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EPHESIANS

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# EPHESIANS

M I C H A E L   A L L E N



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# EPHESIANS 1

**1:1** Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are faithful in Christ Jesus:

These words have roots near and far. They begin with an identification of their near or proximate cause: it is Paul who writes here. Paul the apostle plays a decisive role, displayed across a full half of the New Testament. His upbringing and conversion as well as his ministry and writing appear on display for posterity. When we read that this text comes from Paul, we have an unusual measure of specific familiarity compared to other writings from the first century. There is a deeper cause, however, for Paul is identified only as the author in his apostolic service. That term “apostle” itself points beyond and before to the very one who had sent him: to Jesus Christ. We do well, then, to heed the words of this epistle by attending to its sources near and far.

First, Paul is identified as the author in this first verse. Questions have been raised about whether this is the historical Paul or a literary Paul. While Christians classically took Paul to be the author in every sense of the term, many moderns have suggested a more complex or indirect authorial reference.

Why do many believe Paul incapable or unlikely of penning this text? Several reasons have been offered, and sometimes they are not sufficiently distinguished (especially helpful in laying out the critical arguments are K. Barth 2017: 55–58 and Fowl 2012: 9–28). First, doubters claim that the vocabulary and style differ so significantly from the undisputed Pauline texts as to be written by another. Second, the themes and theology of the letter are noted as being divergent, not least regarding its eschatology. Third, the close relationship to Colossians (itself a disputed letter in modern scholarship) is taken by some to render Pauline authorship impossible. If Ephesians depends on Colossians, and if Colossians is not of

Paul himself, then Ephesians is not either. What would be the effects? Ephesians has been recognized as a canonical text and, from earliest days, received as a Pauline text. While its canonical status is not likely to be jeopardized, reading it as written by another would require a rethinking of what might be meant by the authorship claim in the first verse. Most argue that it would be written by a disciple of Paul, even one authorized by Paul and drawing on and extending Paul's apostolic commitments. It is worth noting, however, that pseudepigraphic literature was not typically viewed in the early Christian era with anything but disdain. Would someone close to Paul dare to write under his name if it was a practice viewed with suspicion? Wouldn't statements from Paul himself condemning false claims of authorship lead any purported "Pauline community" to express hesitation in this regard (2 Thess. 2:1–2; 3:17)? Or would that not be disrespectful? One would either need a more positive valuation of a pseudepigraphic text or need to venture the more radical suggestion that someone unconnected to Paul was doing so.

What sense do we make of these arguments? These three threads need to be examined individually and cumulatively. First, stylistic arguments turn on the nature of distinctive vocabulary. Ephesians has 2,429 words, with 530 distinct words; of these terms, only 84 do not appear in the Pauline writings, and 41 do not appear anywhere else in the New Testament. Such numbers are almost exactly paralleled in the case of Galatians: its 2,200 words involve a vocabulary of 526 words, of which 80 do not appear elsewhere in Paul, and 35 (more if one counts proper names) do not appear anywhere else in the New Testament. Yet Galatians is treated as an undisputed text (Fowl 2010: 20). The style of Ephesians admittedly includes longer, more complex sentences than are typical in Paul's writings (e.g., Eph. 1:3–14). However, stylistic argument and distinct vocabulary do rather little to suggest substantive reasons for suspecting the traditional attestation.

Second, many argue that Ephesians does not operate with the apocalyptic viewpoint typical of Paul's writings. It does not speak always under the looming sense of an imminent end. Instead, it ventures to speak of households and order and rhythms of communal life that point toward long-term formation. The presence of household codes here serves as the most pointed illustration of Ephesians' uniqueness and even jars many moderns to doubt Pauline authorship. But are the household codes really that different from Paul's teaching on social relations in the undisputed texts? Some argue that they conflict with Gal. 3:26–28, though that is questionable (→5:22–6:9). They surely do not conflict with principles of authority and submission latent in Rom. 12:3–8 and 13:1–7. Ephesians does add eschatological elements that are less obvious in texts such as 1 Corinthians

or Galatians, but we have to ask if that is a reason to doubt Ephesians' authorship claims. For instance, Romans and Galatians are frequently viewed as speaking rather differently about the law; even if they are read coherently, as they should, each still highlights different elements in its own distinct way. Why in modern critical study do differences on Torah not manifest an insurmountable rupture prompting doubt about authorship but different eschatological emphases do? All in all, there are good internal and external reasons not to take theological distinctiveness as a reason for doubting authorship claims (K. Barth 2017: 58; Fowl 2010: 22–25).

Third, Ephesians does speak in ways that parallel Colossians. If one surveyed recent commentators, one would likely get a sense that Colossian priority is favored, though many differ or hesitate to speak confidently one way or another. Indeed, making such judgments is speculative at best, remarkably tendentious at worst (for the complications, see charts and analyses in Talbert 2007: 4–6). Yet all would agree that the texts run parallel in terms of vocabulary, themes, and style. Of course, these parallels might help augment a case that neither text is as *alter*-Pauline as modern critical readers suppose (though they may differ from undisputed Paulines, they have notable commonalities as a Pauline subcorpus). In a real sense, this third line of argument serves to countermand the previous two: the parallels here show that whatever distinctiveness is present in Ephesians is present not only there but, to some extent and in sometimes diverging ways, in Ephesians *and* Colossians. Therefore, the parallels with Colossians offer no prompt to judge Ephesians as less likely Pauline and may well help augment the case that the style and substance of Ephesians is even less idiosyncratic than often judged (given that it is shared also by Colossians in so many cases). For a similar argument, see especially Karl Barth (2017: 56–57).

What about early interpreters? What was the church's judgment prior to the modern era? The earliest attestation of the text is indisputably Pauline: see *1 Clement* 46.6; Ignatius, *To the Ephesians* 1.1–2; Polycarp, *To the Philippians* 12.1; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.2.3, 5.8.1; and Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 4.8. At least two early texts evidence awareness of the category of pseudepigraphic texts and yet speak distinctly of Ephesians as being Pauline: Tertullian's *Prescription against Heretics* 36 and the Muratorian Fragment. Presumably these figures and communities would have had a broader sense of Greek style and vocabulary, of thematic and generational change regarding theology, and of the expanding Pauline corpus (not least Colossians and its relationship to Ephesians). That some of them overtly talk about texts in the primitive Christian milieu that are

pseudepigraphic and yet specifically judge that Ephesians is authentic is no small thing. Given the flimsy nature of critical arguments, each of which is weak on its own and only further weakened when viewed together, over against this global affirmation of early witnesses, we have every reason to take the text's claim to Pauline authorship at face value. It may be that we have reason to take purportedly historical-critical objections as being in this particular case neither historical nor critical.

The epistle itself suggests that Paul is frankly the least interesting of the causes of this scripture. Paul does not flourish his own experience with a congregation, nor does he allude to his own future plans herein. Whereas other epistles penned by this apostle to the Gentiles trace back their testimony to deep familiarity or tease out the hopes for ministry yet to come, Ephesians does not bear such marks. In its finale, we will hear a brief and blunt word: "So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord will tell you everything. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage your hearts" (6:21–22). One name (Tychicus), one action (sending him to report), one goal (that they might be encouraged by this update). Clearly Paul's pastoral pedigree, much less his present struggle (→3:1), do not factor heavily into this writing.

Paul's personal reserve does not suggest some kind of unmooring of his identity. He is not going the route of abject self-immolation. His biographical brevity takes the form of captivation. Someone more significant must be attested. Someone else's action must be confessed and communicated. That someone finds reference in two ways. First, Paul labels himself in such a way that is externally rooted by calling himself an "apostle." This term connotes genuine authority and vital responsibility, to be sure, but it is wholly derived from another. Karl Barth comments, "There is something exceptional and impossible about him, but it is not his genius, his experience, his unmediated knowledge, or anything that can be accounted for psychologically as greatness or character." There is a mortification of his own meaningfulness, yet Barth follows with a vivification of his place: "What makes him an apostle is his mission, his instructions, and the service he is to offer, which are not, from a psychological point of view, even *his own matter* but the matter that *has him* and sends him" (K. Barth 2017: 60). To be an apostle is, at its root, to be sent by another. Paul names himself as one sent by Christ Jesus, the exalted Son (→3:7–10). The risen Christ addressed Paul, stunning him and in so doing saving him from a mangled posture toward his lordship (see further Acts 9). Elsewhere Paul will insist that, though he was a

persecutor of the church, God “was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles” (Gal. 1:16). That statement prompts us to note the second way in which Paul points to someone behind himself: his apostleship comes “by the will of God.”

Ephesians will point time and again beyond the surface affairs and the obvious perceptions we might take in. A key purpose of the letter, explicitly so (→1:17–19; 3:16–19), is to reshape the spiritual sense or sensitivity of the reader. Paul intends to stretch the dimensional constraints of our sight, lest our myopia incline us to miss the most interesting activity. This expansion of imagination comes even in the naming of the author, for Paul will not let us go a hair’s breadth without characterizing himself as sent by another and, ultimately, as an apostle whose ministry is rooted in the eternal purposes of the God who wills. To qualify Paul’s role in this way does not denigrate the benefits of reading his text like other texts. We can bring the tools of literary criticism to bear in reading Ephesians, alert to its scope, shape, and sequence. And yet there is more that we dare not miss. These words and this testimony to the nations have mysterious roots all the way back in God’s eternity (→3:1–3), and thus we expect more here than we would from other texts (be they ancient or contemporary). While we might read this text with much profit against its background in the Greco-Roman world, the history of Jewish literature, and the development of early Christian instruction, we nonetheless must—absolutely must—attend to these words with a commitment to perceive them as another instance of divine gift.

These words also have a target that is both specific and suggestive. The specific target has been debated as to whether a particular locale comes in for address here: “who are in Ephesus.” The more suggestive address ranges more widely: “to the saints who are faithful in Christ Jesus.” We do well to consider the possible local reference, to reflect on the text-critical issues present here as well as the title appended to the epistle (“The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians”). As with the authorship question, so here many make a large deal of this question; yet the interpretative payoff is markedly less significant (whereas the authorship question at least has potential ramifications for how one interprets 3:1–13; 4:1; 6:20).

Brevard Childs (2008) reminds us that Ephesians comes to us amidst a collection of letters and that its placement therein bears significance. The relationship to Colossians is no doubt the most intriguing, given the verbal and thematic parallels. But we read Ephesians as part of a larger corpus that circulated together and has been received by Christians as a whole. Indeed, we might say that Ephesians plays a distinctive and hermeneutical role in the church’s reception of that



Pauline collection, for it alone bears the marks of a letter unmoored from local crises and particular anachronisms. While the other letters all commend Christ in relation to various flare-ups, Ephesians alone does not manifest a concern to address a significant controversy. Given this, it provides something of a Pauline melody against which we might read the other letters, noting where they fall in step and where they introduce new movements for pastoral reasons. All this has to be related to the admittedly complex documentary evidence, which may tilt toward omitting the phrase “who are in Ephesus” and the title “to the Ephesians” (on which see Thielman 2010: 12–16). Omission is the harder reading (the key question being: why would it ever be omitted once included?), and thus slightly more promising on text-critical grounds. We have reasons, admittedly tentative, to read the text minus the reference to Ephesus (though, of course, it likely circulated—even intentionally—to Ephesus among other cities in Asia Minor).

Returning to the words of 1:1, then, we must attend to Paul’s address to “the saints who are faithful in Christ Jesus.” Three things are worthy of attention. First, Paul writes to “the saints.” Other items will be attested regarding their experience, history, and character, ranging from their moral, ethnic, cultural, and contextual description. Yet Paul fixes on their holiness at the inception of the letter. He distinguishes them as set apart, for that is what it means to be a saint. He views them in another dimension, we might say, from those who share so many other demographic commonalities with these men and women. In many ways, Ephesians provides a set of lenses or spectacles through which we see the church as what we confess to be “the communion of saints.”

Second, the saintliness of these addressees is bound up with their being “faithful.” The term employed here, *pistoi*, marks them apart by means of that uniquely Christian virtue. Christians do well to remember that faith is not a universal honorific. Saints are those defined and set apart by their life of trust. There is something remarkably self-effacing in the terminology here, reminding us that saintliness is shaped by a life of appropriate dependence. The elites of Asia Minor, like the well-to-dos of the modern world today, ran in cultures marked by their pompous bravado. The gospel summons us to a notably different posture: trust. The apostle does name the moral virtue of the church, but it is a moral transformation that itself points away from control and composure to deeper roots in the divine character, in the one in whom we place trust.

Third, these saints are “faithful *in Christ Jesus*.” Here we have allusion to what will quickly become overt in the epistle—namely, that the most significant realities about its audience are bound up with their union with Jesus Christ. Ephesians

opens up a new dimension of life in the Christian community, illuminating the personal and social tie held in union with Jesus Christ. Even the letter's addressees cannot be stated without casting an eye to the deeper realities amidst them. Just as saintliness ought not be thought of apart from the uniquely Christian dignity received from God above, so we dare not attend to the value of that faith apart from its roots in its object—that is, “in Christ Jesus.” Reformational theology was so moved by this reality—that faith's significance lies in its object—as to address the matter regularly in catechisms. “Q. Why do you say that you are righteous by faith alone? A. Not because I please God by virtue of the worthiness of my faith, but because the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ alone are my righteousness before God, and because I can accept it and make it mine in no other way than by faith alone” (Heidelberg Catechism 61; see also Westminster Larger Catechism 73). Ephesians characterizes saintly faith ultimately by its object, fundamentally by its union with Jesus himself.

**1:2** Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

These words can easily be passed over and treated as mere rhetorical flourish, yet they deserve a careful and attendant gloss, for we find that they are an invitation to the depths of what the letter itself addresses. Paul wishes grace and peace for them, and we will see that these are the elements of his argument. He will describe God's kind gift and will sketch its harmonious effects. He will be satisfied neither to praise God's largesse without tracing out its impact into real lives, nor with any attempt to consider the practical contours of Christian life apart from seeing their source in God's agency. He highlights this twinned relationship—grace and peace—by locating both personally in the action that comes “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Similar greetings mark the beginning of many Pauline letters (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3; Phil. 1:2; 2 Thess. 1:2; Phlm. 3). Indeed, the greeting can be found also in non-Pauline writings of the New Testament (1 Pet. 1:2; 2 Pet. 1:2; Rev. 1:4), so that it likely represents a fundamental and widespread Christian greeting (M. Barth 1974a: 71). We ought not be surprised, for Paul's corpus addresses contingent circumstances with a consistent eye to the singular gift of God in Christ and its many ripple effects in renewing human life and community. No crisis marks this letter, and that makes this phrase's presence all the more telling. Paul's interventions into strife and his missive into the ecclesiological calm are attended by the same desire: whether in good times or bad,

grace is needed, and peace is meant to follow, and this comes only “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

What precisely can we say about this grace and the peace that the apostle wishes for these readers? Grace refers to the kindness and mercy of the Lord toward his people. Other terms—justice and righteousness most notably—would address the kind of reciprocity and equity that mark this relationship, but grace marks out the way in which God is the giver of gifts. *Charis* can and does “perfect” gifts in various ways in Jewish and Greco-Roman literature; Paul will characterize the gift of God in a number of notable ways that can only be discerned by reading on (Barclay 2015). And this incremental revelation is the point, for this invocation of blessing and this desired effect are meant to gesture toward the broader argument of the epistle. As we read, we look for grace and the way in which it will be defined, shaped by the unfolding witness of the text. Too easily, discussions of Paul’s presentation of the gospel tend toward assuming that grace is a known reality and only its opposite—“works” in many contexts, sin in others—requires specification. Too often, recent New Testament scholarship has suggested that grace was an idea permeating the Jewish mindset (Sanders 1977), pointing to the presence of the term in texts from that and previous eras. Yet those comparative arguments frequently fail to see that notable texts such as Wisdom of Solomon speak often of grace, to be sure, albeit in ways from which Paul diverged notably (Barclay 2015; Linebaugh 2013a). Whereas Wisdom would define grace as a gift given to one who would put it to optimal use, Paul understands grace as the favor shown to the ungodly, the enemy, the dead. The epistle will have to train us to hear “gift” well—that is, in a way that befits the Christian.

Peace speaks of the social character of the community marked by this grace (see especially the repeated reference in 2:14, 15, 17). Whereas “maturity” is the common term for wholeness of the Christian self (see Matt. 5:48; Heb. 5:14; cf. Eph. 4:13), peace characterizes the Christian society in terms of wholeness. Jonathan Pennington (2017: 71–72) highlights a number of texts in the Old Testament (Gen. 26:29; 34:21; Ps. 122:6; Zech. 6:13) that employ the term *shalom* to convey this notion of wholeness. Ephesians later characterizes the gospel of our Lord as “the gospel of peace” (Eph. 6:15). This epistle conveys the notion of wholeness in terms of persons (ch. 2) and gifts (ch. 4), so that again a desired effect of reading this letter serves as a benchmark or guide for our further meditation (see M. Barth 1974a: 74). We dare not presume to know intuitively what peace would be. It is far too easy for malformed hopes of what we name as harmony actually to be problems, in which case the gospel is but a disrupting and

transforming answer. But Paul reminds us frequently that Christ not only answers deep human questions but also grants us still greater questions. Like the psalmist, we find here that God not only answers our prayers but calls us toward a more penetrating sense of reality and of our real need. Peace given by this God is not the mere absence of our distastes nor the presence of our wants, but a wholeness to which our present yearnings must be transfigured.

So the message involves grace and peace, a twofold blessing that is addressed again at the letter's conclusion: "Peace be to the brothers, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible" (6:23–24). Note that the order of grace and peace is reversed here: it forms a chiasm of sorts with the opening. At the end the letter sums up how we live together in love (peace) and reminds the reader of how we are rooted (grace).

These easily overlooked realities are not only significant as abstract or universal realities; they are "to you." The promise of the text does not simply offer proverbial pontification about the ways of the world but attests to what God has given "to you." The personal and intimate—that which is deeply formative of one's self—is addressed by this.

Neither the cause (of God's grace) nor the call (to societal peace) can be presumed upon, so Paul goes on to define and particularize. These aspired hopes are "from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Paul does not hesitate to use causal language with regard to God (*apo*, "from") when speaking of this gift and the wholeness that it brings to our common life, but we must see that the causal language pushes deeper underneath the seemingly material or immanent conditions of human life. "God our Father" and the "Lord Jesus Christ" cannot be restricted to monikers for a tribal deity and a mere Jewish man. These terms *theou* and *kyriou* bespeak divine identity; as with its other occurrences in apostolic scripture, the appellation of *kyrios* to the person of Jesus identifies this one as the God of Israel, the great I AM (see Exod. 3:14). David Yeago (1994) and Kavin Rowe (2009) have helped sketch the ways in which the apostle Paul, like the later evangelists, applies this transcendent name (the name used to mark out the God of Exod. 3:14) to Jesus himself.

The God named here is the one who bears perfection, then, as God and Lord, but he is also the one whose perfection expresses itself in drawing near to his people. So this one is not only Father to the eternal Son, but out of that eternal generation of the Son he willfully pursues adopted children so that we too might address him as "our Father." This Lord can be named with a terribly common

Jewish name, Jesus (or Joshua), yet he uniquely bears a title and an office that was long anticipated by his people, the Messiah or Anointed One (*Christou*, “Christ”). We will see throughout the coming verses that the God of eternity shows no embarrassment or aloofness but takes up this world and even the blood found therein. His glory can and does extend into the seemingly messy and minute. C. S. Lewis once commented that the modern British are skittish toward believing that partaking of common elements such as bread and wine has any genuine religious benefit; but the creator and sustainer of the world does not share this view.<sup>1</sup> He delights to condescend in such a way. As he does not remain aloof but makes himself near through the sacraments, so here he makes himself known in this Jesus.

**1:3** Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,

God may be blessed. God has blessed us. Understanding the relationship of these two statements proves remarkably significant. Here eternity and history seem to face each other. In this verse the mutable and the immutable are drawn together. But can they stand together, or will they collapse on one another?

Modern theologians have suggested increasingly that God’s capacity to bless us hangs on his own involvement within and openness to our history. Ronald Goetz speaks of the “new orthodoxy” of the “suffering God,” seeking to explain what has been a groundswell in Christian theology since the Holocaust, owing to the pathbreaking work of figures like Jürgen Moltmann and revisionary texts like his *Crucified God*.<sup>2</sup> The vulnerable God can bless us in Christ—that is, in the cross and the sorrow of this redeemer. Blessing can resound on this God as well. Indeed, theologians such as Robert Jenson have argued that involvement in history can be an ontological perfection.<sup>3</sup> This sort of sketch, what Jenson might call an effort at evangelizing our metaphysics, seems on the surface to accord with the reciprocal blessings mentioned here.

Will the broader context allow for such a rendering? Will the way the words run here in 1:3 even support this tendency? Context seems to complicate matters, first, for there is a notably jarring set of phrases appearing throughout this long sentence that will run through 1:14. We do not avoid anything approaching

1. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1978), 65.

2. Ronald Goetz, “The Suffering God: The Rise of a New Orthodoxy,” *Christian Century* (April 16, 1986): 385–89; Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

3. Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *The Triune God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

reciprocity out of adherence to a perfect-being theology that draws on abstract or ideal speculation. That would be the way of assumption and premonition, which we might methodologically call speculation and spiritually diagnose as idolatry. But we do listen to Ephesians itself and hear a bracing call that God stands alone, not isolated but singular nonetheless. John Webster has argued that “the passage is scattered with gestures toward God’s wholly realized life”:

The blessings with which God has blessed us in Christ are “in the heavenly places” (1:3)—in the “highest heavens,” that is, the place where God and his Christ are ineffably exalted, “far above” (4:10), from where Christ exercises his universal and supreme lordship over “things in heaven and things on earth” (1:10).

These divine blessings flow, moreover, from the eternal relations of Father and Son: God the Father chose us in Christ “before the foundation of the world” (1:4); created circumstance follows and does not cause or shape divine election.

And so God the Father is “the Father of glory” (1:17), the inextinguishable source of light and radiant presence; God the Son is one who is again “far above” (1:21)—not a mere competing power or name, not circumscribed by spatial or temporal locale, but the universal and self-authored presence that can emerge only from the infinite recesses of God’s own life.

What is manifest, therefore, in the mission of Christ is God’s mysterious will (1:9): Christ’s work flows from and makes apprehensible the antecedent divine purpose, which is not reactive but which comprehends and forms created history.

He “who fills all in all” (1:23) is in himself replete, filling all things but filled by none; and so there is a creation and a redemptive history and a church. (Webster 2011: 390–91)

In light of these hints of perfect transcendence, then, we might be inclined to say that the Blessed One who blesses is not himself blessed because he blesses but was already blessed, is already blessed, and shall evermore be blessed. Return of blessing there may be, but we dare not render this in terms of easy reciprocity or a tit-for-tat and quid pro quo sketch of life with God.

Substantively, this is compelling. But the syntax actually proffers a more straightforward path when read in its Old Testament context. The opening call that God is blessed (*berakbah*) regularly occurs throughout the Psalter: “Blessed be God . . .” (Ps. 66:20); ‘Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel’ (Ps. 41:13, etc.)” (Bruce 1984: 253). The language of blessing—that God may be blessed and the one who blesses—employs the same verbal term to connote God’s enlivening of us and our praising or magnifying his name.

What is 1:3 commending if not a straightforward reciprocity of constitutive blessings? The God who blessed us is the one who shall still be himself blessed. God blesses in ways that seem costly, sacrificing his Son for the sins of the world. Yet redemption does not mark the course of God's giving himself away. The God who blesses us does so without thereby giving up his own blessedness. Ephesians 1:3 prompts us for what will be repeated in various prepositional phrases—namely, the participatory shape of our salvation and the mystery of life in union with God in Christ (see “in him” in 1:4, 7, 10, 11, 13; “in the Beloved” in 1:6; “in Christ” in 1:3, 9). The mediating work of the Son enfolds others into his own blessedness rather than passing off that blessedness like a possession whose ownership is always and only a zero-sum matter.

Yet we must go further: not only is this God not giving himself away in giving his only Son, but he is all the more blessed in that he is now also enthroned on the praises of his people (Ps. 22:3). While it is not constitutively reciprocal, there is a mysteriously responsive *berakhah* offered back to the Lord. Not only has God gone up with a shout (Ps. 47:5), but God's grace has now gone up with a shout. “Blessed be the name of the Lord”—this is the refrain of the people who have themselves been blessed. That metaphysical distinction between God's blessing them into life and their creaturely blessing offered as praise and acclaim to the God of all life implicitly states the great matter of Christian theology—namely, the perfect God's presence with his people for their blessing and his glory.

So this “God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” is blessed now and forevermore. And this in spite of his blessing us—nay, *even as* he “has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.” He has not withheld his highest glory from us but has shared “every spiritual blessing,” yet this largesse has not thereby stripped him of his resources. God's glory is not a capital fund of fully private property but, in the gospel, becomes a social good for those “in Christ.” And his generosity has not overwhelmed our finite frame either, for this capital glory exists “in the heavenly places.”

Ephesians will repeatedly seek to draw our attention to things heavenward. In many ways, chapters 1–3 especially, as well as the epistle as a whole, explode what Charles Taylor calls the “immanent frame.”<sup>4</sup> Like looking afresh through 3-D glasses, we are now able to see reality in its depth dimension. While we may be overwhelmed and waylaid by what is mundane or worse, in Christ we have all spiritual or godly goodness in the heavenly places. Paul will shortly turn to label

4. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 539.

this rich blessing as the inheritance of an adopted people, sons and daughters of the most high King (→1:5).

**1:4** even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.

Ephesians 1:4 points backward and forward. Its connections seek to show the deep source and the high purpose of God's rich, heavenly blessings given through Jesus Christ. Ephesians offers a vivid portrait of the present, obliterating the reductively immanent frame by taking in the heavenly spectrum but also by sketching the present as part of a deeper narrative. The text resituates us within a broader metaphysics of heaven and earth and a wider narrative that runs no shorter than Alpha to Omega.

First, this verse points backward by taking up the language of choice and election. The term used here, *exelexato*, appears infrequently in Paul (cf. 1 Cor. 1:27–28) but more commonly in the Gospels and Acts. This choice occurred “before the foundation of the world,” suggesting its precedence and eternal depth. The term connotes choice and selection, alluding to the exercise of the divine will in designating these persons as objects of God's own election.

Second, this verse also gestures forward to the intended aims of Christ's heavenly blessings—namely, “that we should be holy and blameless before him.” Note that holiness and blamelessness are not completely synonymous. We see this distinction even in Leviticus: “You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean” (10:10). Cleanliness or blamelessness is preferable to being unclean and blameworthy. Yet purity is not itself holiness. Holiness demands a still further devotion to the Lord. The holy is clean rather than unclean, but also holy as opposed to common. Christ blesses us not only that we might be purified from sin but that we might be alive to God (*coram Deo*, “before God”).

**1:5–6** In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.

Ephesians 1:5–14 now runs through the three tenses of Christian salvation with greater attentiveness to details. Verses 5–6 specifically return to that eternal past, wherein God's electing will was upon these saints “before the foundation of the world.”



This previous choice is now termed “predestination,” and Paul clarifies that it occurs “in love.” We have to read Eph. 1:5 in light of the rest of the epistle. In this case Eph. 2:1–3 proves pertinent, for God’s gracious love creates the beauty in which God delights, rather than delights in a beauty that already exists. Indeed, Paul will soon speak of not only an absent beauty but a deranged death and grotesque existence that we possess apart from Jesus Christ. So predestination occurs “in love,” but we do well to remember that remarkable claim from Luther’s 1518 Heidelberg Disputation: “The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it” (Luther 1957: 57).

Three further statements qualify or characterize this loving predestination. First, God’s adoption of sons through Jesus Christ occurs “according to the purpose of his will,” reminding us that the intended aim or “purpose” (*eudokian*) for our well-being is God’s own. History is not wayward and rambling but bears out this deeply rooted purposiveness. Second, God’s own direction leads “to the praise of his glorious grace,” for his pursuits refract on him in blessedness (→1:3). Third, predestination to adoption cannot be drawn the slightest bit away from the way “with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.”

Some have feared that predestination really connotes a hidden god, perhaps a god with a shadow side different from the manifestation of God’s glory in the face of Jesus Christ. But Paul will have none of it. Predestination speaks to divine resolve of precisely that blessing that characterizes the work of Jesus Christ. Yet we dare not tame Jesus or shave off the rough edges of his blessing, for he comes to bring a sword (Matt. 10:34), he speaks in parables to confound the doomed (Matt. 13:13), and he attests a future judgment to eternal perdition (Matt. 25:31–46). Predestination roots the blessing in Jesus rather than pointing away to some other face or mask of the divine being, but Jesus also pronounces woes and curses, and we would be remiss if we trimmed down predestination to be any less significant there.

Not only can predestination not be severed from Jesus, but it also cannot stop short of leading to praise. The God who wills this history and these events—in the particular story of Jesus’s sojourn and now in these Christian lives—is to be acclaimed. A bit more specifically, Paul believes that his eternal election prompts praise of his “glorious grace” (see similar phrasing in 1:12, 14). Does this grace bestow his glory? Or does his glory overflow into and prompt the giving of this grace? The genitive relationship could be rendered in either direction grammatically, though the wider context of chapters 1–3 may well prompt us to avoid

any separation here. Not only in 1:7–8 but also later in 1:23 and 3:19 the glory of God will be bound up with the grace of God: not only standing behind it as source and before it as goal but also bearing it as gift (for the God who is full fills us all with that which is his own). We not only acclaim the way that his gravitas leads to his generosity, but we accord him glory, laud, and honor for the way in which he gives us nothing less than his own self. Glory, like blessing, exists in God—marking out his singular all-sufficiency—and shall be ascribed to God by the echoing praise of his children.

**1:7–9** In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will,

Paul now returns to the affairs at hand in the story of the gospel, having contemplated their eternal depths in God’s own predestining love. The earlier reference to “adoption . . . *through* Jesus Christ” (1:5) now takes an even more particular bent: “redemption *through* his blood.” The instrument of our being enfolded into the divine family by adoption and redemption from sin cannot simply be identified by the name of Jesus but is identified even more specifically by reference to his shed blood.

This blood is defined or clarified as “the forgiveness of our trespasses.” The seventeenth-century theologian John Owen spoke of how the death of death occurred in the death of Christ, wherein his shed blood atoned for sins. The first time Owen addressed the matter, he argued that God might have simply forgiven sin by fiat but willingly chose to put forward his incarnate Son as a sacrifice for human sin. A few years later, in his “Dissertation on Divine Justice,” Owen argued that divine justice demands satisfaction and not merely abeyance of human sin.<sup>5</sup> The argument hinges on biblical teaching and on the doctrine of divine simplicity. First, biblical teaching frequently attests the way in which both justice and mercy mark the atoning work of God. “Steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other” (Ps. 85:10). In that most famous of psalms, the conclusion comes with acclamation that “surely goodness and mercy shall follow me” (Ps. 23:6). The gratuity of God fulfills rather than repudiates the good justice of God. When we are victims of mistreatment, this promise can serve as a salve to our pains. But we must be equally willing to stand

5. See Carl R. Trueman, *The Claims of Truth: John Owen’s Trinitarian Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998).

under the same sign when acknowledging the only pathway by which our own injustice may be forgiven.

Yet the necessity of redemption through blood and forgiveness by means of atonement does not bespeak divine weakness or lack. Critics of such atonement theology—whether in its Anselmian form, its earlier Jewish sacrificial mode, or its later Protestant penal manifestation—regularly lodge the complaint that only a weak God would be unwilling or incapable of forgiveness apart from a seeming bloodlust. Does this turn from eternity and blessing to blood and forgiveness signal a divine insufficiency? Quite the opposite, for language of excess appears here: “according to the riches of his grace” points to the fullness that is his own, while “which he lavished upon us” alerts us that those depths of the divine storehouse are poured out for us (→3:16). Paul will return to this pairing in concluding this chapter with the acclamation that the church is “the fullness of him who fills all in all” (1:23) and later in praying that “you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (3:19). We dare not race past this earlier mention, however, for the benefits of Christ’s grace are here tied to the depths of God’s own triune fullness.

Fullness cannot be caught, however, like any other object of knowledge. So it is not for nothing that this is depicted as a “mystery” and must be revealed “in all wisdom and insight.” This will not be the only mystery in Ephesians (cf. 3:3, 4, 9; 5:32). Later Paul will herald boldly the proclamation of “the mystery of the gospel” (6:19) as one of the more all-encompassing descriptions of his apostolic work (similar to Rom. 16:25–26). These mysteries of the faith bear careful pedagogical delivery, and Paul says that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ makes them known with insightful wisdom. As in Gal. 3:24, there is a divine prudence shown in manifesting the truth to sinners bent to falsehood in a patient, persistent manner that leads to righteousness. We tend to think of pastoral wisdom in exercising thoughtful pedagogy with any given person or congregation, but this verse speaks of God’s pedagogical insight in dealing with all his people not merely on a personal register but at a redemptive-historical level.

**1:9–10** according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

This prudence in divine pedagogy leads to a goal: the “purpose” (*oikonomian*) that is “set forth in Christ.” Indeed, the patience of the divine pedagogy attested here in 1:9 is meant to accent the purposive mystery of Christ. It is surely not for

nothing that “Christ” is mentioned here, rather than “Jesus,” as this title manifests the kind of patient pedagogical preparation under discussion. Jesus was to be received as the Anointed One or Messiah, as the prophet, priest, and king of Israel.

Christ is made manifest at the “fullness of time.” Time cannot be treated as the plodding of years after months after days after seconds of chronological sequence. We may experience time as a succession of instants, one atop another, and yet there is a “fullness of time,” and it expresses a divine “purpose” and “plan.” Time is teleological and purposive. Time bears the very fullness of the one who is himself full.

Now, this fullness is not some extraneous solution to the vagaries of time, and it is not thereby ambiguous or unknown. He “set [it] forth in Christ,” so the emphasis here is on its manifest character. In fact, the previous verses must not be forgotten—namely, that the “riches of his grace” are “lavished upon us” inasmuch as this manifestation of the divine plan appears. God’s grace is displayed not only in redeeming but also in revealing; God’s riches are shared not merely in becoming incarnate amidst history but also in summing up history in an eternal plan.

This passage illustrates a nexus point for recent debates regarding Paul’s theology, whether it is salvation-historical or apocalyptic in form. The language of “mystery made known” connects with the intrusive imagery of apocalyptic theology, while the notion of a purpose and plan (indeed an *oikonomian*) speaks of the historical and narrational character of God’s agency. While scholarly trends may veer or tilt from one direction to another (whether toward J. L. Martyn or others’ apocalyptic register or again toward N. T. Wright’s salvation-historical approach), Paul’s language includes both registers. God does sum up time and history, to be sure, and so we must speak not only of redemptive history but of God actually working on history itself: it’s not quite right to say “redeeming history”—because history has not sinned—but we might say “transfiguring history” or “filling history.” And yet the character of this summing up that is “set forth in Christ” intrudes on the plod of human history and cuts against the grain of any notion of immanent progress. Even its logic has to be graciously “set forth” and revealed and can’t be assumed to be obvious or available for observation and analysis apart from divine action.

God unites “all things in him,” and we must deal with the universalism and particularism in this claim. God acts on all. God does so in Jesus Christ. Two questions emerge. First, what does it mean that things are united in Jesus Christ? Is this language of redemption or of some creational, metaphysical reality that falls short of Christian salvation? Second, what does it mean that “all things . . .

things in heaven and things on earth” are drawn together in Christ? Does this really have significance for every element of created reality, or does it have some other significance? Might it be construed representatively or hyperbolically? Kevin Vanhoozer suggests a way to think about both questions: “We therefore have to distinguish two kinds of ‘being in’ or participation in Christ: a general cosmological participation in the Son through whom all things were made (Col. 1:16) and a more particular Christological abiding in the Son in whom there is reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:17). . . . Salvation involves more than relating to God generically as a creature; it involves relating to God covenantally ‘in Christ’” (2010: 281–82). Vanhoozer suggests that some participate in salvific union with Christ, while all share in his mediation of existence. In so doing Vanhoozer finds a way to thread the needle of Manichaeism on the one hand and universalism on the other hand. But of which kind of participation does Eph. 1:10 speak?

Here we see one instance where Ephesians and Colossians do follow the same pathway. Colossians 1 speaks of Christ’s significance for “all” in its hymn:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. (Col. 1:15–20)

Paul there repeats the language of “all” (which appears five times in one form or another), and he not only also employs the terms “in heaven and on earth” but appends other pairings (e.g., “visible and invisible”).

Back to Eph. 1:10: God unites “things in heaven and things on earth.” This literary merism takes in all reality, and it means to help us picture reality in the most basic of terms. Genesis 1 introduces us to created reality as composed of heaven and earth (Gen. 1:1) and then speaks of the filling of these realms with things or occupants. Here all these things, whether in the heavens or on the earth, are united “in him.”

Is not all this analysis something of an ontological diversion from dealing with the coming of the Christ? Does metaphysical analysis actually pull us closer to hear

the textures of Paul's teaching, or does it not distance and occlude such intimate and patient listening to the tones of scripture? John Webster says something pertinent in asking why grasping Paul's ethical teaching can't be pursued apart from metaphysical inquiry: "Why must Christian ethics contemplate being? In order that our moral lives can be conducted away from idols toward reality. The metaphysical impulse in Christian theology is not a flight from history—far from it: it is an element in the ascesis imposed upon sinners by the gospel, part of the needful dispossession and re-engagement with the truth in which the baptismal form of Christian existence is impressed upon the subjects of God's redemptive goodness" (2015b: 15).

Perhaps speculative or metaphysical theology falls foul of some Reformational worries about thereby tilting away from God's self-revelation toward the hunches of human hypotheses. There surely are traditions of inquiry within the Lutheran and later Reformed churches that have decried metaphysics for just those reasons. And yet it is precisely the scriptural assault on our proclivity toward idolatry that prompts more than a surface reading of the biblical text and goads us toward the material substance—the metaphysical reality—of which it gives witness, either directly or indirectly. To see Jesus here as the one in whom all is summed up serves like a kidney punch to stall our own projected self-direction and to puncture any sense of self-sufficiency.

More must be said of this specific action: *anakephalaiōsasthai*. Irenaeus of Lyons takes the term and runs with it, reading scripture through this lens of recapitulation and tracing ways in which Jesus fills up earlier scriptural elements. The term used here sums something up, drawing together disparate or disconnected parts and moving them onto some sort of resolution and climax. Frequently it is a term employed to sum up an argument, rhetorically speaking, and highlight its consequence. Here, however, Christ sums up or recapitulates all things, things in heaven and things on earth. As Paul will elsewhere say, "All the promises of God find their Yes in him [Christ]" (2 Cor. 1:20). The Son provides both the fulfillment and the final clarification of promises, indeed of all things. So-called apocalyptic readings rightly accent the way in which the action of Christ is total and seismic in its agential power. Yet we do well to attend to the way in which Christ's transcendental and invasive works fill up and tease out categories that the Son gave to his people Israel in prior epochs of covenant history.

**1:11** In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will,

The union enjoyed in Christ brings not merely pacification but an inheritance. God owns us as his sons or daughters so that the work of salvation brings not merely survival but an estate. Throughout the epistle more will be said about these riches (1:7, 18; 2:7; 3:8, 16), and the divine storehouse is shared with many sons and daughters.

Of course, we are not natural-born sons and daughters but those adopted (→1:5), which is why the prepositional phrase “in him” continues to recur. Christians possess and partake of riches in Christ—not in themselves, nor in anything native to them. By grace, not by nature, is the watchword here. And, therefore, we must see that this inheritance does not simply come obviously or naturally. Thus, Paul returns to the language of divine intention or will; here he takes up the term “purpose” to speak of God’s working out by “the counsel of his will.” All things, all history come from his counsel or judgment—that is, his will.

Predestination is language of sovereignty. However much history and its vagaries may appear to drift from anything spiritual or divine, the claim here suggests that history still operates according to God’s decretive will. Further, Paul draws a wider and a closer circle: in the closer circle, he charts God’s predestining will that we obtain this inheritance in Christ; in the wider circle, he will go further to speak of all things working by God’s will. But “the purpose of him” connects these two realities—his predestining love of his own and his global governance of all things. The text does not reduce the global to the salvific, as if the only purpose for the former is the latter. Still further, the text does not purport to say how the global tacks toward the salvific, as if seeking to read the tea leaves of providence. But the text does confess—by faith, not sight—the providential and global direction that has salvific consequence.

**1:12** so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.

Speaking of purpose, Paul not only says that global governance by almighty God serves a purpose in graciously granting an inheritance to those adopted in Christ. He also speaks further of a purpose behind the disbursement of that estate—namely, that it might be to “the praise of [God’s] glory.” The language of “hope in Christ” serves as a crucial connection point in this regard: because this inheritance comes to those who hope in Christ, the delivery of the promised riches eventually proves his trustworthiness and thereby magnifies his name. Not merely hope itself as an act but those persons (“we”) who do hope in Christ are themselves the praise of his glory. The hope placed in Christ grants a quality to

the very being of the Christian by turning outward to find fullness in another (much like Heb. 11:13–16 speaks of faith doing so). Christians find their meaning and hope outside their own lives and fully in this Messiah; their very being exalts his goodness and grace.

“We” may refer to the first generation or wave of Christians, though perhaps it is more likely that Paul alludes here to Jewish believers in distinction from Gentile believers. Two reasons suggest such a focus. First, 1:10 has already spoken of the “fullness of time,” wherein all has been brought together (see also Gal. 4:4–5). Second, 1:11 then declares the inheritance given, which makes one think on the fact that such an estate must have been promised previously, and where else but to Israel? Third, the following verses contrast the “we” with a “you also”: that “you” is marked by belief and the Spirit but also refers to Gentile believers who were formerly “the uncircumcision” (2:11). Most Jews of Paul’s own day had spurned the Messiah, and Paul elsewhere lamented with sorrow that reality (Rom. 9:1–5). His words here echo the latter portion of that passage, however, where he argued that the failure of individual Israelites—even of a sizable aggregate of them—did not negate the word of God or the glory of the Lord (see also Rom. 9:5; 11:36).

**1:13–14** In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

Paul continues describing the present experience of the congregation before pressing on to the future inheritance yet to be possessed. He peers backward to consider what has been accomplished in and for them here, and he does so by speaking alertly of the action of Christ and his Holy Spirit.

First, the Holy Spirit was promised, has been given as a guarantee, and now seals them. The Spirit was foretold and promised, in both Old and New Testament revelation (Joel 2:28–32; Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8). The glory of the Lord indwelt the temple of the Lord in the ancient economy (1 Kings 8); now the glory of God inhabits the Christian man, woman, and child.

Second, this sealing with the Spirit occurred for “you also” and comes only “in him”—that is, in Christ Jesus. The Spirit is no supplement to Christ, and he is no discrete gift. The Spirit is an aspect of Christ’s own gift. Sealing with the Spirit comes precisely when one believes in Jesus; thus the empowerment of the presence of the Spirit does not mitigate but crowns one’s dependence on the incarnate Son. The notion of being united with or located within Christ has been recurring here



(see 1:3, 4, 6, 7, 10, 11; contra many commentators, other “in Christ” references relate that phrase to action and not to our union or location, as in 1:9, 12). These actions of Son and Spirit involve divine action in our very being, not merely on our behaviors or actions. The God of predestination and election deigns to act lovingly in our midst and in our very selves. This heavenly work comes prompted, in this case by one “hear[ing] the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believ[ing] in him.” Ephesians 1:13 actually offers parallel statements marked out by the adverbial clause “in whom you also” (*en hō kai hymeis*), highlighting the reality that both hearing and believing Christ are essential to being sealed by his Spirit. The Spirit may be related to an inheritance but is no estate passed pell-mell from one generation to another apart from personal trust.

All this is from God—the Son and Spirit—and returns to God: “to the praise of his glory” (cf. 1:6, 12). God’s heavenly work amidst us shows that he provides not merely the atoning sacrifice of the servant king nor even just the heavenly foothold of the exalted Son but also the applicatory indwelling of his only begotten Son. From him is truth, salvation, and the Spirit. Through him is the word, the sealing, and guarantee. Therefore, to him is all glory.

**1:15–19a** For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe . . .

Paul regularly turns to prayer for his audience (see especially Phil. 1:3–6 and Col. 1:3–14). He is an apostle, a sent one, an emissary whose action finds its power and validity only in the warrant of another. In a vivid sense, his speech comes from him hearing Jesus. Yet here we see that this relationship runs the other way also: he hears of their faith and love, and he turns intuitively to God in his prayers.

Paul first remembers them in his prayers, having “heard of [their] faith in the Lord Jesus and [their] love toward all the saints.” These words shape our understanding of his audience in this epistle. Again, his hearing may relate to a broader region and the church therein, as opposed to the particular congregation or church in Ephesus itself. Indeed, his comments on their witness do remain theologically