



The Letter to the Ephesians

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Professor N. T. Wright gave an overview of Ephesians in two addresses to the Scottish Church Theology Society conference in January 2013. Retaining something of the informality of the spoken address, they have been transcribed and abbreviated by members of the society, and are published here with his kind permission and without annotation.

A bishop once said plaintively: ‘Everywhere St Paul went there was a riot. Everywhere I go they serve tea.’ It’s a fair complaint – maybe riots will come back when we preach Paul – who knows? Of course part of the question is whether Ephesians really is Paul or not and I am not going to go into that in any great depth. I think the current prejudice against the Pauline authorship of Ephesians and Colossians owes a lot to the liberal Protestantism of nineteenth-century Germany, which has stayed as a kind of shibboleth in many Pauline studies so that people assume these two books are deutero-Pauline or whatever. Well, in ancient history all sorts of things are possible; we can only be sure of a small number of things in the first century. But, when you keep studying Romans and Galatians and so on, and turn to Ephesians, you invariably find things summarised there rather well. And many, like my distinguished predecessor J. B. Lightfoot, have thought that Ephesians is in fact a circular, written around the same time as Colossians, but to a wider group of churches probably in the vicinity of Ephesus, perhaps up country in the Lycus valley. Paul refers in Colossians to a letter to the Laodiceans and nobody quite knows what that is, but maybe it is actually the circular he was sending at the same time. Ephesians does have the feel of a summary – yes, it could have been a summary by one of Paul’s associates, but I am going to treat it as a Pauline piece of writing, likely (along with Colossians and Philemon) written while Paul was in prison in Ephesus, between the writing of 1 and 2 Corinthians, in the middle of his writing career.

Ephesians is often said to be about the Church. It is, but foundationally it is about Jesus the Messiah. I regularly translate *christos* as either ‘Messiah’ or ‘King’ because I have become convinced over the years that when Paul calls Jesus *christos*, this is not simply a proper name; the messianic meaning is always just below the surface. In Ephesians, almost every paragraph of the letter is structured around Jesus the Messiah in some way or other. The only paragraph which doesn’t mention Him at all is 6:10–20, about spiritual warfare; but that of course begins: ‘Be strong in the Lord’, so we are already on the same page even without the word *christos*.

Ephesians divides very easily into chapters 1–3 and 4–6. For convenience, the two sections could be titled “Ephesians and the Mission of God” and “Ephesians and the Church of God”. Like many titles, those two do not tell you much more, but they do indicate something: first about God’s overarching purpose and where we humans fit into it, and second about putting the Church on the map. As I come back to Ephesians for the umpteenth time, I find myself still coming with questions about Paul’s theology and Paul’s worldview.

Those who have read some of my longer books may know that I use the category of worldview as something distinct from theology. Theology proper is, of course, discourse about God – in a Christian context, discourse about God, the Trinity, the Father, the Son, the Spirit; about the Church, the calling of God to the Church and so on. But worldview is about spectacles, not what you look at, but what you look through. You only stop to examine your worldview, like your spectacles, if suddenly things have gone fuzzy and you can’t see straight – so I analyse worldview in terms of the stories that people habitually tell, the narratives by which they live without thinking until somebody suddenly says: ‘Why do you do that?’ and the answer is: ‘Well that’s just what we do.’

Symbols have a key place in this. Today they include obvious things like mobile phones and credit cards, which indicate how we go about things and what our society is about. Now, let’s ask about symbols in Paul’s worldview because when he’s teaching young Christians, he is getting them to put on a new pair of spectacles, helping them to think about what he as a Christian takes for granted, but they don’t – not yet. As a Second Temple Jew, Paul’s worldview symbols were clear – the

things that mark you out from your pagan neighbour are circumcision, the keeping of the Sabbath, the keeping of the food laws, the centrality of Torah and Temple, particularly. In your world, if you are a Jew with other Jews, you don't often talk about those things: you take them for granted. But if somebody who is not Jewish meets you, they will perhaps say, 'Why do you do those things?', or perhaps go off and whisper, 'Do you know what those Jews do? They take a day off once a week. Can't think why they do that. And they refuse to eat pork. Is that because they think they are better than the rest of us?' (because most people ate pork as the cheapest meat going) – and so on.

But for Paul it is quite clear that the Church is not defined in terms of the Sabbath, circumcision, food laws, the Temple in Jerusalem, or even the Torah given by God to Moses. What are the symbols of Paul's worldview? You could say the cross – but the cross is not actually there on the street as a visible, tangible thing. I have come to the preliminary conclusion that the central symbol of Paul's worldview is the Church itself, precisely in its unity and in its holiness. On the street, what the onlooker is supposed to see is a community that is united and a community that dances to a different drummer, that does stuff differently. Unity and holiness is what chapters 4–6 are all about, but the groundwork is laid in 1–3. Pastors will know that it is easy to have either unity or holiness in the Church, but hard to get both of them at the same time! Paul insists on both with claims of apostolic authority, but this is an authority which comes not so much from the office but from his testimony (which comes up in chapter 3).

One of the things I spend my time as a New Testament teacher doing is explaining to people how Second Temple Judaism actually worked, how a Second Temple Jew like Paul might have been expected to think. We need to come to the text trying to give twenty-first-century answers to first-century questions, rather than nineteenth-century answers to sixteenth-century questions, as much of the Church still tries to do. What are the first-century questions? For a Jew the first-century questions are about an ongoing story which is reaching its climax – a single story going back to creation, but especially to Abraham and the Exodus. First-century Jews do not tell those old stories as abstract truths which can be packaged and then planted in their own world; rather, it is a single story gone horribly wrong, and

they are waiting for God to sort it out.

The story of creation has not been finished! The story of Exodus has not been finished! The people went into exile, and in Daniel chapter 9 the angel said the exile would not last seventy years but for seventy times seven years, and in Paul's day people were still trying to calculate when this 490-year period would be up. There were several things that would indicate this. For many Jews (not all), the Messiah would come and would liberate God's people, defeat whichever pagan empire happened to be in power at the time and establish a reign of justice and peace. But the great hope (see the end of Ezekiel) was that the God of Israel who had abandoned the Temple at the time of the Babylonian exile because of the people's wickedness, this God would come back. The post-exilic prophet Malachi said, 'the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his Temple' (Mal 3:1) – but the priests are fed up because he hasn't done so yet. A great deal of New Testament theology is predicated on the belief that this promise has come true, shockingly, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Much of New Testament Christology comes from seeing Jesus as the one in whom the prophecies of Isaiah 40–45, of Malachi, of Zechariah are now being fulfilled.

If this is so, then we have a New Temple theology. The Temple in Jerusalem was not just a big church building at one corner of the city; in Jewish cosmology it was the place where heaven and earth actually overlapped and interlocked. Today, if you ask someone on the street if they believe in God, they will likely think of an Epicurean far distant God. But in the Jewish worldview, heaven and earth, God's sphere and our sphere, overlap and interlock and the Temple was the place where that happened. So if God was going to come back, God was going to come back to the Temple. But what would that look like? And who will get to see it? Everyone – or just some really wise visionaries? So a genre of wisdom literature and apocalyptic vision emerges, and many New Testament books make use of this idea of the unveiling of what is secret.

This is not about something 'up in the sky' – it is like a curtain being pulled back in the room where you sit. So, in much of Paul, and especially Ephesians, we have a kind of reworked creation theology, only now it concerns a new creation and a new exodus. The word

‘redemption’ carries with it overtones of what God did when He went down to Egypt to rescue a people for Himself. Although some people in a previous generation tried to suggest that Ephesians has roots in Gnosticism, this is a mistake. Some of the early Gnostics may have got material from Ephesians, but Ephesians is deeply rooted in the Jewish world which is precisely *not* Gnostic. For the Gnostic, the created order is a dark and dangerous place, and the thing to do is to escape it. For the Jew, creation is God’s good, lovely world which has been spoilt, spoilt horribly by both human sin and dark malevolent forces, but the point is to rescue the whole creation from that and not abandon the creation so that saved humans can go and live somewhere else.

If the Reformers had taken Ephesians rather than Galatians and Romans as their main set texts, the entire course of Western history might have been different. In Ephesians 1:10 Paul says something which many Western Christians have never grasped, that the whole point of what God was doing was to sum up everything in heaven and on earth in the Messiah, in Christ. The coming together of everything in heaven and earth – that’s Temple theology. The Temple is now replaced by this living human, in whom the living God and the living human being are one and the same. And as a result of God’s determination to bring together heaven and earth in one reality, the life of those humans who find themselves caught up in this purpose is not only radically changed but directed outwards. And so in Ephesians 2:10, we are God’s *poema*, God’s artwork, created in the Messiah for the good works which God wants us to do. These are not just ethical works as in ‘I’m going to behave myself from now on’ (though that would help as well), but good works which look outward: these are the impact we have as individual poems, works of art. Some of us may be haikus, some of us may be sonnets, some of us may be long narrative epics, whatever, but God wants us each to be works of art, poems for the community where we live, so that people can see what we’re up to and discern the kinds of lives we lead as the impact God wants to make in the world.

Then there is chapter 3, verse 10. In my first years in Durham, I went for Ephesians 3 again and again. It seems to me very important: ‘that through the Church the manifold wisdom of God might be made

known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places.’ When Paul says ‘through the Church’, he talks of the Church as described in chapters 1 and 2, fantastic as that may seem to those of us who spend our lives in the Church. When the Church is being the Church, united and holy, then the principalities and powers know that Jesus the Messiah is Lord and that they are not. And that is, it seems to me, vital for the witness of the Church in the contemporary world. 3:10 has often simply been forgotten by the Western Church. We’ve concentrated on being the Church away from the rest of the world rather than simply being the people that the rest of the world might look at and say, ‘Something new is going on here!’

That gives you the shape. Now moving to exegesis, the letter divides up neatly enough: Ephesians 1, 2 and 3 begin with praise, move on into prayer, and by the end of chapter 3 Paul ends with prayer and moves back to praise. The three chapters are book-ended with worship, with prayer inside, and in between you have this account of who the people of God are to be within that life of worship and prayer. I think this is deliberate; Paul has sat back and thought about things so that the description of the Church in chapter 2 is held within the life of worship and prayer.

There are other major themes in chapters 1–3. One of them is the power of God. This man in prison writes about the power of God! People often sneer at Ephesians as if someone with such a high ecclesiology could not possibly know the reality of humdrum Church life. Paul knows the reality all right; he is in prison wrestling with the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, as he says in chapter 6. And yet he can talk about the power of God and, of course, balance that out with the love of God: the power of God as seen in the resurrection of Christ, growing out of the love of God seen in the death of the Messiah. Those two go side by side and we’ll come back to them.

After the first two verses, Ephesians 1:3–14 is a single sentence in the Greek, one great prayer: ‘Blessed be God who ...’, a classic Jewish expression of praise which in turn divides into three sections. This can be set out as follows:

3–6: the purpose of God, the divine plan shaped around Jesus the Messiah. God mysteriously choosing, calling all to the praise of His grace. It's similar to the amazing climax of Romans 8:28–30, and it seems to grow out of the language of Deuteronomy where God says, 'It wasn't because you were anyone particularly special or numerous or powerful that I chose you, it was simply that I love you and I've got stuff for you to do.' Much of Ephesians is indeed about the stuff that God has got for these people to do, but the reason they are there is not because they decided, maybe arrogantly, to pin their flag on God's map, but because God said, 'I have chosen you.' That remains mysterious and I don't have any particular theory about that mystery; I leave it where Paul leaves it.

7–10: at the centre, the unveiling of the mystery – in classic Jewish apocalyptic language. God has made known to us 'the mystery of His will'. The word 'mystery' would resonate in non-Jewish circles but is deeply rooted in Jewish circles as well, this idea that a secret plan is unveiled. This is the true exodus, the rescue not just from Egypt but from this dark power which the New Testament calls sin. Sadly in the last two centuries, in the Western Church the word sin has become downgraded, as though it simply means some unpleasant things which some people in the Church think you oughtn't to do, but which everyone does anyhow. But sin in the New Testament is much darker and more worrying than that. It's got a capital 'S' to it and it's often seen almost as a personified power; and the rescue from this is on the analogy of the exodus.

Paul doesn't here explain the 'how' of this, apart from saying it is about God's grace being lavished upon us. And it is a plan to bring together all things in heaven and on earth in Christ. Here, if you were a Second Temple Jew, you would think to yourself: Paul is talking about the Temple, and about the Torah, the book which God gave through Moses to Israel. These are the great symbols, the story of how God came and formed a people for His own possession.

11–14: completing this paean of praise, verses about Jewish and Gentile Christians, and the stamp of the Spirit. Ephesians is very clear on the distinction between them, in order then to say that they have come together into one. Some, from a Jewish background, spearhead the movement, but Gentile Christians are included as well. And when you were included by the word of the Gospel powerfully transforming your life, then you were marked out, sealed with the Holy Spirit; He is the guarantee, the *arrabōn* in Greek (in modern Greek it means an engagement ring).

Western Christians assume that the inheritance is going to be heaven, but Paul makes it clear elsewhere that this inheritance concerns the whole new creation. In Romans 8, the *klōronomia*, the inheritance, is heaven and earth come together. Think of Isaiah 11:9: ‘The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea’. That’s the promise: creation as a whole set free. And how is that anticipated? By the Spirit coming and taking residence in the actual physicality of Christian believers as the advance statement of God saying, ‘I am doing this now because one day that’s what I am going to do to the whole world. This is how it is going to work.’

So the heart of this praise is for God’s sovereign act of exodus resulting in His indwelling. You see how the narrative of the Book of Exodus works out here – God rescues the people from Egypt, He gives them the Torah, and then the whole of the second half of the Book of Exodus is the plan to build the tabernacle. The plan is nearly thwarted because of the golden calf, but the tabernacle does get built, and the final scene of Exodus is God who comes and dwells in the tabernacle. From Genesis 1 and 2 through to Exodus 40, you have a pattern: God with His people in the garden, and everything goes horribly wrong; Abraham gets called, and His family mess up big time; nevertheless each time God makes a move to the rescue, and by the end of Exodus God is now dwelling with His people again. The story is incomplete, but it affirms the good purpose of God to live with His people by grace. This story continues until finally in the New Testament John says, ‘the Word became

flesh and dwelt among us’, and Paul says, ‘God’s plan is to sum up everything in Him, things in heaven and things on earth.’

In Ephesians 1:15–23 we have Paul’s prayer. He prays that the revelation in the Messiah will be what transforms the Church individually and collectively so that (v. 18) ‘the eyes of their hearts’ will be enlightened – not just by some outward knowledge, but by a knowledge that goes deep and transforms your worldview. Everything looks different once you get this new pair of spectacles. So in verses 17–19 we see this emphasis on wisdom and revelation, the divine unveiling of God’s plan and the method by which that plan is being worked out. So many Western Christians have been robbed of that because they think platonically of a disembodied heaven and then wonder how the word ‘resurrection’ could possibly fit into it. The answer is, it can’t. So we lose sight of our hope, and God’s power (v. 19) in us who believe. Compare Philippians 3 where Paul says, ‘My desire is to know Christ and the power of His resurrection’. Paul uses four different words for power in the space of a verse. And then we see what this is going to mean in verses 19, 20 and right through to 23: that power is the power with which God raised the Messiah from the dead and made Him sit at His right hand far above rulers, authority, power and dominion, above every name that is named not only in the present but in the future. God has placed all things under His feet, an allusion, of course, to Psalm 8, which is actually the role for humanity in the purpose of God.

In the contemporary Church, conservatives have often tended to emphasise bodily resurrection simply as an extraordinary and spectacular miracle that God did to get Jesus out of a very nasty predicament; they don’t relate it organically to what is going on now. Then liberals in reacting against such an apparently bizarre treatment of resurrection, have either explained it away or said it should not be taken too literally. But in the New Testament, at the heart of the resurrection is a whole theology of new creation: God affirms the goodness of the created order, following the necessary judgment on the corruption of it. God says, ‘Yes! This is my world. I am making it over anew, starting with the physical body of Jesus Himself.’

As a result, many Christians have never really wrestled with the

question of, say, what Matthew 28:18 means when Jesus says, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me’. I suspect that many Christians today are quite happy to think of Jesus having all authority in heaven, but have not begun to think of what it actually means to say He’s in charge here, now. This is what Paul is saying, even though he is in prison, even though the churches are a tiny little minority, scattered in little house groups here and there around western Turkey as we now call it. Paul says this has already happened, God has appointed Christ to be head over everything for the Church which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

It is easy to misunderstand and think that this is a prediction of some grand Constantinian thing of bishops having dinner with emperors or whatever – but it’s not. Paul is talking about something which is already a reality even with these little scattered persecuted groups and even with him, as their leader and perhaps archetype, in prison. Somehow we have to get our heads round a different sort of power!

Moving on, in chapter 2 we have a vision of the Church rescued from a terrible human plight. Verses 2–10 are in the Western tradition a classic statement of sin and salvation, but we should come to this within a larger vision of the plan of God for new creation, for the controlling metaphor for salvation here is life out of death. ‘You were dead in your transgressions and sins’ (v. 1), but now God has made us alive (v. 5), together with Christ, and this is all the work of grace. Without an understanding of the sin of all humankind (vv. 1–2) in which Jews share (v. 3), the solution which is about to be offered makes no sense.

Then comes one of the great ‘But God ...’ moments in Paul. God acting in the Messiah raises us with Him to enthrone us together with Him. Perhaps most Christians don’t think about this. From the Easter hymn, ‘*May we go where He has gone, rest and reign with Him in Heaven*’ we select the idea of resting. But reigning? What are we to reign over, what are we to run? We should be talking about a new heaven and earth, and being in charge of that under God and after the model of Christ who came not to be served but to serve, bringing God’s wise order into this world. All this has already begun and if the Church doesn’t realise what it’s there for it is because we have not

wrestled with what Paul actually says.

Then come verses 8–10, clearly a summary of what grace means. Paul often does this – he takes a chapter of one book to expound something, and then elsewhere sums it up in a single phrase. These verses contain a summary of quite a fair chunk of Romans and Galatians as you will be aware. ‘By grace you are saved through faith, not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, even that faith itself; not of works lest anyone should boast.’ The whole of Romans 2 and 3 lies behind the first half of Ephesians 2, which ends with this wonderful verse, ‘We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works’. We are indeed God’s poem, God’s artwork.

If you have read Rodney Stark’s book *The Rise of Christianity* you will know that in these first three centuries of persecution the Church did not spread by the great ideas that were being passed from one great theological brain to another – that was the backup system, the steering to make sure that the show stayed on the road. The Church spread by people living in a different way. People in little villages and hamlets and small groups who were different – they didn’t expose their baby girls like everyone else did, they looked after the poor, they looked after the sick, they cared for people who were not of their family or race. People did not know you could live like that. Here is a new way of being human, doing the good things God has already prepared for us. There is not much about Mission with a capital M in Ephesians but there’s a huge amount about the Church living in a new way of being human.

Now verses 11–22. For those who know the contemporary debates about Paul, in 1–10 we have ‘the old perspective’ and in 11–22 ‘the new perspective’, but the author of Ephesians seems quite happy to say that they belong together! Anyhow, verses 11–22 are fascinating. I love the music of Sibelius, and sometimes in some of his tone poems (think of *Finlandia*) he’ll throw out little fragments of a tune here and there, but only three-quarters of the way through do these little fragments come together and you get this wonderful great swelling tune. Then you realise that that is where the music was going all along. Ephesians 2:11–22 is like that – we get fragments of New Temple talk, but then it is all brought together. God has broken down the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles (there was a wall like that with a

warning sign on it in the Temple in Jerusalem). The Church is built on the foundation of apostles and prophets, and then, finally, in verse 21, ‘In Him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy Temple in the Lord.’ And in case you missed the point, verse 22 also has Temple language, ‘You are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit.’

You find much the same in 1 Corinthians 3 and 6, and in 2 Corinthians 6, those great Temple passages, and perhaps in Romans 12. People sometimes argue about the doctrine of the Spirit taking four centuries to develop, but it is right here in the New Testament. Yahweh returns to Zion, God comes back and dwells in the Temple, only now the Temple is the Church. You cannot get a higher pneumatology than to take ‘Yahweh returning to Zion’ language and say this is happening by the Spirit. For a first-century Jew the Temple is not just an illustration, the Temple is the centre of everything, and Paul dares to say that in these tiny little scattered Christian communities around Asia Minor, the new Temple is taking shape (cf. Greg Beale’s book, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*).

The point about the Temple is that what God does in the Temple is what God wants to do to the whole creation. In the Old Testament, God fills the Temple with His presence not as an escape from the world but as a foretaste of that day when the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the Lord. This is Temple eschatology only now it’s inaugurated eschatology. It is God coming back to dwell among His people.

Chapter 3, verses 1–13 may feel like an aside, but Paul is working up to verse 13, because if the leader of a movement has been picked up by the authorities and put in prison, supporters may think, ‘Oh dear, things are really going wrong!’ Paul wants to make it clear to them that instead, they should be pleased about his imprisonment! He says just the same in Philippians and Colossians, and reflects back on it in 2 Corinthians chapters 4, 6 and 11. So it’s not an isolated thing here. He writes, ‘Don’t lose heart over what I am suffering for you; this is in fact your glory.’ Why? Because this whole movement is based on the love of God and the crucified Messiah, which re-defines the very notion of power. This is the way that God is running the world – through the suffering, through the love, through the self-giving of His

people in the Messiah. And so from verse 2 onwards, Paul heaps up the language of vision; he has glimpsed this revelation, this mystery, and he wants them to glimpse it. What is it? Up to then, humankind has been torn apart by all sorts of divisions, not least the Jew-Gentile one, but now there is unity.

Caesar would have loved to be able to unite his empire in the way Paul envisaged Christ uniting His realm. The unity of people under the one lord, one of the great imperial ambitions, still goes on – most empires try to do that to this day. Paul says, ‘God has done it in Jesus’, and that’s why the stunning verse 10 is what it is. The word *polupoikilos* is what you’d say in a glorious garden when all the colours of the rainbow were there. So this wonderfully diverse and yet united people is to be a sign to the principalities and powers that Jesus is Lord and they are not. And that resonates with the principalities and the powers who stand behind and manipulate the powerbrokers of the world, who in turn think they are so high and mighty (but are not) – and this is how the wisdom of God is made known.

The united-in-diversity Church is the thing that tells the powers they are not in charge, and that’s why Paul can be confident. Diversity is a buzzword at the moment, raising a number of questions such as: What are the limits of diversity? Are there limits? Who says? How do you know? At what level does that get decided? When we look at chapters 4–6, this will be on the table.

Finally, in verses 14–19 is the prayer that brings it all together, echoing the prayer in chapter 1. It is a prayer to the Father. The Fatherhood of God is so important throughout Ephesians, and Paul again is praying that his friends will be strengthened with power in the inner person. Again this is New Temple language. This is God dwelling in our hearts by faith. Now that can collapse into a kind of self-indulgent pietism, but for Paul it is a human transformation which is designed to generate and sustain people who are part of this extraordinary community and who are facing outwards as they are called to those particular good works; a transformation in being filled with the fullness of God, knowing the love of the Messiah even though it passes knowledge.

Again, love and power. Love degenerates, if we are not careful, into sentimentalism. Power we worry about because we think it means

bossiness or manipulation – but we should think of the love of God on the cross, and think of the power of God in the resurrection, and think how these would look when we live them out as a community. Then comes the closing doxology which makes a circle back to the opening paean of praise. Again it is about the power which is at work within us, through which God is able to do far more than we can ask or think.

To Him be glory, the glory which fills the Temple, glory in the way God gets stuff done, the glory of God supremely revealed in the love through which Jesus died, and because of which Jesus rose. Paul is determined that his people will be a people of praise, a people who know the story, a people who are beginning to realise this extraordinary truth, as C. S. Lewis said, that when you're with your Christian neighbours they are the holiest object ever presented to your senses, since in your Christian neighbour the living Christ truly dwells. (He, as a good Anglican, accepted the blessed sacrament as another equally holy alternative.)

That is the vision which Paul has in Ephesians 1–3. We turn now to chapters 4–6.

I enjoy looking at the big picture – in Myers-Briggs terms I have a strong N rather than S – it seems that most biblical research degrees are done by people with a strong S, a serious problem because it produces a generation of teachers who are interested in little details but not the big picture. Whereas what most students need is to see the big picture and then they understand why the little details mean what they mean. So, this is an overview, without all those little details which can easily be filled in. Last night somebody asked me a wonderful question: 'If we only had Ephesians, and if the Church had privileged Ephesians instead of other books, what would the dangers have been?' One of the dangers would be, that we might go along with modern culture and divide things into truth and application, theory and practice, indicative (chapters 1–3) and imperative (4–6)!

The trouble is, that feeds the tendency to divide fact from value, the 'is' from the 'ought'. Creation is not a kind of tableau for us to play with, taking the given and doing what we want with it. Ethics – what Oliver O'Donovan calls 'how to think about what to do' – matters, it is not a matter simply of how we feel or how we vote.

Have you noticed that where we used to say in discussion 'I think

such and such’, we now say, ‘I feel such and such’, because that seems less confrontational? We use the language of feeling to mean thinking, but that colludes with an emotivist ethic in which feeling trumps thinking and may even drive thinking out of the window altogether. That in turn may collapse into the discourse of, ‘You only say that because you are a ...!’ Or the belief that if someone disagrees with me, they have ‘the wrong attitude’.

I believe in the authority of Scripture. I believe in the appropriate subsidiary authority of tradition, but I certainly believe in the subsidiary authority of reason – and maybe it is reason that we need to be emphasizing these days. Because if you have bits of scripture, bits of odd memory of Church tradition, and then ‘This is how I feel’, then I’m afraid the ‘feeling’ will just blow you about, and that is exactly what Paul warns against in chapter 4. The modernist narratives of ethics that we have lived with are so often narratives of progress. We have simply transferred them from the industrial and technological progress of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with the help of a bit of second-hand Darwinism, to the idea that we are evolving morally and culturally as well. There is, here, a latent Whig view of history as well; as if history is automatically going in the direction of something that calls itself moral progress.

Hillary Clinton talked about people in the Middle East being on the ‘wrong side of history’ – how does she know what history is going to do next, as if there was an automatic moving staircase of evolution? That was one of the things Barth was arguing against. There are many confusions in our world and they leak into the Church all too easily. One of them is the prevailing mood of Gnosticism since the Enlightenment, the sense that we in the West are the ones who have superior knowledge, we have discovered the great secrets of the universe, and the rest of the world needs to catch up. Even Gnosticism ceases to be about who we really are as whole physical beings and becomes about ‘an inner spark which I have discovered’. Think of the ‘ugly duckling’ type of movie, where the heroine discovers who she really is. The moral imperative of our time, it seems, is about being ‘true to myself’.

This is a parody of the Christian understanding of the individual, and it leads easily to the cult of ‘authenticity’ or ‘spontaneity’. Our

society is now littered with examples of what this leads to; Jimmy Savile is just the latest horrible example – he was being ‘true to himself’, doing what came naturally. But in Ephesians 4–6 we have a call to be different from the world around, to think differently in order to live differently. The renewal of the mind is at the centre of it (cf. Rom 12:2). We model a new way of being human.

People sometimes say, if the Church threatens to be too different from the world, ‘Oh the Church is turning itself into a sect’ – but right from the start the Church was different. Thank God for that! Now of course there was wonderful stuff in the ancient Graeco-Roman world – that is how Paul could write in Philippians 4:8, ‘Whatever is true and honest, and lovely and noble ... think about that’. He’s looking out into the wider world and recognizing that all is not dark. All is not totally lost, but, ‘All you have received and heard and learned and seen in me, do’. In the rest of the world there are flashes of all sorts of good things, but we are called to march to a different drummer, to enact the coming together of God’s creation in a whole new way.

Remember Ephesians 1:10: God’s desire is to sum up all things in heaven and on earth in Christ; 2:11–22, Jew and Gentile coming together into a holy Temple in which the Spirit then dwells. This is heaven on earth, Temple language. ‘Jew and Gentile’ is also Temple language and then we have in Ephesians 5, husband and wife, ‘a great mystery’ taken to refer to the Messiah and His people, the Church. This is Genesis 1 and 2 theology, celebrating the joining of bits of God’s creation made for one another.

This already shows us that Paul’s ‘ethics’ are not simply a bunch of dos and don’ts, rules that you can either count or discount. The simple view, ‘We don’t do rules because Christ is the end of the Law’ is low-grade Protestantism which has infected Church culture. So people say, ‘We don’t do that harsh judgmental stuff’, meaning, let’s get rid of moral standards, especially the ones we don’t like! But it’s not like that. Paul’s ethics grow out of a vision of creation renewed and restored, in which things that might look as though they were separate actually are designed to come together. This, then, is a new creation ethic and, as with marriage itself, it’s not just the renewal of creation, it is the renewal of that which is creative in creation. The joining of husband and wife in Ephesians 5, in itself a principle of

procreation, symbolises the focus that God has put into His created order. Hence, throughout 4–6 we have the sense of a virtue ethic (see my book *Virtue Reborn*), only instead of the proud self-achieving ethic of Aristotle, we have this ethic as God’s gift by the Spirit, the way to practise the character strengths which will let us inhabit this new way of life. And central to all Christian ethics, as emphasized in 1 Corinthians, Philippians and Colossians, are humility and love.

To begin with chapter 4:1, ‘Let the prisoner of the Lord beg you that you walk worthy of the calling with which you have been called with all lowliness of spirit, meekness, with long-suffering forbearance, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.’ He can’t say it often enough. He goes on saying it from different angles. Paul does the same in Philippians 2:1–2 – ‘If there is any sympathy and compassion in love, complete my joy by being of the same mind, being of the same soul (*sumpsuchoi*), being of the same order of mind.’ We look around our churches and we think, ‘*We’re not of the same mind*’, but Paul has the temerity to say we must be working at these things – not just vaguely tolerating one another. What he says in 4:1–3 he keeps repeating. Love and humility must be at the centre. We’ve got to be working at that unity. It’s a unity of love and humility. I have a sense that however far we’ve advanced in all sorts of other ways, in Church, and in society, we are still quite close to what the Americans call ‘first base’ when it comes to some of these things. So, it’s not just 4:1–3 either, he repeats it again and again – this is the very heart of biblical morality, how we are with one another. We have a huge amount to learn.

Chapters 4–6 contains four sections: the first section, in 4:1–16 is an initial plea for unity; the second section 4:17 to 5:20 sets out how to live counter-culturally – the new way to be human; the third section 5:21 to 6:9 is about working it out in the home, not just down the street; and the fourth and last section 6:10–20 concerns the battle with the principalities and powers. These four sections belong together, like four musical lines, soprano, alto, tenor and bass; in prose you have to set them out in sequence, but they belong together like one chord. This musical harmony is the normal Christian life. Think of, say, *The Marriage of Figaro* which has a glorious chorus with six people singing different music, all telling their story, but doing it together.

Paul warns about the cunning wiles which may deceive us and pull the thing apart. He's already talking about spiritual warfare when he talks about the counter-cultural way to be human (4:17ff.); he talks about swimming against the world's tide. This is hard work! It's costly; we have to take the shield of faith and all the other things, together.

Turning to the first section, 4:1–16 on *unity*. Don't ignore those opening verses, 1–3. Unity is rooted in small-scale humility and kindness. In Durham I made friends across ecumenical boundaries; those friendships began with little gestures of openness, welcome, kindness, hospitality. Getting to know one another without saying, 'We must now sit down and talk about the doctrine of such and such, some great issue that has divided our churches.' Rather, Christians getting to know one another, getting to the point where easily and naturally, they might start to pray together. Getting to the point where they might, yes, have conversations about some of the supposed big issues – but the primary issue is, can we be humble and wise and loving in each other's presence? And if unity is rooted in that, at one level, then equally it is rooted (vv. 4–6) in the biggest doctrine of all, which is, of course, monotheism.

There are different types of monotheism. If you're a pantheist, you are a monotheist because if everything is divine then there is only one of it, but Judaeo-Christian monotheism is creational monotheism; there is one God who made the world. It is covenantal monotheism, this God is the God of Israel. It is cultic monotheism, you must worship this God and this God only. And it is eschatological monotheism, one day this God will be all in all. Biblical monotheism has a very particular shape and one of the astonishing things, in the earliest parts of the New Testament, is to see how biblical monotheism has been rethought from top to bottom, around Jesus and the Spirit. For instance, in Galatians 4 Paul tells the story of the one God and how He has liberated His people, and refers to the God who sends the Son and the God who sends the Spirit of the Son. Then he points to the unity of God's people 'now that you know God, or God knows you'. Many New Testament passages work like this, and here in Ephesians 4:4–6 is one of them, in which their unity is affirmed in 'one body, one Spirit ... one God and Father' and so on.

That is the theological and also the practical ground of our unity.

If we are worshipping this one God together, then we have to learn to link arms and do it together. Monotheism in the Old Testament goes very closely with the Temple: there is one God, so there is this one place where you must worship (see Deuteronomy). Jeroboam leads his folk astray like the pagan kings by building shrines elsewhere. From Jerusalem, the Old Testament theologians look out and see the kings of the earth doing their own thing and they say, nevertheless, this is where the living God has decided to put His name. Psalm 2, often quoted in the New Testament, asks why the heathen make such a fuss: ‘They shake their fists against the Lord and His anointed. And God says, I have set my king upon my holy hill of Zion.’ The royal theology, also Zion theology, says to the rest of the world, there is a creator God who is in charge and He has established His throne in Jerusalem. In the New Testament that is translated into a ‘Jesus mode’ and a ‘Spirit mode’.

That helps us to understand the hardest passage in Ephesians, 4:7–10, which cites Psalm 68: ‘When He ascended on high He led captives in His train and gave gifts to humankind.’ In the Old Testament original, it doesn’t say He gave gifts, it says He received gifts. Likewise people have puzzled about the Talmud, about the Syriac versions of the Bible, this and that, and no doubt that will go on. Now Richard Hays argued in his *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (1989), a classic of modern biblical interpretation, that when you have an Old Testament quotation in Paul, you should always look at the larger context from which it comes, and then at the larger context of the passage in which Paul is quoting it. This gives another dimension to the most difficult passage of this kind.

My favourite example is in 2 Corinthians 4, when Paul says, ‘We have the same Spirit of faith as the one who said, “I believed and so I spoke”, and so we believe and so we speak.’ Now in Psalm 116, ‘I believed and so I spoke’ comes in the middle of a Psalm which is all about a sufferer who clings on and finds that the Lord rescues him. And 2 Corinthians 4 is all about being utterly crushed and despairing, nevertheless somehow believing and speaking. Paul has taken what seems to us a rather odd verse from the middle of a psalm, but used it in a similar context.

Now, what is this complicated Psalm 68 about? It’s about God

coming from Mount Sinai delivering His people, scattering kings to left and right and establishing His presence in Jerusalem, in the Temple and again, declaring that His people are the ones to which He is giving strength and power; the kings of the earth are going to look on in jealousy until they learn that actually they have to come in and submit. It's an extraordinary psalm but, if you read it, you'll see all sorts of echoes of Ephesians. God as Father; victory over the powers of the world; the whole Jerusalem and Temple theme which is so important for Ephesians. God as the one who saves from death; God, again, as Father; the inheritance of God's people and then echoes of what we noticed at the end of chapters 1 and 3.

It seems that Paul is drawing on that entire Temple theme to say we celebrate the fulfilment of all those Old Testament strands, now that God has exalted Jesus. Jesus has ascended on high (Eph 1) and now He is giving His people the gifts they need to exercise the power which Jesus wants to them to use. We can misunderstand power when we think of it as bullying and so on, but actually, power is God's gift to His people, redefined in Christ, redefined around humility and love and suffering. But it is real power nonetheless. We take it with humility and hope and we go to work to exercise the gifts that we have been given. These gifts flow from this new heaven and earth reality. God has established Jesus as the one in whom heaven and earth come together and now this reality flows out to the world.

Writing the *Everyone* commentaries [the *New Testament for Everyone* series], I came to Acts and realised there was no place to hide. It was scary to recognise that I had to get right through to Revelation, and I remember thinking, 'I am not sure how I will approach this'. But I had been doing some other work elsewhere on Temple theology and on how heaven and earth come together in the Temple, and I realized that in Acts 1 what you have is a bit of earth mixed in with the risen body of Jesus, now at home in heaven. If we find that incredible, as many do, it's perhaps because we're still semi-Platonists at heart, and think that heaven is a place where physicality has no belonging. No, heaven and earth have come together in Jesus. In Acts 2, the Day of Pentecost, the energy, the powerful breath of heaven has come to birth, on earth. These are both Temple themes, and through the rest of Acts, all the pressure points are to do with temples: Stephen's speech in

chapter 7; Paul at the Areopagus critiquing the temple culture there; at Ephesus undermining Diana of the Ephesians; then back in Jerusalem we have, ‘This man has been polluting the Temple ...’. It is all about, ‘Where is the living God now to be found?’ Is it in somebody’s temple somewhere or is it in this new thing that God has done? That’s how it works. These are the gifts which flow from the coming together of heaven and earth.

They are the gifts of power and strength, implementing what Paul said at the beginning of chapter 1. They are the gifts which equip the Church to stand against the hostile forces that are out there (6:10ff.). Remember, these are not separate issues, they all go together in the music of the gospel. When he talks about apostles and prophets, evangelists and pastors and teachers, this is not just, ‘Oh yes, we need somebody to do these jobs, so that’s fine and we can probably do that’. Although this is a practical task, it is not just about management, it is so that the Church can be the Church, the new, renewed and renewing humanity, equipping God’s people (v. 12) for the work of *diakonia*. The apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers do have their distinct ministries, but this is to enable the whole Church to serve. This *diakonia* is not just ministry in the Church, it is service in the world. This relates directly to 2:10, ‘the good works which God prepared beforehand for us to walk in’. These specialist ministries enable God’s people to be out there bringing the love and the cheerful, regenerating power of God to birth in God’s world, building up the body of Christ for action, not to stand still like a stuffed dummy. The point of the body of Christ is that it does the work of the Messiah in the world. And this takes hard work.

We all are called to attain to the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God, to mature humanity, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. That is not given from day one, we have to work at it, with meetings, plans and preparation. I was speaking at a conference in an English diocese, and it became clear that the hierarchy in the diocese had come up with a great plan which was being stoutly resisted by quite a lot of others in the diocese who didn’t like it. So, trying to speak into what was clearly a sticky political situation, I quoted the well known line which says, ‘If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans.’ And, of course, that got a laugh from one

section of the hall. Then I said, ‘If you want to make God cry, tell him you haven’t got any.’ Because if you never think prayerfully about where you should be going, as a local community, as a larger Church, then you let anyone come in and force their agendas onto you. There is a lovely quote by Charles Williams, a friend of C. S. Lewis: ‘We must build many altars so that the fire may come down somewhere else.’ In other words we have to plan prayerfully, but it is up to God since the fire may break out in an unexpected place.

My own Anglican communion has suffered grossly from lack of strategy, from freewheeling, from just hoping things will work out. We must pray for our new archbishop, Justin Welby. We need strategy to avoid the pitfalls of Ephesians 4:14, and grow up. George Caird, one of my teachers, says in his commentary that this is one of Paul’s most splendid mixed metaphors – here you have the Church as little, new-born babies who are tossed to and fro on an open boat out at sea, at the mercy of people playing dice and you think, ‘How on earth do these three things work together?’ It’s like in 1 Thessalonians 5:2–8 where Paul says that the thief is coming in the night, so the woman is going to go into labour so that you mustn’t get drunk but you must put on your armour. You think, ‘Do not try this at home!’

Paul is just throwing these metaphors in. But the point of verse 14 is that we are in a dangerous situation, not simply coasting along in neutral territory. Dangerous things are happening out there and we have to think through the cultural, theological, ideological, exegetical issues so that we’re up for it. So, (vv. 15–16) we can speak the truth in love, and the body of Christ be built up.

Now the second section from 4:17 to 5:20. Here is the counter-cultural life of the people of God. The new humanity at which people will look in surprise and shock. Galen, one of the great medical names of the ancient world, had heard about these Christians, these Nazarenes, and there were two things he knew about them, both of which made him think they were mad, but deserved respect: one was that they believed in the resurrection of the body, the other was that they didn’t sleep around. They were sexually continent, they were faithful within marriage and abstemious outside. Nobody in the ancient world knew that that was possible. Resurrection of the body – ridiculous! Sexual continence, well why would you want that? Would it not be good if the

Church today were known for these two things?

Note the contrast in 4:17–19 and 4:20–24, the old way and the new. An ignorance gone hard and calloused. I had a few years of working in the House of Lords, and listening to debates ranging from euthanasia to the Iraq war, I found the most bizarre and specious arguments being used. People just went with what was said in the papers. A week ago, a letter in the *TLS* said, ‘We shouldn’t talk about people helping to kill somebody because that gets in the way of where we are morally and we want to find different language.’ This is precisely how totalitarian regimes advance, by changing the language so that the unthinkable becomes thinkable, and then do-able.

When Christian Aid campaigns to relieve Third World debt, bankers tell us, ‘Oh you can’t do that because that will teach people they can just go soft on their debts and not meet their obligations.’ And then suddenly, at the end of 2008 what happened? The big crash. Banks came to the governments and said, ‘Excuse me, we seem to be short of £22 billion, can you help us out?’ And we the tax payers have done that, to let the banks go back to paying themselves large bonuses. The very rich did for the very rich what they had refused to do for the very poor! Is this not what Paul is talking about in 4:17ff.?

In verse 19, Paul moves on to sexual licentiousness, but he does not single out that sin. Of course holiness matters in personal relationships, but it matters in every other area of life as well. Paul continues, ‘You did not learn the Messiah that way’. Verse 21 is perhaps the one place in Paul where he says ‘in Jesus’ rather than ‘in the Messiah’, and I think that is because in the stories of Jesus in the gospels you can see what it means to put off the old way which is corrupt through deceitful lusts. I have had to interview clergy who are in trouble and I’ve said to them, ‘How did you even think that that was a good way to behave in that situation?’ It is so blindingly obviously not, and they know in retrospect that what they did was wrong, but somehow their thinking was darkened and distorted at the time; and there were mantras out there in the culture which they could pull in to justify things. So put off the old ways (baptismal language), and put on the new (vv. 23–24).

Then come the specifics, 4:25–32, specifics of speech, truth telling, anger management, respect for property – and in the middle of that passage, a verse about the thief who must no longer steal (v. 28) – but

then more about speech. I don't think I've ever heard a sermon about speech patterns, about the way we choose to talk, and yet it's very powerful here, as in Colossians 3 which is the parallel passage. It's as though sins of the tongue and sexual sins for Paul are the two things which really drag the Church down and make sure it is useless for its work in the world. So verse 29, 'Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, only what is helpful for building others up', then verse 31, 'Get rid of all bitterness and rage and anger and slander, every form of malice, and be kind, compassionate, forgiving, just as God and the Messiah forgave you.' Every bit as challenging as the following passage about sexual morality.

What Paul is going to say about sexual morality in 5:3ff. is held together within the opening command of 5:1–2 to be imitators of God, to live a life of love as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us. The sexual immorality which he's about to warn against is a life of self-getting rather than of self-giving, so that vv. 3–14 are all about the difference between darkness and light, and the realm of sexual behaviour. Paul had spent time in Corinth, and was almost certainly imprisoned in Ephesus where he was dictating this letter. Those ancient cities were like the wrong bits of London or Paris or Amsterdam or New York on steroids. Even the 'liberated' people in our societies would recognise exploitative and damaging expressions of sexuality. Paul gives a reasonably full list here, which corresponds in outline and in one or two details to the lists that you find in the gospels where Jesus warns against certain types of behaviour, using language which picks up from the Old Testament in order to say 'this is basically off-limits'.

These are not arbitrary rules made up to stop people having fun (as the deceit in our culture teaches). The point is that the new humanity has been launched, and certain styles of behaviour and speech have no place within it because these styles of behaviour are corrosive and destructive. 'Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient' (v. 6). People hear verse 6b as a sort of old fashioned threat: 'God is angry and He is coming to get you!' God's wrath, as we know from Romans 1, includes that steady process, that when somebody chooses to behave in a certain way, part of who they are actually changes and

corrodes. The choices that we make, the actions that we pursue, leave tracks in our neural systems. When people choose to behave in certain ways then they become that sort of person.

One of the lies of our time is, ‘Today I can choose to behave like this; it has no consequences; and tomorrow I can choose to be something different.’ That’s actually not how human behaviour works, so the call is to live in the light. Of course, the Church that tries to live in the light will immediately find the temptation to self-righteousness, to a pretence that we are better than we in fact are, but that risk should not be a reason to give in to the opposite danger. ‘Wake up O sleeper, rise from the dead, and the Messiah will give you light’ (v. 14). The resurrection has power over death itself.

Freud once said that sex was ‘laughing in the face of death’. Certainly it celebrates something life-giving, and we all know that we’re heading for the grave. Sex is indeed a deep creational instinct, but the resurrection is *God* laughing in the face of death. The resurrection is God saying, ‘I have overcome this’. And in the power of the resurrection all the puzzles and the agonies of one’s sexuality can be seen in a different light. It’s no surprise that Galen saw resurrection and sexual propriety as the two things which stuck out to him in early Christianity. Perhaps we should explore how they should go together in our world today.

Now 5:15–20. In our corporate life, we set a context within which the challenge about speech and the challenge about sexual behaviour can be addressed. ‘Be wise, make the most of opportunity. Don’t be foolish, don’t get drunk. Do cultivate good, cheerful, wise habits of speech and behaviour.’ This sort of stuff doesn’t happen by accident. You have to think about it. You have to plan it. You have to work it out.

And so we come to the third section, to 5:21 to 6:9, and the life of the home. This is one place where both the modern and post-modern critique has launched itself at Paul and said, ‘Paul, this is just bourgeois rules about how to behave, how to settle down in a cosy, comfortable life and not disturb anyone particularly.’ That’s a classic move to make on the part of a culture which has done its best to undermine marriage and the home over the years. Now, our children get into all kinds of situations, and it’s not a matter of trying to reinstate a simplistic, one-dimensional portrait of the happy, good little family. If you know

what life was like in a place like Ephesus or Corinth or Laodicea, Christian homes would stand out; people would say, ‘O my, there’s a place of security, a place of friendship, a place of love’, not, ‘These are people who are squashed and stultified’. Slavery? Yes, of course we wish that Paul had said sooner or later we’re going to get rid of it – which he hints at in his letter to Philemon – but in Paul’s world, slaves did most of the sort of jobs that today are done by, perhaps, the internal combustion engine, electricity, gas, etc. Can you imagine just suddenly saying to people today, ‘OK guys we know that our cars are polluting the planet, so I want you now, as a matter of Christian obedience, never to get in or drive a car again!’ You would get the reply, ‘Tom, that’s a nice idea but somehow I’ve got to get home and there isn’t a railway here at the moment!’ So it would have been totally unrealistic for Paul to say ‘Give up your slaves right away.’ The best thing for him to do in that context was to say, ‘Remember you have a master in heaven, so treat your slaves as you hope that God will treat you.’ There are debates we could have, but sometimes, I fear that peoples’ criticism is rather like the old communists who didn’t want to put up the workers’ wages because that would delay the revolution, saying, ‘Paul, don’t tell masters to treat their slaves fairly, because that will demotivate the next Spartacus!’ Actually slave revolts were very unhappy things in the ancient world and they were lose-lose moments, not a good scene.

Then comes the whole question of marriage, very carefully balanced. The way the world does relationships and sexuality is exploitative and degrading and it’s usually the women who come off worse; so here is a model which Paul very daringly roots in the example of the Messiah Himself who loved us and gave Himself for us – and note that the challenge here is actually for the husband, rather than for the wife. Until we husbands learn what it means to treat our wives as Christ loved the Church then we cannot expect wives to take very seriously what he says in verses 22ff. But of course, the whole things comes under the rubric (v. 21) of mutual submission which in turn takes us back to the beginning of chapter 4, the humility, the tenderness, the gentleness, the kindness which is supposed to characterize us as Christians.

Finally, we come to the fourth and last section in 6:10–20. This is

a great passage full of vivid colour about the whole armour of God, but this is not an odd appendage to a letter which otherwise is about a cheerful, high-realized eschatology – the Church already seated in heavenly places in Christ. The high ecclesiology is affirmed in the teeth of the reality which is that there are principalities and powers at work in the world. They use all sorts of means. They use political powers. They use the media today (something unknown in Paul’s day). They attack, they besiege, they pull down. ‘Therefore stand, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His power’ (v. 10). This is resurrection language from chapter one, because of the wiles of the evil one (v. 11). The physical rulers will do their political stuff, but what counts is the dark forces behind them; they are just puppets. Paul, having experienced persecution himself, knew that persecution was likely to come, so he tells them to stand firm, with truth as the belt, righteousness as the breastplate, the gospel of peace on their feet, an echo obviously of Isaiah 52, ‘How lovely are the feet of those who preach good news of peace.’

Even when Paul is doing a riff like this, he can’t help echoing bits of Scripture to left and right: the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the one actual weapon, the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God. And then we come to verses 18–20, on prayer, which is back to Temple theology. When you look at Paul’s letters, there are many themes which only occur in one letter: the Eucharist, only in 1 Corinthians; the theme of boasting the way Paul does, only in 2 Corinthians – lots of things. But prayer is all over the place because prayer is the daily, hourly, challenge to live at the intersection of heaven and earth. To be New Temple people in the power of the Spirit. That’s why it’s hard work. To hold God’s creation together at this point – heaven and earth coming together, Jew and Gentile coming together, male and female coming together – that is difficult. This is the challenge of new creation, the challenge of the new world which is being born. ‘Pray also for me’ (v. 19) – I often want to say that, and you will want to say it to your folks as well. Those of us who are called to speak need to be given the words, because even if (paradoxically) we are ambassadors in chains, we need to declare what is true fearlessly. Paul concludes, ‘Tychicus will tell you more; peace and grace to all who love our Lord Jesus with an undying love.’

A prayer

Almighty Father, as we have seen Your Son, the new human being, giving His life for us and rising again to launch Your new world, so give us courage in our day, and the strength and the power that we need both to live in that new humanity ourselves and to teach and model it before Your watching and sometimes hostile world. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.