

THE MESSAGE OF EPHESIANS

(John Stott)

The letter focuses on what God did through the historical work of Jesus Christ and does through his Spirit today, in order to build his new society in the midst of the old.

It tells how Jesus Christ shed his blood in a sacrificial death for sin, was then raised from death by the power of God and has been exalted above all competitors to the supreme place in both the universe and the church. More than that, we who are 'in Christ', organically united to him by faith, have ourselves shared in these great events. We have been raised from spiritual death, exalted to heaven and seated with him there. We have also been reconciled to God and to each other. As a result, through Christ and in Christ, we are nothing less than God's new society, the single new humanity which he is creating and which includes Jews and Gentiles on equal terms. We are the family of God the Father, the body of Jesus Christ his Son and the temple or dwelling place of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore we are to demonstrate plainly and visibly by our new life the reality of this new thing which God has done: first by the unity and diversity of our common life, secondly by the purity and love of our everyday behavior, next by the mutual submissiveness and care of our relationships at home, and lastly by our stability in the fight against the principalities and powers of evil. Then in the fullness of time God's purpose of unification will be brought to completion under the headship of Jesus Christ.

With this theme in mind, we may perhaps analyze the letter as follows:

1. The new life which God has given us in Christ (1:3 -2:10)
2. The new society which God has created through Christ (2:11 - 3:21)
3. The new standards which God expects of his new society, especially unity and purity (4:1 - 5:21)
4. The new relationships into which God has brought us-harmony in the home and hostility to the devil (5:21 - 6:24).

The whole letter is thus a magnificent combination of Christian doctrine and Christian duty, Christian faith and Christian life, what God has done through Christ and what we must be and do in consequence. And its central theme is God's new society - what it is, how it came into being through Christ, how its origins and nature were revealed to Paul, how it grows through proclamation, how we are to live lives worthy of it, and how one day it will be consummated when Christ presents his bride the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing ... holy and without blemish' (5:27).

The contemporary relevance of this message is obvious. Karl Marx also wrote of 'the new man' and 'the new society': And millions of people have caught his vision and are dedicating themselves to its realization. But Marx saw the human problem and its solution in almost exclusively economic terms. The 'new society' was the classless society which would follow the revolution, and the 'new man' would emerge as a result of his economic liberation.

Paul presents a greater vision still. For he sees the human predicament as something even deeper than the injustice of the economic structure and so propounds a yet more radical solution. If he writes of nothing less than a 'new creation'. Three times he uses creation language. Through Jesus Christ God is recreating men and women 'for good works', creating a single



new humanity in place of the disastrous Jewish-Gentile division, and recreating us in his own image 'in true righteousness and holiness'. Thus according to Paul's teaching the new man and the new society are God's creative work. Economic restructuring has great importance, but it cannot produce these things. They are beyond the capacity of human power and ingenuity. They depend on the fiat of the divine Creator.

This message of the church as God's new creation and new community is of particular importance for those of us who call ourselves or are called 'evangelical' Christians. For by temperament and tradition we tend to be rugged individualists, and are thought to care little about the church. Indeed, the expressions 'evangelical' and 'low church' are generally supposed to be synonymous. Yet they should not be. The true evangelical, who derives his theology from the Bible, will be bound to have the very high view of the church which the Bible has. Today more than ever we need to catch the biblical vision of the church. In the West the church is in decline, and urgently needs to be renewed. But what form of renewal do we desire? In the communist world the church is always stripped of privilege, often persecuted and some driven underground. Such situations prompt the basic question: what is the church's essential being, without which it would cease to be the church? Then in several regions of the third world the church is growing rapidly, and in some places its growth rate is faster even than the population growth rate. But what kind of churches are coming into being and growing? Thus in all three worlds—the free world, the communist world and the third world—we need to be asking radical questions about the church! And Ephesians will supply us with answers. For here is Christ's own specification of his church, the church for which he 'gave himself up' (5:25), the church which is his body, and even his 'fullness' (1:23).

Much of the message of Ephesians is adumbrated in the apostle's opening salutation: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (verse 2). True, this was the customary greeting with which he began all his letters, a Christianized form of the contemporary Hebrew and Greek greetings. Yet we may safely say that nothing from Paul's pen was ever purely conventional. On the contrary, both these nouns are particularly appropriate at the beginning of Ephesians—'grace' indicating God's free, saving initiative, and 'peace' what he has taken the initiative to do, namely to reconcile sinners to himself and to each other in his new community.

'Grace' and 'peace', then, are key words of Ephesians. In 6:15 the good news is termed 'the gospel of peace'. In 2:14 it is written that Jesus Christ himself 'is our peace', for first he 'made peace' by his cross (verse 15) and then he 'came and preached peace' to Jews and Gentiles alike (verse 17). Hence his people are to be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' (4:3). 'Grace', on the other hand, indicates both why and how God has taken his reconciling initiative. For 'grace' is his free and undeserved mercy. It is 'by grace' that we are saved, indeed by 'the immeasurable riches of his grace' (2:5,7,8), and it is by the same grace that we are gifted for service (4:7; cf. 3:2,7). So if we want a concise summary of the good news which the whole letter announces, we could not find a better one than the three monosyllables 'peace through grace'.

Finally, before leaving the introduction to the letter, we must not miss the vital link between the author, the readers and the message. Paul the author is 'an apostle of Christ Jesus', the readers are themselves in Christ Jesus, and the blessing comes to them both from God our Father and from ... the Lord Jesus Christ, who are bracketed as the single spring from which grace and peace flow forth. Thus the Lord Jesus Christ dominates Paul's mind and fills his vision. It seems almost as if he feels compelled to bring Jesus Christ into every sentence he writes, at least at the beginning of this letter. For it is through and in Jesus Christ that God's new society has come into being.