

Together

A sermon series in Ephesians: Spring 2025



“God made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.”

Why preach on Ephesians?

During 2024 Christ Church grew significantly. This is a wonderful encouragement. It also has some interesting consequences:

- Most Sundays $\frac{3}{4}$ of the congregation each Sunday have been members of the church for less than a year.
- Because people don't generally feel 'judged' at Christ Church, we have people from a wide range of backgrounds, nationalities, personalities and opinions.
- Because you can 'belong before you believe' at Christ Church, many are still making up their minds about Christian faith.

Therefore, my prayer for 2025 is not that we grow larger, but that we grow closer – becoming a loving family able to discuss and understand our differences with grace.

This kind of unity across difference is only possible because we have Jesus Christ in common. Our connection to him connects us to one-another more deeply than background, nationality, personality or opinion.

And this is the central message of Paul's letter to the Ephesian church. I pray that as we let God's Word in this letter teach us, we will really grow to treasure what he is doing here at Christ Church.

The message of Ephesians

Ephesians 1:10 summarises the focus of the letter – that it is *'[God's] will ... to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ'*.

From start to finish, Paul's letter is about the unity of Christians who are 'in' Christ.

Context of the letter

Ephesus was a huge city – and was the epicentre of worship for many of the Greek and Roman gods. Paul visited twice – once briefly on his way from Corinth, and then later for a sustained 2-year missionary stint. His news about Jesus landed with great power. It caused both transformation and opposition – including a city-wide riot that precipitated his departure (Acts 18-19).

It was almost certainly a difficult place to be a Christian. The Spirit of Jesus praises the Ephesians for standing up to hardships and falsehood when he appears to John in his great vision (Revelation 2:1-7).

Most scholars believe that Paul is writing from Rome where he is under house arrest – awaiting trial by Caesar. This is a time when he writes to encourage many of the churches he founded during his first and second missionary journeys.

Structure

The letter falls into two fairly clear halves. Chapters 1-3 are 'theological' in emphasis – rejoicing in what God is doing in the world. Chapters 4-6 are 'pastoral' in emphasis – describing how the Ephesians should respond to what God has done. The word 'therefore' (3:1) links the theology of 1-3 with the pastoral instruction of 4-6. This makes the letter into one logical chain.

Reading or preaching Ephesians

Context

Preachers have a rule of thumb – ‘A text without a context is a pre-text for a subtext.’ It is saying that written material taken out of context can be made to mean what you want it to mean. But the same can be said more positively too. When you look carefully at how one part of a text fits into the flow of the whole text, it’s likely you will see its message with much more power and clarity.

I don’t know of any book in the bible where this is more true Ephesians. Therefore, **I think it’s likely that we should be making connections across the whole letter as we preach. In the first half of the letter (1-3) it is especially important to make connections *within* whole chapters. In the second half (4-6) it is especially important to make connections *back across* chapters to the first half (1-3).**

Applications

The Ephesians live in a marketplace of religions and

worldviews where it’s not easy to live a distinctive life as a Christian. It’s not so different for us. We don’t suffer torture and oppression like Christians in some parts of the world. But we are frowned upon, and sometimes directly opposed for seeking to live distinctively, and for the counter-cultural claim that there is one way – not many.

The Ephesians lived between the resurrection and return of Christ. This is the era when Jesus is growing his church in the world, and Satan is opposing him. So do we.

The argument of Paul’s letter seems to suggest that Christ’s community (the Church) is central to God’s purposes for them in the world. He might well say the same to us.

Overall then, it seems reasonable to conclude that God’s message to Christ Church might not be so different from Paul’s message to the Ephesians. **We can probably apply the majority of his message to the Ephesians quite directly to ourselves.**

Section by Section

Chapter 1

Here Paul introduces God's 'unity project'. He calls it *'the mystery of his will ... which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfilment'* (1:9-10). [The phrase 'in Christ' appears more frequently here than anywhere else in the bible. Paul also describes the uniting work of Father, Son and Spirit as a unified mission.]

1:3-14

He praises God for what he's doing, and for all the lengths he has gone to for us to be part of his new community. He chose us (1:4,11), predestined us (1:5,11), gave us grace (1:6) redeemed us (1:7,13), forgave us (1:7,13), enlightened us with understanding (1:9,13), included us (1:6,13), gave us his Spirit (1:13), and guarantees our inheritance (1:14).

These are huge gifts to receive, but the focus is not on the gifts (as if election or salvation were ends in themselves). The focus is on their purpose – God giving us access to the new community he is creating in Christ.

1:15-23

He is moved to pray to God that the Ephesians would understand and experience their part in God's great plan in Christ, which centres on the Church. He prays that they would know the Father better (1:17), and that they would grasp the hope he's given them (1:18) and the power at work in them (1:19).

The tone of the prayer is instructive. It is a prayer of supplication (asking) but there is no sense of duty or labour. Paul is full of thanks about what God is doing for the Ephesians (1:16) and excitement about what he is doing in the world (1:19-23).

Chapter 2

Here Paul shows how their unity with Christ is God's work, from first to last.

2:1-10

They started dead – so could contribute nothing (2:1). God '*made [them] alive*' (2:5) – planting in them a life which already resonates in heaven (2:6). It has happened by grace through faith (2:7-8). Even the faith is a gift – so they haven't '*exercised*' faith and can't boast (2:8-9). All this means that they are '*God's workmanship*' (2:10).

There is great security in knowing that our new life in Christ is something God has done – not something we have done. He didn't wait for us to get things right to start his work in us, and he's more than capable of finishing what he's started regardless of our failings.

2:11-22

Thus, even former strangers (2:11-13), and former enemies

(2:16), are united by a death and rebirth experience (2:14-15).

This union is so powerful it makes them '*one new humanity*' (2:15). Or, using another metaphor, a building where '*Christ Jesus himself [is] the chief cornerstone*' which '*rises to become a holy temple ... [where] God lives by his Spirit*' (2:19-22).

This incredible description echoes Jesus' prayer in the upper room in John's gospel '*that all of them [church present and future] may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me*' (John 17:21). The unity of the Church by the Spirit is enabled by the unity of the Trinity and is a participation in the Trinity.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 has an odd structure. Paul initiates a prayer (3:1), but then heads off down a side-ally where he simply rejoices in the privilege of being appointed a servant of this amazing unity project. He then returns to the prayer in (3:14).

3:2-13

During his rejoicing, Paul gives an insight into the purpose of the church that is found nowhere else in scripture. He says, *'[God's] intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms'* (3:10-11). That is quite a role description.

We will discover as we read the letter that this privilege also brings opposition in the same way that a soldier carrying the standard might draw fire in a battle (6:12).

3:14-21

His prayer, when he returns to it, echoes the prayer of chapter 1

but centres more clearly on Christ – the one on whom God's unity project centres. He prays they may *'grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ'* (3:17-19).

Christ is the centre of the plan and the prayer, but the Father is the author of the plan and the person Paul is praying to. Paul's prayer is also suffused with confidence because of the overflowing generosity and capacity of the Father *'who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine'* (3:20) and because his prayer is aligned with the will of the Father, who has chosen to display his *'glory in the church and in Christ Jesus'* (3:21).

Chapter 4

Here Paul starts to spell out how the Ephesians should live as part of this new community in Christ. In essence, they should lean into God's design for the church. This means Paul's focus is not really on personal morality, but on relationships. The first half of the chapter starts '*live a life worthy of your calling*' (4:1) and mainly addresses 'do's'. The second half starts '*no longer live as the Gentiles do*' (4:17) and mainly addresses 'don'ts'.

4:1-16

Paul commends a series of virtues (humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance & love). But the key is to see that he's not urging them to be 'good', he's urging them to be 'good to one-another'. This is because God is building a united community (*one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all* – 4:4-6).

Within this community he apportions differences – differences of gifting (4:7-8) and differences of calling (4:11). He calls us to exercise these differences for the sake of one-another.

In other words, growing in Christ-likeness is not primarily an individual project but a corporate one (4:12-16). Some of the most important aspects of the Christian's calling cannot be achieved solo.

4:17-32

Paul knows that change is difficult and that self-centredness is deeply rooted in the human heart. So, he provides every possible motivation towards change.

- He insists with God's authority (4:17).
- He exposes the old way of life – ignorant, hard-hearted, and indulgent (4:18-19).

- He calls it out as dark and Godless (4:18).
- He reminds them of the promise of renewal (4:20-24).
- He lists the merits of new life – truth, righteousness, holiness & Godliness (4:21-24).
- He warns them that Satan will oppose them (4:27).
- He points out that the old ways grieve God’s Spirit in them (4:30).

- He tells them they’ve been shown the same kindness they’re to show (4:32).

And within all this reasoning he names most of the specific human behaviours that disrupt relationships – lying, anger of all kinds, greed & stealing, and careless talk in all its forms. In most cases he names and commends the opposite, constructive behaviour.

Change isn’t easy but Paul builds a strong motivational framework to help us.

Chapter 5

Paul presents a positive vision of the new life. Live, *'a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God'* (5:2). He then unpacks what this means in community generally (5:3-20) and what it means in marriage specifically (5:21-22).

5:3-20

- Love is not sexual immortality (5:3) however alluring that argument might be (5:6-7).
- Love is not following the crowd (5:11) but being a light in dark places (12-14).
- Love is not the thrill of forgetting (5:18) but the thrill of remembering truth (5:18-20).

It's almost certainly not coincidental that Paul addresses three common misunderstandings of love in these three paragraphs – sexual intimacy, avoiding conflict, and a heady feeling.

5:21-33

Paul explains that Christian marriage is made to display the relationship between Christ and his church (5:31-32). Each party

has the opportunity to put the other first out of respect for Christ (5:21).

A Christian wife can choose to let her husband take responsibility for her, just like the church is made up of those who have let Christ take responsibility for them. A Christian husband can choose to lay down his life for his wife's good, just as Christ chose to lay down his life for the church's good.

These represent huge decisions to respect and to love on the part of wife and husband (5:33). If they are to reflect the dynamic between Christ and the church, each party must concentrate on their own part and not their spouse's part. Jesus never said, 'If you will respect me then I'll lay down my life for you'. If he had, we would be lost!

Chapter 6

The first part of chapter 6 is probably an extension to chapter 5. Remember chapter 5 has taught us to *'live a life of love'* like Christ (5:1-2), and to *'submit to one another out of reverence for Christ'* (5:21). Here he applies that principle to authority relationships in families and the workplace. The second part of chapter 6 is a reminder that Satan hates the way a united church displays God's wisdom and we will need every resource God has provided to resist Satan's attacks.

6:1-9

God's pattern is for children to obey their parents (6:1-3) and for parents – specifically fathers – to be proactive in raising their children (6:4).

'Bondservants' are neither abducted slaves, nor employees, but men and women who have thrown themselves on the mercy of a compatriot to avoid destitution. They work for their board, lodging and protection.

Paul tells them to work wholeheartedly *'as if serving the Lord'* (6:7) who will reward them for the good they do.

Completing the circle, he tells masters to treat their bondservants as those who are

as valuable to God as they themselves are (6:9).

In an age where the abuse of authority leads many to reject authority, it's worth noting that Paul teaches the Ephesians to reform authority relationships – making them beautiful. Neither of these relationships however is given the status of the marriage relationship – to reflect the intimate connection between Christ and his church.

6:10-20

Pursuing unity is not easy; it is a struggle. That is because it pitches us *'against the rulers, authorities and powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the*

heavenly realms' (6:11-12). To make our stand we will need God's full protection. Paul describes this protection as a metaphorical suit of armour. He uses exact phrases from Isaiah 59 where Isaiah describes the Messiah's armour. In other words, he is suggesting that all the protections we need are found in Christ. Those protections include truth and righteousness (6:14), gospel peace (6:15), faith (6:16),

salvation, the Spirit and the word of God (6:17), and prayer of all kinds (6:18).

6:21-24

As Paul signs off, you can see that his practical arrangements and greetings reflect the unity in Christ that he's been writing about. He sends a '*dear brother*' to share his news and encourage the Ephesians. He speaks of the grace available to all who love Jesus '*with an undying love*'.

Further resources

Bible project summary video on the book of Ephesians – available free here <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/ephesians/>

God's new society: the message of Ephesians, 1979, John Stott – available free here

<https://archive.org/details/godsnewsocietyme0000stot>

Historical and religious background to the city of Ephesus – available free here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JpJ-IWw5_Mc