12); and of the Holy Spirit, sealing (vv 13-14; Lincoln 1990, 12-18; Schnackenburg 1991, 46). But all three persons of the Trinity appear throughout.

Paul mentioned seven specific blessings God granted believers: election (v 4), adoption (v 5), present redemption and forgiveness (v 7), revelation (vv 8-9), the Holy Spirit (v 13), and future redemption (v 14). These offer no clue as to the structural logic of the benediction, but the reminders served Paul’s rhetorical aim “to get the audience caught up in love, wonder, and praise of what God has done for them, . . . causing the audience to join in the praise of God” (Witherington 2007, 229). Epideictic rhetoric presumed that the audience was sympathetic with the speaker’s convictions. His goal was not to change their minds but to motivate them to a more profound commitment to the values they already shared.

I prefer a threefold division based on central thematic emphases and the formal similarity of vv 7 and 11. Both begin with “in him” (*in whom*) followed by indicative verbs (“we have” and “we were . . . chosen”). Paul summarized God’s redemptive plan from eternity past, in the present, and stretching into eternity future (Graham 2008, 16-17, 30, 44; Thielman 2010, 43-44).

IN THE TEXT

I. Bless God for the Plan of Redemption in the Past (1:3-6)

■ **3** The NIV needlessly obscures Paul’s play on words (pleonasm): *Blessed be the God . . . who blessed us . . . with every blessing!* Praise be to paraphrases the Greek adjective *eulogetos*, *spoken well of*. Because Paul omitted the verb, this may not pronounce a eulogy, but state a fact: *God is worthy to be blessed* (O’Brien 1999, 94). Paul explained why God deserves our blessing with the aorist participle *has blessed* (*eulogēsas*) and the noun *blissing*

(*eulogiai*), all from the same word family. “Praise” in v 6 translates a different Greek noun, *epainon*.

The object of the benediction is the triune **God**—God the **Father**, our **Lord Jesus Christ** (v 3; see v 17), and the Holy Spirit (→ “Spirit” in v 13). Although “Trinity” is not a biblical term, passages such as this provided the materials from which the church of the first four centuries constructed the doctrine.

The benediction celebrated “redemption” (v 14) in its various dimensions. Paul identified its grateful recipients with the pronouns “we,” **our**, and **us** (vv 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14)—all Christians. “You” and “your” in v 13 refers to the first readers of the letter.

The phrase **in the heavenly realms** is unique to Ephesians (1:3, 20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12; but see cognates in 2 Cor 5:1; Phil 1:20; Col 1:5, 16, 20; and in 1 Cor 15:40-49; Phil 2:10). Most assume it refers to a metaphorical location. Ephesians conceives of the heavens as “part of the created universe, [but] not geographically understood.” They are “the realm of unseen forces that exert their influence on human beings. God’s blessing on believers ‘in the heavenly places’ asserts God’s presence, power, and, indeed, supremacy in that realm. . . . Every blessing of every sort in every realm of existence has its origin in God” (Thurston 2007, 94-95). “The reference is to the realm of transcendence, the spiritual dimension beyond the world of sense” (Talbert 2007, 44).

Paul did not imply that the blessings for which he and other Christians praised God were expected only in the future in heaven. God sent these blessings from his realm to be enjoyed by humans in this present world. God’s blessings comprehend past, present, and future. Redemption began in the mind of God in the primordial past (Eph 1:4) and will be completed only in the unseen future (2:7). Yet it is also a present reality (→ 1:13, 14) for those who are “citizens of Heaven” (v 3 Phillips).

The heavens in Ephesians refers to both the sphere of God (vv 3, 20; 2:6) and of “rulers and authorities” (3:10), “the powers of this dark world,” that is, “the spiritual forces of evil” (6:12). Paul accepted the OT assumption of the existence of multiple “heavens” (see 4:10; 2 Cor 12:2). Christ “ascended higher than all the heavens” (Eph 4:10) “to the highest place” (Phil 2:9). God “seated [Christ] at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion” (Eph 1:20-21). But he assigned the sinister spiritual powers that oppose his rule to the lower heavens, in “the kingdom of the air” (2:2), in “this dark world” (6:12). Whatever it means, **the heavenly realms** does not describe “celestial topography” (O’Brien 1999, 97).