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Victor A. Bartling

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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The Church in God's Eternal Plan

A Study in Ephesians 1:1-14

VICTOR A. BARTLING

The Church was in the world long before our days. It existed in Ephesus before Paul wrote his Letter to the Ephesians. Essentially the church, like Christ, never changes. Its foundation, its goals, its means and resources, its message to men always remain the same. But since the church is made up of men, it necessarily reflects, in its historical manifestations, the social and cultural aspects of its historical environments. Within these environments, however, it must function according to God's unchanging design. There is always the temptation that the church may so much lose itself in its own given historical setting as to cease to be the church of God. It is well, therefore, that the modern church should look at itself in the light of St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. For this letter from beginning to the end deals expressly with the church.

It is a sign of our ecumenical age that, in the last half century more generally than at any other period of history, church people all over the world have been studying this particular letter and have found that it casts on the reader a peculiar spell which sends him back again and again to search in its endless depths. Here we see the lineaments of the design of God's

church, and here we find our own place within this design.

Anyone who reads the entire letter at one sitting, either in the Greek original or in translation, quickly senses that it falls into two major parts, each containing three chapters. In the first three chapters we sense a *vertical* thrust: our eyes are directed chiefly upward to God and His Christ; in the last three chapters the thrust is *horizontal*: our eyes are directed chiefly to our fellow Christians and fellowmen. A few simple outlines may be suggested. All say about the same thing: The Nature and the Function of the Church, or, more popularly stated: The "Is"-ness and the Business of the Church. Or: Paul's Vision of God's Unveiled Secret with Regard to the Church: the Vision Beheld (1—3), the Vision Applied. (4—6)

Ruth Paxson has written a devotional treatment of the letter which carries a suggestive alliterative outline as the title of her book: *The Wealth, Walk, and Warfare of the Christian*.¹

Ephesians is in many ways a difficult writing. First of all, the thought of the inspired writer attains inexhaustible depths and unscalable heights. Then, we do not find the swift, argumentative style peculiar to most of his letters, but rather the contemplative style of exalted devo-

Victor A. Bartling is professor of New Testament exegesis at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, and a member of the Board for World Missions of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

¹ Ruth Paxson, *The Wealth, Walk and Warfare of the Christian* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1930).

tion and prayer. This accounts for the remarkably large number of nouns in Ephesians, over 43 percent of its total vocabulary in Greek, and this substantive style, in turn, increases the difficulties of interpretation. All through the letter, and especially in the first half, there are words and phrases and sentences whose precise meaning has been under constant debate. A careful comparison of currently used English translations with their marginal notes, for example, the King James Version, the Revised Standard Version, and the New English Bible, will alert even the layman to many of these problems while, at the same time, he will reap rich rewards from such reading and comparison. The essential message will come through in spite of individual perplexities.

"*Paul an apostle of Christ Jesus,*" so the writer himself. The name is repeated in 3:1: "I Paul, the *prisoner* of Christ Jesus in behalf of you Gentiles" (cf. 4:1; 6:20). Bible students are aware of the fact that the authenticity of this letter as coming from Paul himself has been challenged in recent times. But even many liberal critics have been unconvinced by the arguments presented. Who is the man who, to honor Paul, uses his name and, employing Pauline thoughts and words, especially from Colossians, expands them into that mighty monument of highest Christian thought which we have in this letter? He must have been the apostle's equal, if not his superior, in mental stature and spiritual insight. Who is he? Why hasn't his name gone down into history? This letter is the coping stone on the massive structure of Pauline teaching. Confidently we say that Paul himself laid that stone and that he did so in all probability during his

Roman imprisonment, possibly just 1,900 years ago.

There is, indeed, a close affinity between Ephesians and Colossians. Paul had just finished dictating Colossians and planned to send it to Colossae by the hand of his friend from Asia, Tychicus, along with the converted slave Onesimus, who was returning to his master, Philemon of Colossae. In the Colossian letter Paul put into clear light the dangerous false teaching which was attracting many Christians in Asia Minor, a religious-philosophic hodgepodge of Jewish and pagan elements which made much of the hierarchies of "principalities and powers" in the universe. This teaching granted Christ some room in its scheme of things, but its whole tendency was to deny His supremacy and the completeness of His redemption. Paul, in his reply to this heresy, developed the theme of Christ's person and work in relation to the whole universe, including those principalities and powers. These powers, in the first place, far from being superior to Him, owed their existence to Him and were ignominiously defeated by His death on the cross, on which as on His triumphal chariot He led those powers away like chained captives (Col. 2:15). Moreover, His people are so vitally united to Him, being members of the body of which He is the Head (Col. 1:18), that they share in His triumph and have no need to pay homage to those forces that once held them in bondage.

But if the church is the body of the exalted Christ, what is her relation to the cosmic role of Christ? What is her relation to the universe over which He is enthroned as Lord? What is her relation to God's eternal purpose? These questions were not dealt with in the Letter to the Colossians,

but they continued to exercise his mind after he had finished dictating that epistle. Gripped by the vision which he sets before us in Ephesians, he began to dictate this letter to be transmitted, it would seem, to the whole circle of congregations that had sprung up in Asia Minor as a result of his three years of ministry in Ephesus, that they might be strengthened in their faith through this magnificent vision and live in its light.

In Greek, the section vv. 3-14 is really one long sentence. A famous classical scholar has called this "the most monstrous sentence-conglomerate in all Greek literature." This is a false judgment. There is nothing monstrous about it. Here is a man inspired by the Holy Spirit to see a vision of cosmic proportions; he sees one great plan of God working itself out from eternity to eternity, comprising all the history of man's life in time, giving each man's life a God-intended design and goal; he sees God's own creation, the church of Christ, in the center of God's plan; he sees the cosmic scope of Christ's redemptive work; and swept away by the glory of it all, he can only, as it were, stutter his praise breathlessly in clause after clause. Along with tremendous import, there is music and grandeur in the passage just as it is given to us in Greek. Once we have immersed ourselves into the passage, it will never again let us go. Modern translations break it up more or less into sentences with full stops. The noble King James Version translated quite literally and so preserves much of the atmosphere of the original.

In v. 3 Paul praises the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In v. 6 he speaks of God's grace lavished upon us in the Beloved (a title of the Messiah) in whom

we have redemption through His blood. In v. 13 we who believe are declared to be sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise.

We who work for and in an institutionalized church denomination speak of our "founding fathers." At our St. Louis seminary we have a Founders Hall and annually observe Founders Day. The church of which Ephesians speaks, the church which must be the major concern of each one of us and for which we are really working, has no human founder. It is solely the creation of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. That is her glory and dignity. All that the church is comes from pure grace. And lest we forget this, Paul three times in this hymn sinks down, so to speak, on his knees before the great Three in One in the phrase "to the praise of the glory of His grace." (Vv. 6, 12, 14)

One of the foremost and most influential English interpreters of Ephesians has a notable passage about these verses:

The twelve verses which follow baffle our analysis. They are a kaleidoscope of dazzling lights and shifting colors: at first we fail to find a trace of order or method. They are like the preliminary flight of the eagle, rising and wheeling round, as though for a while uncertain what direction in his boundless freedom he shall take. So the Apostle's thought lifts itself beyond the limits of time and above material conceptions that confine ordinary men, and ranges this way and that in a region of spirit, a heavenly sphere, with no course as yet marked out, merely exulting in the attributes and purposes of God.

At first we marvel at the wealth of his language; but soon we discover, by the very repetition of the phrases which have arrested us, the poverty of all language when it comes to deal with such topics as he has chosen. He seems to be swept along

by his theme, hardly knowing whither it is taking him. He begins with God,—the blessing which comes from God to man, the eternity of His purposes of good, the glory of its consummation. But he cannot order his conceptions, or close his sentences. One thought presses hard upon another, and will not be refused. And so this great doxology runs on and on: "in whom . . . in Him . . . in Him, in whom . . . in whom . . . in whom."

But as we read it again and again we begin to perceive certain great words recurring and revolving round a central point:

"The will" of God v. 5. 9. 11

"To the praise of His glory" v. 6. 12. 14

"In Christ" v. 3. 4. 7. 9. 10 bis. 11. 12. 13 bis

The will of God working itself out to some glorious issue in Christ — that is his theme. A single phrase in the 9th verse sums it up: it is "the mystery of His will."²

Usually Paul begins his letters with a thanksgiving. In Ephesians this is postponed till v. 15. Here after the salutation he begins with an act of praise declaring that praise is due to God in response to His prior acts of blessing. "*Blessed* is the God who has *blessed* us with every *blessing* spiritual, in the heavenlies, in Christ." Paul would not deny that God is the Author of all material and temporal blessings which we enjoy, but here he thinks only of blessings of another order: blessings (1) "*spiritual*," i. e., wrought by the Holy Spirit, who has been given to all believers and in whom these blessings are always present for us.

They are (2) blessings "in the heaven-

lies." This expression is used only in Ephesians, and here five times. Twice it is used for the sphere where the risen Christ has been exalted and where those who are in Christ have been exalted along with Him (1:20; 2:6). Twice, however, it designates the sphere of "the principalities and powers" and of "the spiritual hosts of wickedness" (3:10; 6:12). It seems clear, therefore, that Paul does not think of physical regions in or above the heavens but of what we call the "unseen world behind the world of sense," something like our word "transcendental." So these blessings come from the "world of God" and are of heavenly nature. Finally, these blessings are "in Christ." This phrase "in Christ" or its equivalent is found some 40 times in Ephesians, 10 times in this single passage (one sentence in Greek) which we are now studying. This phrase has a variety of rich implications. Here, as often, it designates that new sphere of existence of the baptized Christian where Christ is the Head of His body, of which we are members. We Christians all have two addresses since our baptism — our house number and "in Christ." "Christ dwells in our hearts through faith" (3:17). It is Scriptural to reverse that and say, "Through faith we dwell in Christ." He is the true Center from which everything in our life proceeds: our vocation, our family life, our conflicts, our sorrows, our joys, our living, our dying. And it is by virtue of this union, this solidarity with Christ, that we and all of our fellow believers of all ages are the church of Christ, "saints," and that means the people of God, who constantly enjoy the blessings of God, Spirit-wrought, in the heavenlies.

This opening verse of Paul's hymn states

² J. Armitage Robinson, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians* (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1909) p. 19.

the theme which is unfolded in the rest of the passage. It begins in v. 4 with the thought of eternity before creation and ends again in v. 14 with the thought of eternity after the final consummation of God's eternal purpose and plans. For those who are in Christ Jesus — and that means for all who truly belong to His church — God's grace operates *before* time, *in* time, and *after* time. The church is not something that emerges from human choice in processes of history and from historical causes. It was conceived from eternity in God's mind and is to endure eternally. It holds a place in the life of the world which is far above any human evaluation and altogether different from its seeming weakness and frailty in its present empirical manifestations. God's central and ultimate purposes are being progressively realized through it. It is a story of grace and nothing but grace, and it is all to serve the glory of the God of glory.

Three blessings, Spirit-wrought, in the heavenlies, in Christ, are presented in vv. 4-10: (1) our *eternal election* in Christ to become the sons of God; (2) our *redemption* through the costliest ransom, the blood of God's own beloved Son, which brings us the forgiveness of our trespasses; and (3) that blessing which is the central theme of the letter, *illumination through insight into the mystery of God's will*. We want to look at this more closely.

V. 9 tells us that this wisdom and insight is God's gracious gift to Christian believers through an act of revelation. We thank God for giving this wisdom and insight especially to Paul, through whom we may receive it right here in Ephesians as a most precious foundation for a satisfactory and practical basic understanding of the mean-

ing of life and of our place in God's scheme of things.

The *mystery of His will*. When people in Paul's days heard the word "mystery," they thought at once of the many mystery religions which existed everywhere. Here there were secret teachings professing to reveal to the initiates the secret of the gods so that they could control them. The initiates frequently experienced "deification." It was profanation to reveal these secrets. However, as the word "mystery" is taken over in the New Testament, particularly by Paul, "mysteries" designate God's plans of grace and the gifts of grace. They are the treasures once hidden in God's eternal counsel but now revealed in Christ and designed to be shouted from the housetops through the service of Gospel proclamation. Mysteries are now the revealed secrets of God.

The mystery of God's will about which Paul is concerned here, he says in v. 9, is the issue of a benevolent plan of God centering in Christ. It is a plan to be carried out, to be put into effect in the fullness of the times, namely, to gather up into one all things in Christ as the common Head.

The word for "times" used here by Paul is a form of *καιρός*, which is time as counted on God's clock and marked on His calendar; time in which God pursues His redemptive plan and sends out the good news of redemption; time in which His own people are gathered and then go about God's business; time of golden opportunity; time of black disaster when opportunity is neglected. In one sense, the time had fully come when God sent forth His Son, born of a woman (Gal. 4:4). The new world had begun, the end time had commenced. "Now is the acceptable

time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2). In this inaugurated end time, God has by His own authority fixed "times and seasons" (Acts 1:7). The gathering together of the one people of God made up of both Jewish and Gentile believers, as the concluding verses of our passage show (vv. 11-14), and as will be expanded in a lengthy passage (2:11 to the end of ch. 3), is the one great thought and the one great work of God in which He is progressively realizing His eternal purpose. We are linked up with this work and purpose, first, as beneficiaries, ourselves being incorporated into the new people of God, and, secondly, as privileged co-workers with God through whom God deigns to work out His redemptive will among all men.

When all these "times" fixed by God are fulfilled, God's plan will be consummated: He will "gather up into one all things in Christ as the common Head, the things in heaven and the things on earth" (v. 10). In the counsel of God, Christ is the Sum of all things and the divine Fulfiller. In God's purpose He is to bring the universe to its destined goal, fulfilling utterly and completely God's eternal plan. If there is now confusion, it will not last forever. All things, says Paul, will be unified in glorious harmony under the headship of Christ, "the things in heaven and the things on earth." (On "all things," see John 1:3; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:15-20.) Paul has in other places interpreted his meaning here, especially in Rom 8:19-23, where he speaks of "the groaning creation" which waits with eager expectation for the final unveiling of the sons of God at the Day of Resurrection, when the final redemption and liberation of our bodies will be effected.

For all creation, it is plainly declared, shall share in that glorious consummation of the children of God. With the rebellion of man against God there has entered into the story of the universe not only the fact of sin and death but also a corresponding and, as it were, a sympathetic disorder in the whole physical and material universe — man's environment. The redemption of man, therefore, at the same time involves the redemption of the world, the home of man. As Paul states in Col. 1:20, "God through Christ reconciled to Himself *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven." Christ the Savior of the world of men is also in a sense the Savior of the universe.

Paul leaves out of consideration the question of the eternal fate of Satan and his cohorts and of the persistent reprobates among men. He alludes to these in 2:3 ("children of wrath, like the rest of mankind") and in 5:5 (those who "have no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God"). There is no Scriptural warrant for universalism in the sense that all evil spirits and evil men will finally partake of the heavenly life under Christ. On the contrary. But all this evil will be confined. It has been forced to unconditional surrender. It is absolutely depotentiated. Evil can no longer overcome God's people. And also the demonic powers and unrepentant evil men will, though with weeping and gnashing of teeth, acknowledge Jesus as *Lord*.

Has history and life any meaning? Many men say no! And they are likely either to smile or scowl if you as much as suggest a permanent purpose in life. Andre Maurois speaks for many when he says: "The universe is indifferent. Who created it? Why are we on this puny mud-heap spin-

ning in infinite space? I have not the slightest idea and I am quite convinced that no one else has the least idea."

This is the spirit of the widespread nihilism of our days, the philosophy that ultimately nothingness prevails and that the universe is meaningless. In our country 60 percent of the population claim membership in a church. About 95 percent of our population of about 170 million profess belief in God. Yet the majority seem to find their lives without goals, without significance or creativity; they live ineffectively on the periphery of life in frantic search for diversion and escape. The German poet Erich Kaestner puts the spirit of nihilism into a bit of verse: *Man schuf-
tet, liebt und lebt und frisst / und kann
sich nicht erklären, / wozu das alles noetig
ist* ("We toil and love and live and eat /

And yet can never tell / The purpose of it all.")

Has history and life any meaning? The Letter to the Ephesians gives us Paul's triumphant yes. And we who have experienced the grace of God in Christ Jesus, which has showered upon us riches of blessing, "blessing spiritual, in the heavenlies, in Christ," we join Paul in that triumphant yes and are eager to make known to our weary, bored, empty world "the mystery of God's will" as given in "the Word of truth, the Gospel of salvation," that many others may find in Christ the thrill of a glorious purpose in life and a glorious inheritance in the new heaven and the new earth, where the "very good" of the first creation shall once more resound.

St. Louis, Mo.