With characteristic clarity and vivid metaphors, Tom Wright sets Ephesians within the biblical narrative of redemption, drawing on Old Testament passages and the historical milieux of the Jewish and Roman cultures of Paul's day. Building on Paul's joyous anticipation of new creation that pervades the epistle, Wright highlights the mission of the church, its unity and holiness. Under Wright's adroit pastoral care, *The Vision of Ephesians* sings with worship to the glory of God.

Lynn H. Cohick, Distinguished Professor of New Testament, Houston Christian University

Hanging his scholar hat and putting on the pastoral one, Bishop Wright makes Ephesians come alive for both layperson and clergy in accessible style, lucid articulation of complex theological issues, and refreshing pastoral insights. This is one of a kind in simplicity, brevity, and his compelling case for Paul's authorship in the tradition of the church. This is an excellent book for small-group Bible studies, family devotions, and personal spiritual growth. This is not a book to read through in one sitting. Read a portion, read the passage in Ephesians, meditate on it, and acquire greater appreciation for God's revelation through Jesus Christ and his purpose for the church.

Dan Darko, Dean for Global Engagement and Professor of Biblical Studies, Taylor University

With his familiar sparkling prose, Wright takes the reader on a journey through the letter to the church "in Ephesus" (which is, he argues, a circular letter from Paul), sweeping across its expression of the story of cosmic redemption, brought to its climax in the creation of a new humanity in the Messiah. This wide-ranging theological vision proves the perfect canvas for Wright's expansive theological palette.

Jamie Davies, Tutor of New Testament, Trinity College, Bristol

This immensely rich book takes readers deep into the heart of the vision of Ephesians. That vision is of a united and holy church,

called to worship God and to engage in the divine mission of transforming humanity into recipients of the fullness of life. Tom Wright draws upon his many years studying the writings of Paul to offer a beautifully crafted study of Ephesians, replete with penetrating insights that will enrich the mind, the heart, and the spirit.

Paul Foster, Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity, University of Edinburgh

Ephesians is like a beautiful song written by Paul in honor of the world-transforming gospel of Jesus Christ. And there is no one better qualified to perform that song than Tom Wright. His academic voice is uniquely experienced and full of character to draw out the themes of the church's worship and mission embedded in Paul's letter. If you have found yourself struggling to understand Paul in general, or Ephesians in particular, this book will not disappoint.

Nijay K. Gupta, Julius R. Mantey Professor of New Testament, Northern Seminary

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is the most panoramic of his epistles, whisking readers from their present pedestrian rootedness to contemplate their eternal heavenly inheritance. Who better to unpack this letter than our most visionary contemporary interpreter of Paul? Readers looking to grasp the height and breadth and depth of Paul's theology of salvation in Christ can start here, and readers wishing to survey the vista of N. T. Wright's biblical theology may also now begin with this engaging, accessible book.

Wesley Hill, Associate Professor of New Testament, Western Theological Seminary, Holland, Michigan

The Vision of Ephesians is Wright in his finest scholarly form, which is also his finest pastoral form. I refer to Wright's extraordinary knack for condensing extensive scholarly learning into the accessible prose of scriptural commentary. "Lucid brevity"—the eloquent "summing up" of the scholar's oft-untidy intellectual labor—is prized by interpreters of the New Testament. Paul similarly celebrates summation in his vision of the cosmos as "summed up"

in the Messiah (Eph 1:10)—a Messiah who is "the microcosm, the new creation in person," as Wright puts it. With arresting clarity and insight, *The Vision of Ephesians* points readers to Paul's way of seeing the world ("the heaven-plus-earth cosmos") as ultimately resolved in God's Messiah. As for Paul's way of speaking about this world, it is "the gospel of your salvation." This is a book for anyone concerned with such matters.

T. J. Lang, Senior Lecturer in New Testament,
University of St Andrews

To read this book is to feel one has been treated to sitting in on the lectures on which it is based. With his usual flair, and writing in an accessible teaching style, Tom Wright indicates how Ephesians, whether or not by Paul himself, sets Paul's gospel in a universal context, relating it to God's purposes for the church and the cosmos. While sounding some of the familiar, if controversial, emphases of Wright's own theology, the enthusiastic section-by-section exposition enables readers to sense the worship and challenge evoked by the Christ-centered big picture of Ephesians.

Andrew T. Lincoln, Emeritus Professor of New
Testament, University of Gloucestershire

N. T. Wright has provided a fresh reading of Ephesians, not by jettisoning the old but by infusing it with an even older perspective. Based on his deep knowledge of Paul's epistles, Wright provides interpretive comments on Ephesians that are based on Paul's theological framework, the Old Testament, and relevant Jewish literature. This work is accessible, readable, and enjoyable.

Benjamin L. Merkle, M. O. Owens, Jr. Chair of New Testament
Studies and Research Professor of New Testament and
Greek, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

N. T. Wright's vast store of insights and unique style of writing makes this book on Ephesians an enjoyable read. The work is practical and yet engages with the many, and sometimes perplexing, issues raised in this ancient letter. Wright's stimulating interpretations will not

disappoint the readers regardless of whether they are reading him for the first time or are already familiar with some of his many studies.

B. J. Oropeza, Professor of Biblical and Religious Studies, Azusa Pacific University and Seminary

Ephesians has been aptly described as "the Bach of the Bible" and as "the Switzerland of the New Testament." In *The Vision of Ephesians*, renowned New Testament scholar and biblical theologian N. T. "Tom" Wright offers an insightful, accessible treatment of this highly lauded, deeply beloved Pauline letter. In his exposition of Ephesians, Wright devotes particular attention to the recurring themes of worship, mission, unity, and holiness, which he rightly regards to be constitutive of the vocation of the church—a small working model of the new creation. Here the literary beauty and theological profundity of Ephesians are on full display.

Todd D. Still, Charles J. and Eleanor McLerran DeLancey Dean & William M. Hinson Professor of Christian Scriptures, Baylor University, Truett Seminary

N. T. Wright is Research Professor Emeritus of New Testament and Early Christianity at the University of St Andrews and Senior Research Fellow at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford. He is the author of more than eighty influential books, including *The New Testament for Everyone*, *Simply Christian*, *Surprised by Hope*, *The Day the Revolution Began*, *Paul: A Biography*, *Jesus and the Powers* (with Michael F. Bird), *Into the Heart of Romans* and *The Challenge of Acts*.

THE VISION OF EPHESIANS

The Task of the Church and the Glory of God

N. T. Wright

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for Jason and Ashley Harris

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Preface

Ephesians offers a breathtaking vision of the creator's purposes for the cosmos, of how those purposes were and are fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah and the holy spirit, and – not least – of the vital role within these purposes that the church is now called to play.

The present book works through the letter section by section, giving full weight to the 'apocalyptic' insights of the author (taken here to be Paul himself, despite some scholarly traditions) and to the bracing challenges that he offers his readers, whether in the first century or the twenty-first. I have divided my exposition into nine sections (I call them 'sections' rather than 'chapters' to avoid confusion with the six 'chapters' of Ephesians itself). It would have been easily possible to subdivide further in order to bring out more of the detail, just as it would have been possible to produce a book several times longer than this one, engaging with scholarship both ancient and modern. But, though I have consulted a long list of commentaries in preparing this material (there are suggestions for further reading at the end of the present book), I do not normally enter into explicit debate with them unless there is a special reason to do so. My aim throughout has been to open up the text so that what may seem dense and allusive to a reader today can become clear, fresh, challenging and encouraging.

Except where otherwise noted, I have routinely used my own translation of the New Testament (*The New Testament for Everyone*, 3rd edition, 2023), and for the Old Testament the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition.

The book began as a course of lectures given first at Wycliffe Hall in Oxford in the spring of 2024 and then enlarged for a summer 'intensive' in Houston, Texas, in early June that year. I am most grateful to the staff and students at Wycliffe Hall, led by the principal,

Michael Lloyd, and also to the hard-working teams of colleagues both on the Admirato staff (who run the NTWrightOnline courses) and in the local Houston organisation. Pride of place there goes to Dean Todd Still and his colleagues from Truett Seminary, on the one hand, and to Steven Wells and the good people of South Main Baptist Church in Houston, on the other, for again making their splendid facilities available and for their numerous kindnesses. Everything people say about Texas hospitality is true.

Tom Wright
Wycliffe Hall, Oxford

1
Introduction

More than one person, hearing that I was going to be expounding Ephesians, has commented to me that this is their favourite letter by the apostle Paul. I understand that. I once explained it like this, off the cuff, when Michael Bird and I were filming for the online resources that go with our joint book *The New Testament in Its World*. We were standing at the foot of Mars Hill in Athens, where Paul made his famous speech to the city's supreme court. We had been recording some reflections on that event, but then, with the cameras still rolling, Mike suddenly turned and said to me, 'So, Tom, what's your favourite Pauline letter and why?'

We hadn't planned that question, but I wasn't going to duck it. I took a deep breath and breathed a quick prayer, and I said, 'Well, Mike, where I live in Scotland [this was when I was teaching at St Andrews] there are many rooms in the house. There's the kitchen, which gets very busy and hot and we all bump into one another but it's where important things happen and we couldn't do without it. That's Galatians. Then across the corridor there's a formal dining room with decent furniture and everything laid out properly. That's Romans. Then there are living rooms and bedrooms which more or less correspond to the Corinthian letters. But,' I said, 'there's a room at the back of the house, looking out south across the Firth of Forth to the Lammermuir Hills forty miles away. If you look to the left, you can sometimes see the sun rising out of the North Sea. And if you look to the right, at the right time of the day and the month, you can see the moon setting over the Lomond Hills. That's Ephesians.'

Ephesians, in other words, is a letter of vision; perhaps we should say, *the* visionary letter. It gives you, in a dozen or so pages of Greek, or seven of English, a wide-ranging panorama of the Christian

gospel and its implications. It looks back all the way to the creation of the world, and to God's purpose from the beginning. It looks on all the way to the time when, as Paul says elsewhere, God will be all in all. It foregrounds at every point the work of Jesus the Messiah, and the closely linked work of the holy spirit.[1] It maps out the question of what the church is, and what it's here for, and it does so particularly in terms of what it means to be genuinely human, becoming the new sort of humanity that God has created, and is creating, in and through Jesus.

All this is expressed in a high rhetorical style. The writing itself reflects something of the same broad and far-reaching perspective. The vision is so stunning, in fact, that it's easy to forget that Paul is in prison while he's writing this – until we get to the last main paragraph in chapter 6, where he urges us into battle in the spiritual warfare. As Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 15:20–8, he understands this battle as putting into effect, in the wider world, the victory already won by Jesus on the cross.

Why is Ephesians this sort of letter, wide-ranging and visionary rather than addressing a particular situation? The short and obvious answer is: because it's a circular, written not to one particular church but to the many churches that arose throughout what is now western Turkey (the province that the Romans called 'Asia') through Paul's ministry there. The words 'in Ephesus' in the opening address of 1:1 are not found in the earliest manuscripts, suggesting that a later editor has added them. Acts 19:10 says that Paul's two-year ministry in Ephesus had such a powerful impact that, by the time it was completed, the whole region of which Ephesus was the focal point had heard the word of the lord. Many churches had sprung up.

My best guess – we'll come back to this – is that Paul wrote this letter, and its companion pieces Colossians and Philemon, while he

1 As I have often explained, I use lower case for 'spirit' to reflect the fact that when Paul wrote *pneuma* there was no visible way of marking in the text, let alone in oral presentation, the special status of God's spirit, or of thereby differentiating that spirit from the many referents of *pneuma* in the philosophies and religions of the time.

was then in prison in Ephesus.[2] The end of Colossians 4 mentions different letters being circulated at the same time, and encourages the churches to swap with one another to make sure that all the messages get to all the people. The letter specifically to Colossae is more focused on one particular set of dangers facing churches in the area, and it addresses them from the basis of a sophisticated and well-developed Christology. Ephesians is well aware of dangers both practical and theological. It is just as sophisticated as Colossians in Christology, and indeed presents a fully Trinitarian view of God. But it offers an altogether larger vision.

The shape of Ephesians

Ephesians is one of the easiest letters to map out in your mind. This should be an encouragement to personal study and prayerful reflection. It ought also to act as an incentive to learning it by heart. (I have often said to students that, if they were acting in a Shakespeare play, then within a couple of months of rehearsals they would know by heart far more lines than there are in a Pauline letter. I once said that, applying it to Ephesians, to a large group of students in an American college, and when I revisited a few years later I discovered that some had taken the challenge seriously, including one couple who had met through trying to learn the letter and were now married. Well, Ephesians would be a great starting-point for that, too, as we shall see.) As with any Pauline letter, it's easy to get interested in small fragments, verses or even phrases, and to forget the larger whole to which they belong. It is always a good idea to balance detailed word-by-word study with a regular and prayerful reading of the entire letter, at a single sitting, to get a sense of its shape and flow.

From one point of view, the shape is obvious. Ephesians divides down the middle. Chapters 1–3 form one long statement of

2 For the details of this hypothesis, and the historical context within Paul's career, see *Paul: A Biography*.

praise and prayer, with some side issues coming out as well. Then chapters 4–6 form a classic Pauline 'Therefore' passage. The logic is crystal clear: if chapters 1–3 mean what they say, then this (4–6) is what church life and Christian behaviour ought to look like in consequence.

But, at precisely that point, we need to beware of the obvious way in which some traditions might express this. It would be easy to say that the first three chapters are 'dogma' or 'doctrine' and the last three are 'ethics'. Those words can be misleading. The 'dogma' isn't simply 'the doctrine of salvation'. Salvation is assumed as part of the overall context. But what Paul means by 'salvation' is significantly different from what many Christians have imagined. And 'ethics' has sometimes been reduced to 'the way we're supposed to behave now we're Christians', but with the proviso that one should not stress behaviour in such a way that it might compromise pure 'faith' by adding one's own 'works'. This is a comparatively modern confusion to which the letter itself forms a clear and solid reply.

It would be much more accurate to see chapters 1–3 as *worship* and chapters 4–6 as *mission* – with the mission growing organically out of the worship. But even that might be oversimple. The point of worship is to glorify God for what he *has* done, *is* doing and *will* do. Chapters 1, 2 and 3 are very much about God's purpose to display his glory, and to invite worship, *through the life of the church*. Thus, though these chapters don't in fact say very much about the *ultimate* destiny of believers, they do say a great deal about God's *present* purpose for the church, about what God wants to achieve *through the church's very existence* in a muddled and unready world.

Then chapters 4, 5 and 6, though they are quite wide-ranging, have two very specific focal points, two themes which Paul never tires of stressing: *unity* on the one hand and *holiness* on the other. Both of these, alas, have often been forgotten or marginalised in our modern Western churches, or indeed played off against each other. Unity, after all, is quite easy if you don't care about holiness. You just get together and turn a blind eye to heresy and sin. Likewise, holiness is quite easy if you don't care about unity: whenever you have a disagreement, you split off and do your own thing. But Paul is

emphatic that both matter. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 explain both why and how.

At the heart of worship, mission, unity and holiness, then, we discover in Ephesians *the vocation of the church*. The church, united and holy, is designed to demonstrate to the hostile watching world that the God revealed in Jesus is the true God, the creator, redeemer, lover and glory of the whole world.

Paul expounds this in terms of creation and new creation, of humanity and new humanity. Much traditional theology and preaching has downplayed these themes, being more concerned with a supernatural and 'other-worldly' salvation, with 'going to heaven' after death. So, too, many theologically minded expositions have stressed the divinity of Jesus and the divine power at work in saving humans. This is obviously important; but in Ephesians, more clearly perhaps than anywhere else, we see that God's plan in the Messiah Jesus was *to sum up the whole cosmos in him, everything in heaven and on the earth*. Jesus has fulfilled the role marked out in scripture for the truly human being, as well as the role marked out for God himself. The humanity of Jesus is not simply a necessity for the purposes of rescuing the world, but the fulfilment of the creator's original purpose; and the true humanity of Jesus' followers is designed to display to the world what human life was meant to be like.

The way I have come to see this in recent years is to understand the calling of the church as being central to the purposes of God for creation and new creation, and thus to think of the vocation of the church as the call to live as *the small working model of new creation*. This theme is found right across the New Testament, but Ephesians has a claim to be its clearest exposition. I shall be returning to this point, and that phrase, again and again.

All this is so much richer, so much fuller, than simply saying, 'Here are a few things to believe, and here are a few rules to help you behave.' Learning to read Ephesians carefully, we learn to think in a much more organic, theological way. We see how we, finding ourselves (perhaps to our surprise) caught up in the work of God – father, son and spirit – are called to be, corporately and even

individually, the small working models which reveal in advance, and also work towards, the final new creation that God has had in mind all along.

Ephesians and Paul?

All this may highlight for some readers one of the main reasons why scholars in the last two or three centuries have questioned whether Paul himself actually wrote Ephesians. This question has sometimes been posed in relation to the letter's writing style. Romans and Galatians, for so long treated as two of the central Pauline letters, seem much more feisty and argumentative, using what technically is called the 'diatribe' style of debate with an imaginary opponent, and so on. The sentences in Ephesians are much longer, more florid, more discursive. But this argument from style is problematic. The whole Pauline corpus is such a small sample – compared, say, with the works of Paul's near-contemporaries Seneca or Plutarch – that it's very dangerous to draw any firm conclusions. Those who have run computer programs through the letters have, for what it's worth, come back to say that Paul could easily have written the whole lot.[3]

I would make the case in another way. There are indeed stylistic differences between Paul's various letters, but the most obvious one is between 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians. The first letter is cheerful, plain sailing, expounding one topic after another with clarity, good humour, and a clever alternation of styles including the lyrical thirteenth chapter, about love, and the carefully balanced step-by-step argument of the fifteenth chapter, about the resurrection. The second letter, in complete contrast, is gritty and awkward. It sounds as though it's being dictated through clenched teeth, or even through sobs and tears. It has jerky sentences and convoluted phraseology. Having translated the whole New

3 See Anthony J. P. Kenny, *A Stylometric Study of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), pp. 80–115.

Testament, I can say confidently that 2 Corinthians contains some of the hardest Greek anywhere in early Christian writing. But, apart from a few verses in 2 Corinthians 6, nobody questions whether Paul wrote both of these letters. Paul is a craftsman and can shape and modulate his writing this way and that. He is also a human being who has suffered and wrestled with grief and frustration. He doesn't mind letting that appear in his style as well as his content. So it's clear that differences of style by no means necessarily mean differences of author.

Once we see this point, we can say similar things about the relationship between Ephesians and Colossians. The way some scholars have set things up makes it sound as though Paul was writing successive editions of some kind of micro-systematic theology, like John Calvin rewriting the *Institutes* over and over and thereby enabling us to track developments in his thought. A bit of historical imagination suggests that this would be a laughably wrong parallel. Paul is in prison, wanting to get messages out to the little churches dotted around the hinterland. He's got a lot to say but only short letters to say it in, so he writes densely and allusively. Many commentators on both letters have spent many hours and scores of pages trying to guess which bits of Colossians someone has used to piece together Ephesians, or indeed vice versa; and to enquire whether some bits of Ephesians may be original to Paul, and if so which ones and why . . . and so on.

This is the point at which I am inclined to say that, though Occam's razor is the only razor I've used for nearly forty years now, it's still as sharp as ever. Occam's razor is the old philosophical rule that one should not multiply unnecessary entities. We have got used to being puzzled by the places where Galatians and Romans overlap but seem not to be saying quite the same thing; but only the odd maverick would suggest that therefore other hands have been at work. So, too, there are indeed a few puzzles here and there at the overlaps between Ephesians and Colossians, and also between both of those letters and the rest of the corpus. But they are better addressed by careful exegesis of the passages in question, rather

than by suggesting that this or that bit has been added, or edited, or indeed deleted, by someone other than Paul.

I suspect that most of these arguments do not trouble the general reader, or even the preacher. But those who studied Paul in seminary or university will know that the questions have been raised, and it's only right that I should make it clear where I stand.

The real problem, to be frank, is theological. Ephesians doesn't fit with the view of Paul's theology which has been developed by many over the last two centuries or so. New Testament scholarship was dominated for around a hundred years by German liberal Protestants; though that is no longer the case, their influence has lingered on, like the grin on the face of the Cheshire Cat. The 'protestant' part of this position was always worried about the high ecclesiology in Ephesians, in which the church is seen as already seated in heavenly places in the Messiah, as constituting the sign to the powers of the world that Jesus is lord. Classic Protestantism has been eager to pull down the ecclesial high and mighty from their thrones, often in the name of a supposed Pauline theology culled from Galatians and Romans. Ephesians, therefore, came under suspicion for its repeated emphasis on the church.

The 'liberal' part of the 'liberal protestant' movements was equally suspicious of the high Christology in Ephesians and Colossians. The apparently grandiose statements of who Jesus is, and what he has achieved, were not what the functional Christologies of such movements were looking for. In fact, however, both the ecclesiology and the Christology of Ephesians grow directly out of the *Judaean* matrix of Ephesians, which will come out again and again. Here we see one of the many underlying problems. Christianity as a whole, Eastern and Western, protestant and catholic, high and low, has for many generations done its best to hold the essential Jewishness of early Christianity at arm's length. This has affected everything. Ephesians, in fact, gives us a gloriously Judaean view of the world, of God, of salvation, rethought of course around the Messiah and his death and resurrection. (By the way, I normally use the word 'Judaean' rather than 'Jew' or 'Jewish', as a reminder that we are talking about the first-century world rather than either the mediaeval or modern

world, where 'Jew' and 'Jewish' have come to resonate with particular extra meanings.[4]) We need to go back to the first century, and see things as Paul and his contemporaries would have done.

The world view of ancient Israel, and of the Judaean world which Paul knew, was not, after all, the split-level world of Epicureanism or Deism. Nor was it the monistic world of Stoicism. At the heart of the biblical world view is the theme of the temple, the place where heaven and earth come together.[5] Creation itself was and is the ultimate temple, designed to be the joining-place of God's space and our space, with human beings standing at the dangerous intersection of the two. The Jerusalem temple, which was central to the biblical world view, as it was to social, political and cultic life, provided the model: the temple was the signpost, the foretaste, of the new creation, the new coming together of heaven and earth which scripture promised. As we shall see, this is central to Ephesians as well. But, at every point, this was not on the agenda of earlier scholarship. Until recently, many writers on Paul have treated his mentions of the temple as a minor added metaphor, not really making much contribution to the structure and grounding of his thought.

The Judaean world view showed up in another feature of Ephesians which was often squeezed out of older protestant readings: the challenge to the principalities and powers. Many churches since the Enlightenment have effectively made a pact with the powers that be, to let them run their bits of the world as long as the churches could teach people to say their prayers and speak about access to an other-worldly heaven. For many in the more liberal traditions, the whole biblical notion of spiritual warfare was more or less off limits. So the 'powers', whether human or non-human, didn't really feature. But, again, Ephesians won't let us get away with these moves. As we shall see, the higher your Christology and ecclesiology, the more you will find yourself in the thick of the battle, as God's long-awaited new creation comes up against the destructive powers of darkness.

4 See the similar usage, and explanation, in Tom Holland's recent book *Pax*.

5 On this whole paragraph see esp. my *History and Eschatology,* chs 1 and 5.

A lot of this shows up in the way the same traditions have read Romans and Galatians themselves. The very people who have wanted to push Ephesians to one side have often tried to do the same with Romans 9 – 11. And both Romans and Galatians have themselves been read in deJudaised fashion, as though they were answering the mediaeval questions of salvation. This has produced distortions at every level. Once you see Paul in a more historical, more rounded, more Judaean, more first-century world of theology, politics, philosophy and so on (which is what I've tried to do in my other writings on Paul), you'll find that Romans and Galatians come up in three dimensions – and that Ephesians will be right there alongside them. I recall, from over forty years ago, the great American scholar Paul Achtemeier finishing his commentary on Romans and saying that if he was right in how he had understood Romans itself, then the same Paul could have sat down the very next day and written Ephesians. (Actually, I think he had already written Ephesians before he got to Romans, but that's another story.)

So the prejudice against Ephesians has run quite deep in the discipline. Younger scholars have often felt they needed to apologise if they wanted to treat it as Pauline. But behind the complex arguments, I have come to the view that it is indeed just a prejudice. I'm not going to take any more time in the present book to argue the point. Once we understand the other letters as fully and richly as we should, I believe we will see that Ephesians belongs in the middle of them all.

Think for a moment, though, of what follows from this. The protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century, to whom we owe so much in so many ways, tended to highlight Romans and Galatians in particular. They were doing battle over the doctrine of justification, and those two letters are Paul's two main expositions of it – though it pops up here in Ephesians also, in the middle of chapter 2. But I suggest, and I hope that by the end of this book the reader will see what I mean, that if the Reformers had chosen Ephesians rather than Romans or Galatians as their key text, the history not only of the Western church but of the whole world might have been very different.

Let me explore this just a little further. A bit of historical perspective won't go amiss. We come to this letter, as to all scripture, within certain larger implicit contexts which have determined how the texts have been read.

Two points stand out. First, the Reformers were addressing the doctrine of justification as a matter of urgency. The key question of the day appeared to them in the form, 'How can I be sure that I'm going to heaven when I die?' Granted universal sin, this question focused on how people could be put right with God here and now; in other words, on justification. The doctrine of purgatory had loomed very large in the Western world in the period leading up to the sixteenth century, making the question of eventually getting to heaven seem very difficult and uncertain, with more and more religious observances, rules and regulations getting in the way. The Reformers argued, quite rightly in my view, that this was all a misunderstanding, destroying the peace and joy which Christian people were promised in the gospel.[6]

But if the Reformers were right in opposing the mediaeval construct of purgatory, they were still assuming that Romans and Galatians were addressing the going-to-heaven question. But they are not; and nor is Ephesians. The horizon of hope towards which they are working is not about going to heaven when you die. Look at Ephesians 1:10: '[God's] plan was to sum up the whole cosmos in the Messiah – yes, everything in heaven and on earth, in him.' So when, in 1:14, the holy spirit is said to be 'the guarantee of our inheritance', we have to remind ourselves that in Romans 8 the Christian 'inheritance' is not 'heaven', but is *the whole of creation*, redeemed in the Messiah.[7] God's purpose is the coming together of heaven and earth in the great act of cosmic renewal spoken of in Revelation 21, in 1 Corinthians 15 and in Romans 8.

This is what's going on when I say that Paul's vision for the church is to be a small working model of God's new creation. The church *already in the present time* is to be the heaven-plus-earth community,

6 See my recent statement in the final chapter of *God's Homecoming.*

7 See *Into the Heart of Romans.*

the earthly community suffused with the reality of heaven, the heavenly-seated people living out their vocation in the difficult and challenging world of space, time, matter and pagan hostility. And we are justified, set right with God, in order to be that community, and to be it visibly and shockingly before the watching world. Of course, the ultimate future matters, the future in which God's new creation will come into being and all his people will be raised from the dead to share in it. But this is not the theme of Ephesians.

That's the first point at which Ephesians would have set the record straight: Paul's view of salvation is not about being rescued *from* the world, but about the coming together of heaven and earth in Jesus the Messiah, and in the life of his followers. The second point leads on from this: Ephesians – actually in this respect like all the books of the New Testament, only perhaps most explicitly – is about the *unity* of the church. In Romans and Galatians, and certainly here in Ephesians, justification is closely linked to *the unity of the church across Judaean–Gentile boundaries*, indeed across all barriers of culture, ethnicity, gender or social class.

Now, some of the protestant Reformers were very keen on church unity. That's not surprising, since it is such a major emphasis in the New Testament. But the Reformation was from the first a fissiparous movement. Once you have split once, it's dangerously easy to do it again. Quite soon, the churches of the Reformation subdivided into national and ethnic groupings, with distinctive theologies and polities. These were then exported to the newly available New World, and more recently to the mission fields elsewhere.

This process has been helped on its way by the eagerness, among the various protestant movements, that people should have the Bible and liturgy in their own language. That was and is a wonderful thing, breaking the stranglehold of church Latin which had itself introduced many distortions into the Bible and its interpretation. But in that eagerness for local languages, little thought seems to have been given to the New Testament's emphasis, in Ephesians as strongly as anywhere, on the multi-ethnic nature of the church as the sign to the powers of the world that Jesus is lord. If you break up the church into language groups, you break it up into ethnic

groups; and this has been done so successfully that hardly anyone now notices – though Paul certainly would have done! – the scandalous way in which we have colluded with the existence of what we call 'black churches' and 'white churches', let alone all the other colours and configurations. As we shall see in Ephesians 3, it is when the church displays its true cross-cultural unity that the powers of the world are confronted with a new reality which they could never have produced themselves. Multiculturalism was not just *a* Christian idea from the beginning; as we shall see when we get to Ephesians 2, it was part of *the* Christian idea, lived out in places such as Antioch and Ephesus. It has acquired a bad name in some circles today because the secular or postmodern worlds have tried to achieve a Christian dream without the Christian gospel at its heart. But the alternative – churches divided along ethnic or cultural lines – makes nonsense of the idea of new creation, and of the church as the small advance working model of that promised reality. And where that promise and vocation are forgotten, the door stands open to many kinds of idolatry.

So what has happened to Ephesians, I think, is that we have highlighted the passages which apparently speak of salvation in the terms to which our traditions have accustomed us, and we have downplayed or ignored the emphasis on cross-cultural unity. Once we have done that, we leave Ephesians as, indeed, a book of dogma and ethics. And, of course, dogma and ethics really are there. But they are there *within* that vision of the church as the small working model of new creation, with the coming together of heaven and earth symbolised by the coming together of Judaean and Gentile. And that emphasis has been horribly lacking, with terrible effects, in the Western churches of the last 500 years.

The frame of Ephesians: 1:1–2; 6:21–4

So, by way of completing this introduction, we plunge into the text itself. It is always worth looking at beginnings and endings to check our bearings on what the text is all about.

The first two verses are a standard greeting, but none the less important in where they place the weight. Paul introduces himself as an apostle of Messiah Jesus. His apostleship was based, as he says elsewhere, on his own seeing of the risen Jesus. As he does in the two Corinthian letters and also Colossians and 2 Timothy, he adds that his apostleship comes about 'through God's purpose'. He is claiming a God-given authority to speak words which will bring God's life and order into the community and so into the world.

But in Ephesians, the idea of God's 'will', God's overarching purpose, is especially relevant. In the great opening blessing of verses 3–14, to which we shall come in the next section, he mentions God's 'purpose' twice. He is clearly seeing his own apostolic calling, and God's equipping of him for that calling, as part of that larger plan. Paul returns to this theme in chapter 3, where he explains in more detail the way in which his strange apostleship – he having been a persecutor, the least of all God's people! (3:8) – was part of that even stranger divine purpose, strange at least in the eyes of most of the world and certainly of Judaean people such as Saul of Tarsus himself. So, though this introduction of himself is reasonably standard, I think it is specially and deliberately relevant for Ephesians itself.

The letter is addressed to the 'holy ones' and the 'loyal believers' (verse 1). The Greek word *hagioi*, normally translated 'holy ones' or 'saints', could refer to angels, but clearly it is also a term of address for the true people of God. The idea of 'holiness' includes that of being 'set apart'; the believing community has been set apart through the gospel and the spirit to be part of the community that reflects the purposes of the creator God into the world. Holiness, after all, isn't just a matter of complying with various rules. The rules are simply guard rails on either side of the rich, straight path of God's new creation. Paul will have much to say about holiness of life later on in the letter. But, for him, we should note, 'holiness' is already a given through the gospel, now to be lived out, rather than a distant goal which we might attain only through a lifetime of good behaviour. Holiness, as he will go on to explain, is like a new suit of clothes which the believer puts on at baptism – even if, like a young

son putting on his older brother's clothes, believers will then have to 'grow into' them.

The phrase 'loyal believers' is my attempt to cover both meanings of *pistoi*. The word *pistis* means 'faith', but also 'reliability', 'loyalty' and so on. For Paul, it seems to be all of the above, and more besides. Yes, the recipients of the letter are, of course, 'believers'. But this isn't just a matter of intellectual assent to propositions or an emotional response to Jesus, though both of these are vital. It's about *loyalty*, trustworthiness. Again, this is what the church is by definition, as well as what church members must now live up to.

The word *pistois*, meaning 'faithful' or 'loyal', goes closely with 'in Messiah Jesus'. Ephesians is the letter where Paul uses the phrase *en Christō*, 'in the Messiah', more than anywhere else. Whole books have been written on this phrase. I have argued, and I think Ephesians bears this out thoroughly, that Paul uses it as a shorthand to mean 'belonging to the Messiah's people'. Despite what many people still think, the word *Christos* in early Christianity carries its full weight of 'the anointed one', the Messiah. Part of the point there is that the Messiah, the true king, *represents* his people, so that what is true of him becomes true of them. So the phrase 'believing loyally in Messiah Jesus' isn't just about the belief which affirms the truth of the gospel. It is about the faith which, in justification, marks someone out as a member of that family. The whole letter will be expounding what that means.

As I pointed out earlier, some of the oldest manuscripts lack the words 'in Ephesus'. This lends weight to the view that the letter was designed as a circular, to be sent to all the churches in the wider region of western Turkey. Paul refers to such a letter in Colossians 4:16 – the so-called 'Letter to Laodicea' – and I agree with those commentators who suspect that they are one and the same.

The greeting of verse 2 is standard but no less powerful for that. Grace and peace sum up the gospel, its origin and its effects. Paul will come back to them again and again, for instance in chapter 2 where the grace which saves Judaean and Gentile alike is the direct means of peace across the traditional ethnic boundary. And this grace and this peace come, of course – but it needs to be said – from

God the father and the lord Jesus, the Messiah. Here, already, is the mystery of Christology: what the father does, he does in and through the lord. The human role assumed by the lord Messiah is, and was always designed to be, the vessel and vehicle of the divine work.

All that sets us up for verses 3–14. For now, we jump to the final verses of the letter, 6:21–4.

First, in verses 21 and 22, Paul commends Tychicus, who is travelling round the various churches with the letter. He would probably have read it out to the assembled faithful. As well as the letter, he will bring encouraging news of Paul himself. Then, in verse 23, Paul returns to the opening greeting of 'peace', and instead of 'grace' he places 'love', which has been a major theme in chapter 3 and elsewhere. Then, in verse 24, grace and love come together: the church is defined as 'all who love our Lord, Messiah Jesus, with a love that never dies'. The love which the gospel implants in our hearts, answering of course the boundless love poured out in the gospel to which Paul refers in chapter 3, is itself part of the spirit-given vital sign of the whole new creation. As such, it already belongs in God's ultimate future. But this doesn't mean that Paul's readers, or we ourselves, have now arrived somewhere where we don't need grace any more. So that is his closing prayer for us and all his audience. Grace on top of grace, as John puts it.[8]

So here we are, launched into one of the first-century miracles of grace in the form of this short but deep letter. These are huge themes, and we will touch on many tricky but important issues. This will take prayer as well as thought. As will become clear in chapter 6, the dark powers do not take kindly to being reminded of the victory which Jesus won on the cross, and the victory which is still to be implemented through his faithful followers.

After this introduction, we will lay the foundations for our understanding of the letter by working quite slowly through chapter 1.

8 John 1:16.