

# 1. The opening salutation

## Ephesians 1:1-2

### The authority that marks this epistle (Ephesians 1:1-2)

The letter begins in the usual form for letters of that day. Rather than our conventional, 'Dear ...', there is: 'Writer to the reader, greetings.' Authority marks this introduction at every point. Not only crispness and clarity open the correspondence, but assertive directness summons the minds of those addressed.

Authority is not a popular theme today. Relativism has taken precedence. Whether the scene is family, school, workplace, or public or private morals, nothing is to be seen as black and white, but some shade of grey. Everything is relative, never absolute. The same is true of much theology. When liberalism attacked the authority of Scripture in the early part of the twentieth century, Barthianism appeared to come to the rescue. From a background of Hegelian philosophy Karl Barth propounded the thesis that Scripture *is* not the Word of God, but that it *becomes* the word of God in existential encounter. While there is undoubtedly some truth in part of this contention, it falls far short of regarding Scripture as final and

authoritative. There is no acceptance of inspiration in terms of God's leaving a deposit of propositional truth in the words of Scripture and, certainly, no grounds for regarding Scripture as inerrant.

When we walk into Ephesians, we enter a different world entirely. There things are quite definite and precise. We are confronted by a writer who claims authority for what he says, by readers who are obviously expected to take seriously what is written to them because they are in a relationship with Jesus who is Messiah, and by an introductory greeting which purports to come from God and the Lord Jesus Christ. There is certainly nothing hazy about that. Right at the very outset of this letter, authority is impressed upon us, and that is its continuing theme. It is an authority which is impressive and bears the hallmark of the God of Scripture, in writer, readers and greeting.

#### The writer (1:1)

##### 1:1. Paul ...

That authority comes with the very first word of the letter, **'Paul'**, yet this itself presents a problem. For nineteen centuries Pauline authorship of Ephesians was undisputed. The early Church Fathers, along with Marcion, accepted its authenticity. Modern scholarship, however, has questioned this on a number of grounds:

Paul's allusions to himself are said to be forced and artificial. Certain words and phrases are, it is claimed, quite unusual and markedly un-Pauline. For example, Paul refers to the devil by various titles in other accepted, letters, apart from the Pastoral Epistles, but does not use *diabolos* as he does in Ephesians and the Pastoral Epistles. The phrase 'in

the 'heavenlies' occurs five times in Ephesians and nowhere else in Paul's writings. Some phrases are said to be redundant with artificial eloquence not normally found in Paul, such as 'the purpose of his will' (1:11) and, literally, 'the might of his strength' (1:19).

Comparison with Colossians, an undisputedly Pauline letter, is said to suggest that Ephesians is dependent on Colossians and is the product not of Paul but of an imitator. Over a quarter of the words in Ephesians are regarded as being borrowed from Colossians, while more than a third of the words in Colossians reappear in Ephesians. Some explanation is necessary to account for this phenomenon unknown elsewhere in Paul's writings. Further, there is a so-called markedly different use of key terms in the two letters. Christ as 'head of the body' is referred in Ephesians to headship over the church (4:15-16); in Colossians to headship over principalities and powers (Col. 2:19). 'Mystery' is specified in Ephesians as referring to unity between Jew and Gentile (3:6); in Colossians it is applied to Christ (Col. 1:27). In Colossians 'administration' is used for Paul's stewardship (Col. 1:25), in Ephesians for God's dispensation of grace (3:2).

The theology of Ephesians, it is claimed, is quite different from that of Paul in certain basic doctrines. The concept of the church in Ephesians is universal, based on the foundation of the 'holy apostles and prophets' (2:20), whereas in most other Pauline letters it is local, based on Christ as the 'foundation' (e.g., 1 Cor. 3:11). The view of marriage is 'high' in Ephesians (5:21-33) and said to be markedly different from that of Corinthians (see 1 Cor. 7). In Christology, Ephesians attributes to Christ the initiative which in other Pauline letters is ascribed to God, for example, in reconciliation (cf. Eph. 2:16 with Col. 1:20; 2:13-14) and appointing leaders in the church

(cf. Eph. 4:11 with 1 Cor. 12:28). There is said to be an inordinate stress on the exaltation of Christ in Ephesians, to the detriment of the atonement which is so fundamental to Paul's letters (see Eph. 1:15 – 2:10). Markus Barth suggests that, once we begin reading Ephesians, we become conscious not of Paul as author, but of 'a stranger at the door'.<sup>1</sup>

However, none of these obstacles is insuperable and many are capable of alternative interpretation. The numerous statements in the letter relating to Paul read quite naturally and not as fabrication (3:1,3,7-8,13-14; 4:1). Word counts, like statistics, can be notoriously misleading and unusual words are explicable on the grounds of the author's creativity or need to address some particular aspect of truth. There are also many words common to Ephesians and other Pauline epistles which do not occur elsewhere in the New Testament. The vocabulary of Ephesians is nearer, in that regard, to earlier Pauline letters than that of Colossians. Flowing literary style is germane to the subject matter of Ephesians, just as staccato-like debate suits the theme of Galatians.

Comparison with Colossians can work both ways. There are features which show the dependence of Colossians on Ephesians rather than vice versa, while the affinities of language and thought in both letters are so close as to make it more reasonable to regard Paul as the author rather than some impostor or imitator. Christ's headship of the church, his body, a theme common to both Colossians and Ephesians (Col. 1:18; Eph. 5:23), is quite distinct from the body imagery in Romans and Corinthians, where headship is absent (see Rom. 12:4-8; 1 Cor. 12:12-30). 'Mystery' is used, not only in Colossians but also in Ephesians, of Christ's work in general, and in Romans it is applied to the gospel of Christ — each time in a way that is consistent with the particular thrust of the letter concerned but at the same

time harmonious with the meaning of ‘mystery’ in all three letters (Col. 1:27; Eph. 1:9-10; Rom. 16:25-26). ‘Administration’ embraces both Paul’s stewardship and God’s dispensation in both Ephesians and Colossians, as an examination of the personal content of Ephesians 3 will show (see Eph. 3:2; Col. 1:25). The difference in meaning in key terms has been overplayed.

In theology, too, features in Ephesians common with other Pauline letters must not be discounted. For example, the church is equally conceived of as universal in 1 Corinthians. Believers there are linked ‘together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ — their Lord and ours’ (1 Cor. 1:2). The variant views in marriage simply reflect the different situations addressed in Corinth and in Ephesus. The attributing of initiative to Christ rather than to God is not peculiar to Ephesians; in fact it is a feature, not only of Paul’s epistles, but of the entire New Testament. The paucity of references to the atonement is simply because, in Ephesians, the emphasis is on Christ’s exaltation as the culmination of his work. Indeed, instead of the theology of Ephesians pointing away from Paul as the author, examined in the light of his other letters, this epistle might be seen as his *summa theologica*, the very quintessence and climax of Pauline theology. There is no *prima facie* case here for Paul’s not being the author of Ephesians.

1:1. ... an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God...

The note of authority continues. Paul describes himself as an ‘**apostle**’. The Greek word for ‘apostle’ (*apostolos*) has behind it the idea of someone being ‘sent’ or ‘commissioned’. In classical Greek the word was used of a naval or military expedition sent on a definitive mission. The nearest Hebrew equivalent to

'apostle' means an ambassador or emissary of the high priest. Paul goes to Damascus with paper credentials as ambassador of the high priest of Jerusalem. Thereafter, he operates as an apostle of Jesus Christ.

'Apostle' is used in different senses in the New Testament. Sometimes it simply designates one serving Christ as 'pastor' or 'teacher' in an ordinary capacity. On other occasions, it defines a specialized post, the foremost of leaders in the church. In this letter, it implies one who has received direct commission from Jesus, as with the twelve disciples, or a witness of the resurrection, or one deputed to this office in an unusual fashion, as was Paul himself. Special powers can mark the apostle, as in the conferring of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands, or in his work being accompanied by miraculous signs and wonders, such as tongues, prophecy and healing. In Ephesians generally, and specifically here in 1:1, 'apostle' appears to be used in the fullest possible sense.

Paul was very conscious of his apostleship. He introduces his other letters in a similar way to this one. This is because his apostleship was, at times, disputed. His most forceful introduction is in his letter to the Galatians, where he claims his apostolic office 'not from men, nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father' (Gal. 1:1). Here in Ephesians the note of authority is similar, tracing his apostleship to the will of God. Elsewhere he makes the point that he is not a whit less than the so-called 'super-apostles', and that the signs of an apostle have marked his ministry (2 Cor. 11:5; 12:12). Paul claims to have had this office conferred upon him as one 'abnormally born' (1 Cor. 15:8). In all, Paul's words express the authority of an extraordinary office in Christ Jesus confirmed by the direct imprimatur of God's will.

## The readers (1:1)

### 1.1. ...to the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus.

**‘Saints’** translates the Greek word for ‘holy [ones]’. In the Old Testament holiness was an attribute of God. It recalls God’s unique ‘otherness’, or ‘apartness’ from his creation, and, in connection with that, his moral purity and perfection. In the Old Testament, when used of things and people, the designation ‘holy’ stressed their separation for, and consecration to, God. From the same root comes the verbal form which means ‘to cleanse’, either from guilt or from inward pollution, by a propitiatory sacrifice, and also ‘to consecrate’ or set aside for God’s service. Israel is described as ‘a holy nation’ or ‘holy people’, chosen, called and set apart for God (Exod. 19:5-6; Deut. 7:6; 26:19; Jer. 2:3).

In the New Testament, Paul clearly expresses this meaning. Corinthian believers are ‘those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ — their Lord and ours’ (1 Cor. 1:2). Thereafter, Paul uses the term ‘saints’ as a regular way of describing Christians in general (Rom. 1:7; 8:27; 2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:2). Sometimes by the term ‘saints’ Paul refers more narrowly to Judaeans believers (Rom. 15:25-26,31; 1 Cor. 16:1; 2 Cor. 8:4; 9:1,12). Both Paul and other New Testament writers use ‘holy’ and its cognates to describe, not just that initial stage of sanctification in the sense of cleansing, setting apart and consecrating the person to God which is described by theologians as definitive sanctification, but also that subsequent development known as progressive sanctification, by which the believer becomes more morally pure and so reflects in his life the holiness of God. But in this verse the root idea of cleansing, setting apart and

consecration by God to God lies behind Paul's use of this title. C. Hodge sums it up well: 'Hence, the *Hagioi*, "saints", are those who are cleansed by the blood of Christ, and by the renewing of the Holy Ghost and thus separated from the world and consecrated to God.'<sup>2</sup>

Often in popular usage the term 'saint' is employed in a narrow sense to describe apostles or other notable Christians. This is inaccurate. Far from being of the 'stained-glass' variety, 'saints' are those who, in every age and place, experience God's saving power in definitively separating them from sin to himself and in making them, as a result, progressively holy.

**'Faithful'** in Greek is, literally, 'believing'. Again, it is almost a technical term for the Christian. The New Testament uses this verbal form for saving trust in Christ and, as such, it is never something purely academic. It involves action. To believe in Jesus Christ is to repose personal reliance upon him with a view to salvation. It involves coming to, receiving, eating, drinking and, thus, appropriating him in a personal way. It also carries implications. As the saint becomes what he is in Christ, 'holy', so the believer becomes 'faithful' or reliant in his character. Faith is both active and productive in that sense. When we sing the carol, 'O come all ye faithful,' we are not summoning those who think Christmas is a good idea, but calling all who have exercised personal trust in Christ, and who know absolute commitment to him thereby, in that relationship to praise their Saviour.

The engaging feature about these believers is the scenario of their faith. They are holy people 'in Ephesus', or wherever, because they are believers **'in Christ Jesus'**. Their relationship with Christ makes a difference to their life on earth. The sovereignty of salvation is evident in their daily living.



The words, '**... in Ephesus**', are absent from some early New Testament manuscripts and this poses another problem, since it has been questioned whether, in fact, the letter was really directed to Ephesus.

There is little doubt about Paul's contact with Ephesus. His first visit was a short one when he preached Christ for a time but, forced to leave, promised a return visit if it was God's will (Acts 18:19-22). This visit was made shortly afterwards. On his arrival, Paul taught twelve incompletely instructed disciples, who had been acquainted only with John's baptism and had not even heard of the Holy Spirit. Thereafter, he remained for most of three years, teaching first in the synagogue, then debating in the public hall of Tyrannus, witnessing to both Jews and Greeks about repentance to God and faith in Jesus Christ. Some eventually came to faith and, then, when Paul was ready to leave, a public uproar arose over the trade of miniatures of the goddess Diana, whose temple was at Ephesus (Acts 19). Paul made a hurried return visit when on his way to Jerusalem, but only went as far as the outer port of Miletus, where he addressed the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:13-38). His acquaintance, then, with the Ephesian scene was by no means cursory.

In the light of these contacts, surprise has been expressed about the very 'general' nature of the letter to the Ephesians. With the exception of Tychicus (6:21), there are no personal references to Paul's friends or acquaintances, such as we find in letters to other churches (e.g., Col. 4:7-14). There are no specific problems addressed, nor particular aspects of doctrine dealt with. This, of course, would be understandable if, after initial difficulties, the church made steady progress. However, the absence of any 'local' data certainly does seem strange. Is there any resolution of this question? Perhaps there is.

The absence of 'in Ephesus' from some early manuscripts has been explained on the grounds of the letter being a 'circular' correspondence. On this understanding, the epistle might have been dispatched, perhaps first to Ephesus, or even with a blank space left, to be filled in where appropriate, and then directed to other churches in the area, a sort of Pauline 'encyclical'. Similarly to Peter's first letter, which was aimed mainly at Jewish Christians in Asia Minor, 'Ephesians' might have been sent first to Ephesus and then to the surrounding churches, where Gentile Christians resided. In his list of letters, Marcion describes the letter to the Ephesians as 'to the Laodiceans'. Paul in Colossians 4:16 urges: 'After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans, and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.' Could 'the letter from Laodicea' be our 'Ephesians'? Tychicus is certainly a factor common to both letters and may also possibly have been the bearer of both letters (6:21-22; Col. 4:7-8). This would give some credence to such a theory.

Whether a circular letter or not, the implication is clear. The teaching given in Ephesians is suitable not only for Ephesus, but for any place where there are those who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and, indeed, for those today of the same persuasion. The possibility of Ephesians being an 'encyclical' for general consumption simply enhances its universal relevance and authority.

### The greetings (1:2)

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

**‘Grace’** and **‘peace’** were the conventional terms of salutation for Greek and Jew respectively. The Greek term, ‘grace’, and the Hebrew term, ‘peace’, would have been in common usage. But here they are used in a plenary and markedly Christian sense, for they come from God the Father and his Son Jesus the Messiah. These terms do not merely form a greeting, but constitute a summary of the fundamental substance of the letter which follows.

**‘Grace’** (*charis*) lies at the heart of Paul’s theology and connotes the unmerited favour of God. It harks back to the Hebrew concept of ‘grace’ (*hen*) rather than that of ‘steadfast love’ (*hesed*). ‘Steadfast love’ denotes God’s covenant favour and can also be used to describe man’s response to God’s favour. ‘Grace’ speaks of God’s unique favour to which man cannot respond in kind. ‘Grace’ in Paul’s theology comes to mean the total involvement of the divine favour in salvation. The letter begins with much more than conventional modern expressions such as ‘Cheers’!

**‘Peace’** (*eirēnē*), when seen against both Greek and Hebrew backgrounds, completes the picture. It carries overtones both of the end of warlike relations and of the establishment of ongoing well-being between God and man. Again, this goes far beyond any conventional greeting. It speaks of peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ and progressive spiritual blessing as a result. Its significance is both sovereign and saving.

### Application

Authority, then, marks this opening salutation in Ephesians. It is an authority we need to recover today if the thrust of this letter is to mark its message on our lives.

There is the authority of the *apostle*. Misconception here has gravely damaged the Christian church. Within settled

denominations, it has produced institutionalized power-block leadership, dependent on mere outward insignia, which has fossilized real life in the church. Within para-church groupings, it has resulted in arrant claims of shepherding and misuse of charismatic gifts and authority, to the detriment of the decency and order which should characterize any Spirit-filled community of believers. We need to recover the biblical parameters of apostleship. The 'extraordinary' nature of this office within the church, its confirmatory function in the signs and wonders concurrent with it, the index of its strength as relating to Scripture and its authority, its natural 'cessation', not in terms of its power but of the means by which God today exercises that power, are all relevant biblical considerations implicit in this rediscovery. They help us to see the purpose of the apostolic office, to appreciate the import of charismatic gifts, to exercise the continuing power of apostleship in the exposition of Scripture and to reap the harvest in a truly apostolic church. Paul, in his letter, will write later of the gifts and purpose of 'apostles', 'prophets', 'evangelists' and 'pastors / teachers' and of a church 'built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone' (4:11; 2:20), all of which, far from exhibiting an incipient Catholicism that would indicate a later date than that of Paul, illustrates the zenith of Paul's teaching concerning a truly apostolic church. But we shall examine that in detail later.

There is the authority of *Scripture*. Too often our view of canonicity is of early-church councils debating endlessly the merits of inclusion or exclusion of potential books of Scripture. Debates there were, over books such as 2 Peter, Hebrews and Revelation. But to a large extent this work was self-authenticating. And it was so because the authors were apostolic. The question of authorship is not merely academic but fundamental. For the authority of Scripture as Scripture is invariably linked to prophetic and apostolic norms. We savour this authority at the outset of Ephesians. It sets the tone for all the instruction that follows. We stand on the holy ground of Scripture and its authority from the very beginning of this letter and watch it grow to the very end.

There is the authority of *salvation*. An author commissioned by the will of God; a readership made holy and believing through a relationship with Christ; and a salutation leaving behind the niceties of courteous greetings in the interests of a transforming grace and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ — all imply a salvation that is sovereign. The divine omnipotence in salvation introduces this letter and Paul goes on immediately to elaborate this theme. The divine authority of salvation should start us off in reading Ephesians and grow in our perception with every line of its inspired truth.