

THE BACKGROUND

My granddaughter, Gwyneth, is six years old. I had a chance to visit with her this last Saturday. She mentioned that she had recently seen me on television. Mariana had been staying with the grandchildren the weekend of September 25 so Brennan and Gretchen could go off to celebrate their sixteenth wedding anniversary. Mariana had tuned in to our service on Sunday morning, and of course Gwyneth had been with her. Gwyneth wanted to make sure I knew that she really had seen me, so she was trying to remember something about what she had been watching. “Oh,” she said, “it was some weird stuff about God.”

I thanked her and gave her a hug. But afterward, I thought to myself, “Gwyneth is not the only one who sees it that way.” Quite a few people, I suspect, think *The New Church* is just some weird stuff about God. And some of them don’t seem to realize that it is us humans who make the stuff about God seem weird.

Some of you have been tracking with us as we have all-too-briefly traced the development of covenants and religious convictions from Moses and Elijah on into Paul’s elation in Ephesians at the “mystery of God’s plan” – a plan to bring unity and harmony to all of Creation. Only, we have not solved or resolved anything. In fact, the clearer it gets, the more questions and issues rise up all around us.

1.) Do any of us still feel the huge new era sweeping over our world that Paul was seeing and experiencing? Many would claim that “unity and harmony” have been decreasing, not increasing, on the earth for the last two thousand years. Unity and harmony were not here before Jesus came, but they most certainly have not been increasing since. If anything, Jesus has made it worse. And by the way, Jesus would definitely agree with this. *“I have come to set fire to the earth, and how I wish that it were already kindled. I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished! Do you suppose I came to establish peace on the earth? No indeed, I have come to bring dissention (division).”* (Luke 12:49-51)

So now we get to feel superior not only to Elijah and Moses, but also to Jesus.

2.) We keep asking: “How do we Live The Life?” That question keeps on getting harder if we see the real issues more clearly. The church in our time is still trying to give simplex, kindergarten answers to the most profound questions in Life. There may indeed be a quality of simplicity to the Christian response, but it is in no way simplex, easy, or automatic. “Living The Life” from now on will take on a whole new dimension, at least in *The New Church*. Working the twelve steps is indeed wondrous for those of us struggling with addictions. We have no chance of dealing with real life until we get “sober.” But after we are sober, then what? That only gets us back to where we should have started out.

3.) Finding ourselves caught between the “ways of the world” and the “Way of Christ,” how do we proceed? Are we always peaceful – when Jesus was not? Are we forever doomed to be dragged back into animosity, anger, hatred, and strife? Jesus did find and show a WAY to live between the ways of the world and the Way of God’s Kingdom. Thanks to Jesus, so did Paul. What about us? Do we even know there is such a WAY? Do we live it, and help each other, and rejoice in it together?

Of course, all along the way there are forces trying to drag us back into our old ways. Do we know that, and expect it? Even talking about such things raises the ire and animosity of many people toward Jesus, and therefore toward us as well. All around us there are people who are somewhere between annoyed and fiercely angry at any claims we might make that Jesus is our Savior, our Lord, the One we trust to even *know* that there is a better WAY. Why are they still so angry at Jesus? Or at us for claiming our allegiance to Him?

“Well,” you say, “other Christians have poisoned the well.” Indeed, yes. But that is hardly a sufficient answer. Our Lord was crucified long before the well was poisoned. And a growing number of people are determined to make us deny that there is any meaning to Jesus’ crucifixion. They are even more determined to make us confess that there is no significance to His Resurrection.

Anyway, we will not solve or resolve such issues in this lifetime. Meanwhile, there is much still waiting for us in Ephesians. And so, we need to catch up on some of the technical and scholarly items. As we keep discovering, context can change everything. Did Paul write the letter to the Ephesians? Was the letter written to the church at Ephesus? Is there really a connection between Colossians and Ephesians? And of course, for the neophytes: Why does any of it matter?

As usual, I will state my own conclusions so you will have a point of reference. Some of you will just leave it at that, but many of you ponder such things, read other conclusions, and end up disagreeing with me. In *The New Church*, that is always acceptable and appropriate. By the way, I have not always held my current conclusions, and I may very well change them again as new possibilities come to light for me. But what follows are a few comments around what seems most probable to me right now.

Paul did definitely write the letter to the Ephesians. Only, it was never written to the Ephesians. It was written as a circular letter – that is, a letter to be circulated to all the churches in the area of Asia, which did have Ephesus as its central and most influential city. It was written very shortly after Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians. I suspect that Paul realized that a number of items and issues addressed in his letter to the Colossians were of major significance to Christians and Christian churches everywhere, and so he penned this longer letter, which expanded on a number of themes he had mentioned more briefly in Colossians.

Ephesians does reveal a certain “growth” or “development” in Paul’s thinking. Most of the arguments used to deny Pauline authorship assume that Paul could not have expanded his former views enough to contain what we find in Ephesians. I think it is even harder to suppose that some follower of Paul’s was brilliant enough to come up with Ephesians, yet leave us with no further trace of his influence or teachings.

In any case, as you know, a growing trend of “liberal scholarship” has concluded that Paul did not write Ephesians, Colossians, or Second Thessalonians, and that The Acts of the Apostles was not written by Luke and has very little, if any, historical value. Your fastest way into this perspective, as I mentioned during our study of Colossians, is to read *The Authentic Letters of Paul* by Arthur Dewey, Roy Hoover, Lane McGaughey, and Daryl Schmidt (published in 2010). I am not endorsing or encouraging anyone to read this material. There is plenty of it, and the bibliography in the book is a fast window into a lot of it. It’s amazing, as always, to notice who is and is not included in the bibliography. I simply feel that you should be able to find this material if you want to. And the book is current, and a fast way into the attitudes and approaches of this wing of liberal scholarship.

Because you were good enough to slog through the many important but obscure details surrounding Paul's letter to the Colossians, we can skip going over it all again. If Ephesians was written soon after the letter to the Colossians, then it also was written from prison at Ephesus, and about A.D. 54 or 55. But why would Paul be writing to the Ephesians from a prison in Ephesus? Actually, we could come up with some very plausible explanations for that. But one of the curiosities about this letter is that the words "in Ephesus" (1:1, "*To the saints who are in Ephesus*") do not appear in any of the early manuscripts. Nor does Ephesians have the usual comments addressed to personal friends that occur in Paul's other letters. Some have wondered if perhaps Ephesians is the "lost letter" to the Laodiceans. You remember that, in Colossians, Paul requested that the Colossians read his letter to the Laodiceans, and that they in turn should read Colossians. But we have no extant letter to the Laodiceans. Perhaps in some way this is not very inconsistent with my favorite theory. Many have proposed that Ephesians was written on purpose as a kind of treatise intended to be circulated to all the churches in the area (of Asia, today's western Turkey).

On the other hand, apart from the named destination, Ephesians is as well-attested to be a genuine New Testament writing as any book in the New Testament. Nor did anyone contest Paul's authorship until the nineteenth century. Ephesians was known to Ignatius, Polycarp, and Hermas, and probably to Clement of Rome (A.D. 97). Marcion, Irenaeus, the Muratorian Canon, and Clement of Alexandria all accept it as genuine. That, by the way, is a very impressive list of references.

It is sometimes claimed that the vocabulary of Ephesians is completely unlike the other Pauline letters. But G.B. Caird has shown that on closer examination, these conclusions hold very little weight and can all have very plausible explanations. (*Paul's Letters From Prison*, page 14) Realizing that the vocabulary argument was weak, some (especially Edgar Goodspeed and P.N. Harrison) claimed that the *style* was un-Pauline. Caird goes on to upend this claim even further. (pages 16-17) Then it is suggested that the case against Pauline authorship is powerful in its cumulative impact. In other words, two unfounded and discredited arguments put together make a strong case for claiming that Ephesians was not written by Paul?

Of course, if Paul did not write Ephesians, then it was written much later than otherwise assumed, perhaps even well into the second century. Some of you know I have high regard for George B. Caird.

He died an untimely death in 1987, but spawned an amazing crew of scholars who are now in their prime, including N.T. Wright, Marcus Borg, and D.L. Hurst. He often brought perspective to suggestions that others seemed to miss. He asks, for instance, in *Paul's Letters From Prison* (page 19) whether the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus (A.D. 70) could possibly have “broken down the barriers of hostility” (between Jews and Christians). That is, could anyone in his right mind have written Ephesians *after* A.D. 70? And after A.D. 70, the synagogue broke off relations with the church. It is therefore probable that Jewish converts would have been very rare after A.D. 70. In short, the theory that Ephesians was written much later makes very little sense. Therefore we have far more reason to assume that Paul did write it, and that whatever difficulties we are finding may lead us to better conclusions – like the possibility that Paul was learning, growing, and seeing things in a different light all the time.

Of course, there is far more to the controversy than we have time for here. Suffice it to say that the case against Pauline authorship is far from proved. And in fact, assumptions that Paul did not write Ephesians raise far more questions than they answer. In addition, they spawn a whole tribe of complicated explanations, each one trying to tie an increasing number of loose ends together. In the meantime, they also cause huge numbers of “normal” Christians to think that the New Testament is less and less authoritative, and that in particular we should pay very little attention to Colossians and Ephesians. Nobody comes out and says that directly, but it is the inescapable result. If it is not Pauline and was written long after the time it pretends to be written, very few people will take it seriously in the same way they did before. That is exactly what has been happening over the last twenty-five years.

Now, *that* matters, even to me. What are we losing if in essence we throw out Colossians and Ephesians (and Acts)? I think the loss is huge. This is at least in part because I take Colossians and Ephesians and Acts very seriously indeed. They are an authentic part of the story as I keep trying to piece it together. If you pull these pieces out of the puzzle, it ruins major parts of the picture for me. If I have to let them go because a really strong case has been made on the basis of solid evidence, well, so be it. Such things have happened to me before in different ways, and God does not disintegrate and Jesus does not disappear. On the other hand, if you are going to try to delete segments of the New Testament with careless and superficial evidence, circular arguments,

and assumptions built on other assumptions that should never have been allowed to stand in the first place, then I think there should be a far greater outcry and protest than we have heard so far.

In closing, I want to remind you that Paul was not a systematic theologian. He never had time to write a thorough and consistent dogma of Christian beliefs, like John Calvin or Paul Tillich or Karl Barth. Paul was a “missionary” and an itinerant preacher. For the most part, he was writing to specific situations he had heard about in specific churches. Moreover, Paul did not have a library of all the letters he had already written. There is no hint whatsoever that he was trying to make sure he didn’t say something different to the Philippians than he had said to the Thessalonians. This is not to imply that Paul was thoughtless or that he had not pondered the Christian Faith – something he had done probably more deeply than any other person of his time. It is to remind us that his focus was to be helpful to whatever band of Christians he was writing to at the time.

The curious thing is that most of us try to turn Paul into a systematic theologian without even realizing it. We are eager to know what the early church really believed. Vast numbers of us assume that if we can understand “the mind of Paul,” we will come much closer to what we should believe, and even to what all right-thinking Christians should know and think.

In a strange way, many liberal scholars end up nearly agreeing with the perspective of their very conservative, literalist, inerrant opponents. Most of the cases being made against Pauline authorship are based on the assumption that Paul could not have changed his vocabulary, his style, or his beliefs very much. In other words, we try to find a small, consistent, integrated cross-section of Paul’s authentic writings – and then any writing that does not conform to this tight example of genuine Pauline expression must be spurious. (How often does Bruce use the word “spurious”? Rarely. Therefore, this class was not prepared by Bruce, but must have been written by a friend of his twenty or thirty years later.)

I am convinced that Paul was expanding his constructs and his understanding of the Christian Faith all the time. And what a shame to miss this part of his pilgrimage, and an even greater shame if we do not realize that we are supposed to be learning and growing all the time too. Is that the usual Christian stance? Not hardly! In most places,

the pattern seems to be that we are supposed to convert – from darkness into light; from error into truth. If we later admit we did not know everything rightly, it would raise the spectre that maybe we had not really been “saved.”

I think it is obvious that Paul was changing his concepts about eschatology all along. I suspect he was realizing that as time went on and Jesus didn't “come on the clouds,” the church was taking on more and more significance and importance all the time. I think the letter to the Ephesians is showing Paul with a vastly expanded awareness of Jesus' authority and true identity. Thus the real mission (the mystery) was also huge in comparison to what Paul had imagined at the time of the first missionary journey.

Well, I do know that we all have a tendency to “read into” Paul's words things we ourselves believe. We do this even more with Jesus than we do with Paul. Therefore we have reason to stay humble, and to keep learning all along the Way. It is, in fact, a huge part of our WAY that we keep learning, growing, evolving. If this makes it clear that we were wrong, or at least partial, in our views and our understanding a few years back, it also makes it clear that God is greater than we ever know, which makes it clear that part of our pilgrimage – our journey with the Holy Spirit – is to be further enlightened.

If I know nothing today beyond what I believed and held to be true even six months ago, I have surely gone to sleep at the wheel. What an insult to my Lord. What a serious sin, if any of us are trying to lead the church into a dull and brain-dead apostasy. None of you would dream of being so lethargic and unexcited about any other areas of life that you consider to be interesting or important.

If we have people in our churches who are more enthusiastic about a new recipe, a different golf swing, or a chance to make more money than they are about Jesus or what Jesus is wanting to say to them today, then guess what? We will get churches as bored and uninspired and uncommitted as most churches are today. That's enough to give any Christian nightmares.