

THE CHURCH EPISTLES BY-BULLINGER

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Introduction

When the Apostle Paul preached the good news concerning Christ and His Church, at Ephesus, his ministry continued in Asia for the space of two years (Acts 19:10). We read that the Word of God grew mightily and prevailed, and that "all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus." And yet, at the close of his ministry, and of his life, he writes his last Epistle to Timothy, when he says "I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand" (II Timothy 1:15): "This thou knowest that all they that be in Asia have turned away from me."

We are told, on every hand, today, that we must go back to the first three centuries to find the purity of faith and worship of the primitive church!

But it is clear from this comparison of Acts 19:10 and II Timothy 1:15, that we cannot go back to the first century. No, not even to the apostle's own lifetime!

This turning away could not have been merely personal; but must have included his teaching also. For in chapter 2, verse 18, he speaks of those "who concerning the truth have erred." In chapter 3, verse 8, he speaks of those who "resist the truth." In chapter 4, verse 4, he speaks of those who "turn away their ears from the truth" and are "turned unto fables."

It was Pauline truth and teaching from which all had "turned away."

It was this turning away from the truth as taught by the Holy Spirit through Paul, especially as contained in the Epistle to the Ephesians, that led necessarily:

(1) To the loss of the teaching concerning the Mystery; that truth concerning the one Body of Christ. The effect of this was at once to put everything wrong ecclesiastically, and to make room for all the various and different "Bodies," so-called, with all the consequent divisions and schisms of the church.

Instead of recognising "the One Body" which God had made, men set about making their

own "Bodies" and Sects! and with this ecclesiastical confusion came the loss of the truth as to the Christian's perfect standing in Christ as having died and risen in Him.

(2) Next, after this, went the truth of the Lord's promised return from heaven; and of resurrection, as the one great and blessed hope of the church. Other hopes, or rather fears, came in their place, and "death and judgment" took the place of those lost hopes. Having lost the truth of what God had made Christ to be unto us, and the joy as to our standing thus given, in looking for that blessed hope, preparation for death and judgment was the necessary result, and therefore:

(3) The next thing to go was the truth as to what God had made us to be in Christ; and "justification by faith" and by grace was lost. The way was now open for the full tide of error to come in: and it came in, like a flood, with all the corruption and superstition which ended in centuries which have the significant description "the dark ages."

Everyone is familiar with the term, and with the fact. But what were the dark ages? How did they come? They were not brought on suddenly by some untoward event. There must have been some cause, something that made them possible. The corruption was historical. The Eastern churches today are in similar darkness. And the Western churches, where the Reformation has not removed it, are in the same darkness.

The Reformation itself -- what was it, but the beginning of a recovery of these great truths? The remarkable fact is that the recovery of these truths has taken place in the inverse order to that in which they were lost.

Justification by grace through faith was the first great truth recovered at the Reformation. This was the truth over which that great battle was fought and won, though the victory was far from complete. For not until the nineteenth century had well begun did the Lord's return from heaven begin to become again the blessed hope of His church. In later years the subject has become more and more precious to increasing numbers. But this great and "blessed hope" is not yet really learned, because it ought to be the natural outcome of truth received and held, instead of being treated as an independent subject artificially produced. It must come from the heart into the life, and not be merely held and retained in the head, if it is to be productive of the blessed results seen in the Thessalonian church. It must be learned experimentally as a vital and essential part of our standing as Christians, and not be studied as if it were an extra subject, in order to produce Thessalonian fruit. Hence, it is that we more often see prophecy taken up as a study, rather than as the result of waiting for God's Son from heaven.

The last of the three truths to be recovered is the truth taught in Ephesians; and it is only in our own day that we see any real sense of the loss, with any real effort to recover it.

The truth of the Mystery, as it was the first to go, so, it seems, is the last to be recovered.

It is with the hope of doing something to recover this truth that these papers have been written on the Church Epistles. May the Lord use them to bring back vital truths to their proper place, that their power may be felt in the hearts and seen in the lives of an increasing number of the members of the Body of Christ.

The cause of all the confusion around is that thousands of those who profess to be Christians know little or nothing of these Church Epistles. There is no other profession which they could enter without being able to pass a satisfactory examination in the text books set forth for that purpose. There is no position in life that anyone could apply for without being

asked how much one knew of its duties and responsibilities. But the Christian "profession" is treated in quite a different manner, and as quite a different matter. Anyone may undertake that, and all the while be totally ignorant of these Church Epistles: -- "The Creed, the Lord's prayer, and the Ten Commandments" are considered as sufficient for Christian position and profession. Hence the almost total neglect of these Epistles. The four Gospels and the Sermon on the Mount are taken as the essence of Christianity, instead of the Epistles specially addressed to Churches. Hence the great ignorance of Christians as to all that God has made Christ to be unto His People, and all that He has made them to be in Him. Not knowing their standing in Christ, and their completeness and perfection in Him, they are easily led into error concerning their state and their walk. Many, who know they are justified by grace, yet seek to be sanctified by works.

Nothing but full knowledge of what is revealed for our instruction in these Church Epistles will effectually deliver us from all the new doctrines and schools of thought which find an entrance into our midst.

May the great Head of the Body the Church, own this effort, and use it and bless it to the deliverance of many from all the variable winds of doctrine, and build them up in their most holy faith.

Importance of Their Order

It is a serious blow to Inspiration when the importance of one part of Scripture is exalted above another. To do this is to reduce the Bible to the position of any other book, and practically to deny that the whole is made up of "the words which the Holy Ghost teacheth."

This is done in the present day when, according to the new Ritschlian School, The Teaching of Jesus is exalted above the Teachings of the Holy Spirit by Paul, as though there were a rivalry between the two.

The words of Christ, and the words of Paul are equal in weight and importance, inasmuch as both are recorded and given to us by the same Holy Spirit; and are therefore equal in authority. That authority is Divine: and no difference can be made between them without jeopardising the very essence of Inspiration.

That there is a difference is clear. But this difference arises from failing to rightly divide the word of Truth as to the various Dispensations of which it treats.

What He said on earth is necessarily of the highest importance to us dispensationally as showing how, through His rejection by His people Israel, "the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles" (Acts 28:28). But that teaching was given to special persons under special circumstances, and it must be interpreted and applied accordingly. It was not designed as a compendium of instruction for the Church of God, for the Church was not then being formed, and, as a matter of fact, the churches to whom the epistles were addressed did not at that time possess the four Gospels as we have them. On the contrary Christ expressly said, "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when He, the Spirit of truth, is come, He will guide you into all truth (R.V., 'all the truth'): for He shall not speak of (or from) Himself; but whatsoever He shall hear, that shall He speak; and He will show you

things to come. He shall glorify Me: for He shall receive of Mine, and shall show it unto you. All things that the Father hath are Mine: therefore said I that He shall take of Mine, and shall show it unto you" (John 16:12-15).

May we not ask How, When, and Where this promise and prophecy was fulfilled? Does this promise refer to us only as individuals, and to a subjective personal communication of the Holy Spirit to each individually? or, Are we to look for some formal and special realisation of the Lord's words? (1)

What is meant by "all truth," or as the Revised Version has it, "all the truth," into which the Holy Spirit was to guide the Church? Where are "the things of Christ" which He was to show unto us? Does it mean that the Holy Spirit shows one truth to one person and another to another person, and these are so different that those who receive them proceed to quarrel as to which is the truth? It cannot be!

Where are we to look then for this specially promised teaching and guidance?

Surely, when we take these words of Christ, in connection with His last seven-times repeated injunction from the glory, we are to look for some specific fulfilment of such a definite promise as this.

All those parts of the promise, "He shall guide... He shall speak... He shall show you..." etc., are very precise, and must surely have a specific performance in some definite teaching of the Spirit specially addressed to "the churches" as such, and not merely to the experiences of individuals.

Where are we then to look for this, if not in the epistles addressed to churches, as such, by the Holy Spirit?

How many churches were so addressed? How many Bible students are there who can say at once how many there are? We have not yet found one who could do so! What a solemn comment this fact is as to the universal disregard for the Lord's last injunction!

Seven churches were addressed as such by the Holy Spirit, seven being the number of spiritual perfection. (There were nine epistles altogether so addressed, two being addressed to the Church at Corinth, and two to "the Church of the Thessalonians". And nine is the square [or completeness] of Divine perfection: three times three (3 x 3.)

Is it not remarkable that the Holy Spirit addressed seven churches and no more: exactly the same in number as the Lord Himself addressed later from the glory?

The seven epistles of the Holy Spirit by Paul had already been written and read, and neglected and practically forsaken, when Christ sent His own seven to those seven churches in Revelation chapters two and three. This is evident when we compare Acts 19:10 with II Timothy 1:15. Some would tell us to go back to the first three centuries to find primitive Christianity in its purity. But these Scriptures show that we cannot even go back to the first century. The only successors the Apostle knew of were likened to "grievous wolves" (Acts 20:29).

The seven churches to which the Holy Spirit addressed His epistles by Paul are Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians. (The other epistles are "General" (John), or are addressed to "Hebrews," or "to the Twelve Tribes" (James), or to "the Dispersion" (Peter), or to individuals (Timothy, Titus, Philemon, and II John.)

In these epistles we have the perfect embodiment of the Spirit's teaching for the churches. These contain the "all truth," into which the Spirit of Truth was to "guide" us. Where are we to look for this "all truth," if not here? These contain the things which Christ could not speak on

earth, for the time for such teaching was not then. These contain the "things of Christ" which the Spirit was to receive and show unto us. Where else are we to look for the fulfilment of the Spirit's mission as the great Teacher, if not here?

Not only is the number of these epistles perfect, but their order is perfect also.

The order in which they come to us is no more to be questioned than their contents.

But what is that order? Is it chronological? No! Man is fond of arranging them according to the times when he thinks they were written, but God has not so arranged them. Indeed, He seems to have specially disposed of that for all time, and to have forbidden all attempts to arrange them thus, by placing the Epistles to the Thessalonians last of all, though they were written first.

The question, therefore, is settled for us at the outset, and so decisively as to bid us look for some other reason for the order in which the Holy Spirit has presented them for our learning.

In all the hundreds of Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, the order of these seven epistles addressed to churches is exactly the same.

We have examined the five most ancient in existence, viz., the Codex Vaticanus (Cent. IV.), the Codex Sinaiticus (Cent. IV.), the Codex Alexandrinus (Cent. V.), the Codex Ephraemi (Cent. V.), and the Codex Bezae (Cent. V. or VI.).

The general order of the books of the New Testament takes the form of groups, viz., (1) the Four Gospels, (2) the Acts, (3) the General Epistles, (4) the Pauline Epistles, and (5) the Apocalypse.

But while the order of these five groups varies in some of the MSS.: and the Pauline Epistles vary in their position with respect to the other four groups: and while the Pauline Epistles themselves vary in their order (e.g., Hebrews in some cases following Thessalonians), yet the order of these seven addressed to churches never varies.

And, further, though the four Gospels vary in their order (even in the five most ancient MSS.), these seven epistles are never given in any other order than that in which they have come down to us, and are given in our English Bibles.

That order therefore must present to us the line of study marked out for the churches by the Holy Spirit: a complete course which shall begin and finish the education of the Christian: a curriculum which contains everything necessary for the Christian's standing and his walk: the "all truth" into which the Spirit guides him. If he is ignorant of this, he must necessarily err, and be an easy prey for every new teacher who may rise up. He has no foundation on which he may securely rest: no anchorage on which he may depend. He is at the mercy of every "wind of doctrine" against which he has no protection. He will be carried away by any new "views" or teaching that may be put forth from time to time, for he has no standard by which to try them!

How can it be otherwise, if a Christian does not give earnest heed to what has been specially written for his instruction? Every word of Scripture is for him and for his learning, but every word is not about him. But these epistles are all about him and about the special position in which he finds himself placed with reference to the Jew and the Gentile; the old creation and the new; the flesh and the spirit, and all the various phenomena which he finds in his experience.

But now let us seek, in connection with the order in which these seven epistles come to us, for their division into three and four: for such division there must be.

We find it in the fact that three of these epistles stand out distinct from all the others as

being treatises rather than epistles; and as containing so much more doctrinal matter as compared with that which is epistolary. This will be clearly seen when we come later on to notice the structure, which exhibits the contents of each.

These three epistles are Romans, Ephesians, and Thessalonians. And the four are placed between these three in two pairs, each pair containing respectively "Reproof" and "Correction" in contrast to the other which contain "Doctrine and "Instruction" (according to II Timothy 3 :16):

A. | Romans (Doctrine and Instruction).

B. | Corinthians (Reproof).

C. | Galatians (Correction).

A. | Ephesians (Doctrine and Instruction).

B. | Phillipians (Reproof).

C. | Colossians (Correction).

A. Thessalonians (Doctrine and Instruction). (2)

We must leave the inter-relation of these epistles for our next chapter, and then having looked at them as a whole, and in relation and contrast to each other, we propose to consider each of them in the light of the whole, and in detail, as that detail is suggested and brought out by the special relation of each to the whole.

One fact, however, we may notice here, and that is the reason why Thessalonians, which was written before all the others, is put last of all. We may be certain that the order is perfect, and that the reason is divine. Is it not this?

The Epistles to "the Church of the Thessalonians" are the epistles in which the special revelation is given concerning the coming again of the Lord Jesus. If we have "ears to hear," this fact speaks to us, and it says: --(Listen!)

It is useless to teach Christians the truths connected with the Lord's coming, until they have learned the truths in the other epistles!

Until they know and understand what God has made them to be in Christ, and what He has made Christ to be unto them, they have no place for the truths concerning His return from heaven!

Until they have learnt what is taught concerning their standing and their walk, they will be occupied with themselves, and have no use for the truths connected with the Lord's coming again!

How important, then, that we should set ourselves to give heed to "what the Spirit saith unto the churches," and thank God for the opened ear, while we pray that, the eyes of our understanding being enlightened, we may see what has been thus written and given and sent to us for our learning.

Footnotes:

(1) If this guidance is not individual, neither can it be collective, or find its fulfilment in the Church of God as a whole. A mistaken view of these words has led mere ecclesiastics to see in

these words the figment called "the inspiration of the Church" (see an article in The Expository Times, for Oct., 1898, in which this is affirmed). The difficulty with regard to the Church of Rome is at once raised, and is evaded by maintaining that "moral inspiration" must precede and be the foundation of the "doctrinal inspiration," and this "moral inspiration" is seen "in all that greater care for the poor, in all that wider sympathy for suffering, all that deeper horror of bloodshed, in all that greater purity of life, in all that profounder sense of sin, in all that true love of simple, unaffected goodness, etc., etc.

And this is the popular theology of the present day substituted for Christianity by which "the Christian faith" (instead of being the revelation of the Holy Spirit in these seven epistles) has for its striking feature the "power of assimilating itself to the advancing knowledge of the human race"!

(2) There is a further and different division of the seven into four and three. One within the other. We believe that the one we have given above is the true one and the one for our instruction. But there is another more technical, which interlaces it and enhances its perfection.

Four of the seven churches were in what became the Western half of the Roman Empire (now called Europe); and three were in what became the Eastern half (now called Asia).

And each one answers to the other, West to West and East to East, as follows:

West Romans

 Corinthians West

 Galatians East

East Ephesians

 Philippians West

 Colossians East

West Thessalonians.

Their Inter-Relation

We come now to consider the seven Epistles as a whole, and their inter-relation with each other.

We have seen that their order, like their number, is spiritually perfect.

We have referred to their division into three and four.

Let us first look at and compare the three -- Romans, Ephesians, and Thessalonians.

They are treatises rather than letters (Lightfoot [Biblical Essays, p.288] says [comparing Romans and Ephesians], "Both alike partake of the character rather of a formal treatise than of a familiar letter."), and, taken together, they contain the whole revelation of the Spirit concerning Christian standing and state, both individually and collectively: the "all truth" into which He was to "guide" them (John 16:12).

Romans stands first, as containing the ABC of Christian education. Until its great lesson is learnt we know nothing. If we are wrong here, we must be wrong altogether. The Spirit has

placed it first because it lies at the threshold of all church teaching.

It begins, "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, by Divine calling an apostle, separated unto God's Gospel, which..." and then he proceeds to unfold and reveal the Gospel of God's grace. Man is shown to be utterly ruined and helpless, and ungodly sinners of the Gentiles and Jewish transgressors are alike made to know themselves as lost, and how they are justified by God. The doctrinal portion, consisting of the first eight chapters, shows what God has done with "sins" and with "sin," and how the saved sinner has died with Christ, and is risen with Christ -- made a son and heir of God in Him.

This is where Ephesians starts from! It begins, not with man, but with God. It approaches its great subject, not from man's necessities, but from God's purposes. It is occupied not so much with what the saved sinner is made in Christ, but with what Christ is made to be unto him.

It is God's point of view rather than man's. Notice how it begins (after the salutation): "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in the heavenlies in Christ," and Christ is shown to be the Head of all things, the Head of His Body, the Church.

It is not so much the knowledge of ourselves which is the subject here, but the knowledge of God and of His purposes in Christ. Its first great prayer is "that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Glorious Father, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him: the eyes of your understanding being enlightened, that ye may know what is the hope of His calling, and what the glorious riches [or the rich glory] of His inheritance in the saints. And what the exceeding greatness of His power to usward who believe" (Ephesians 1:17-19).

In Romans we have the Gospel: in Ephesians the Mystery.

In Romans it is Jew and Gentile sinners individually: in Ephesians it is the Jew and Gentile collectively, made "one new man" -- in Christ (2:15).

In Romans the saved sinner is shown as dead and risen with Christ: in Ephesians as seated in the heavenlies in Christ; while in Thessalonians he is seen for ever in glory with Christ.

Romans takes up the sinner in his lowest depths of degradation: and Thessalonians leaves him on "the throne of glory" for ever with the Lord: while, midway between, Ephesians views us now by faith as already seated with Him there. Our feet have been taken out of the mire and clay (Romans 1); they are now set upon the rock (Ephesians 1); and presently we shall be upon the throne (I Thessalonians 4).

This is the relation which these three Epistles bear to each other. Viewed together, they form the ABC of the Christian faith, as distinct from all else in the whole Bible -- nothing like it is found elsewhere. All the rest is written for us, for our learning. But this is all about us. The course of instruction is complete, and it is perfect. It commences at the lowest point and leaves us at the highest. We cannot proceed further in either direction. It begins with us on "the dunghill," and ends with us on "the throne of glory." It begins with us as "beggars," and ends with us as "beggars." It finds us "poor," and makes us "rich." And having brought us "low," it "lifteth us up" to the highest heaven, caught up to meet the Lord in the air, "for ever with the Lord." The Lord's dealings are thus stated in I Samuel 2:6-8, but how they were to be manifested in the Gospel of His grace is revealed only in these Epistles.

And now, having seen the mutual relation of these three Epistles, let us look at the other four.

Where are they placed? In our previous chapter we saw that they are placed in two pairs,

the first pair coming after Romans, and the second pair after Ephesians. So that there are two Epistles arranged between the three.

Now the question is, Why are they so placed? There must be some design in this order; and it is not far to seek.

The first pair (Corinthians and Galatians) follow Romans because they exhibit departure from its special teaching.

The second pair (Philippians and Colossians) follow Ephesians because they exhibit departure from its special teaching.

So that we have the whole course of church teaching; the complete curriculum of Christian education, set before us as a whole, positively and negatively.

In the three (Romans, Ephesians, and Thessalonians), we have "doctrine" and "instruction." In the four (Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, and Colossians), we have "reproof" and "correction." Here is seen how "profitable" these Epistles are for the perfection (i.e., the complete education) of "the man of God," fitting I him out for every duty and every emergency.

But there is a further correspondence between these four Epistles.

The first of each pair (Corinthians and Philippians) exhibits practical departure, while the second of each pair (Galatians and Colossians) exhibits doctrinal departure. That is to say, in Corinthians we have practical failure as to the teaching of Romans, while in Philippians we have a failure to exhibit in practical life the teaching of Ephesians as to the unity of the members of Christ's Body. (We shall show this more completely when we come to look at these Epistles separately.)

On the other hand, in Galatians we have doctrinal failure as to the teaching of Romans. This is why Galatians and Romans are so much alike, as everyone knows; though, all that most can see in this likeness is that they were "written about the same time"! The real difference is that what is stated as "doctrine" in Romans is repeated as "correction" in Galatians. Romans begins with a declaration of God's Gospel. Galatians begins, "I marvel that ye are so soon removed from Him that called you into the grace of God unto another [or different] Gospel."

So in Colossians we have doctrinal failure as to the teaching of Ephesian truth. (Lightfoot says, "The Epistle to the Ephesians stands to the Epistle to the Colossians in very much the same relation as the Romans to the Galatians. -- [Biblical Essays, p.395.] In Ephesians, Christ is revealed and set forth as "the head of the Body." In Colossians we have the doctrinal evils which come from "not holding the Head" (Colossians 2:19).

We may thus exhibit the structure of:
The Seven Epistles to the Churches

A | Romans. "Doctrine and Instruction." The Gospel of God: never hidden, but "promised afore." God's justification of Jew and Gentile individually -- dead and risen with Christ (1-8). Their relation dispensationally (9-11). The subjective foundation of the mystery.

B. | Corinthians. "Reproof." Practical failure to exhibit the teaching of Romans through not seeing their standing as having died and risen with Christ. "Leaven" in practice (I Corinthians 5:6).

C. | Galatians. "Correction." Doctrinal failure as to the teaching of Romans. Beginning

with the truth of the new nature ("spirit"), they were "soon removed" (1:6), and sought to be made perfect in the old nature ("flesh") (3:3). "Leaven" in doctrine (5:9).

A. | Ephesians. "Doctrine and Instruction." The Mystery of God, always hidden, never before revealed. Jews and Gentiles collectively made "one new man" in Christ. Seated in the heavenlies with Christ.

B. | Philippians. "Reproof." Practical failure to exhibit the teaching of Ephesians in manifesting "the mind of Christ" as members of the one Body.

C. | Colossians. "Correction." Doctrinal failure as to the teaching of Ephesians. Wrong doctrines which come from "not holding the Head" (2:9), and not seeing their completeness and perfection in Christ (2:8-10).

A. | Thessalonians. "Doctrine and Instruction." Not only "dead and risen with Christ" (as in Romans); not only seated in the heavenlies with Christ (as in Ephesians); but "caught up to meet the Lord in the air, so to be for ever with the Lord." In Romans, justified in Christ; in Ephesians, sanctified in Christ; in Thessalonians, glorified with Christ. No "reproof." No "correction." All praise and thanksgiving. A typical Church.

And now we see another reason why Thessalonians comes last. There are no Epistles beyond this, because there is no higher truth to be taught. The consummation is reached. This is the highest Form in the school of grace, where the Holy Spirit is the great Divine Teacher. "All the truth" culminates here --the "all truth" into which He was to guide the Church of God. It is led from the depths of degradation (in Romans) to the heights of glory (in Thessalonians), caught up to be for ever with the Lord, and left there in eternal blessing "in," and "with," Christ.

This completes the view of the seven Church Epistles as a whole. It is interesting to note that Lightfoot's classification (Bib. Ess., page 222, etc.) is practically the same, even though he arranges the Epistles chronologically.

He puts Thessalonians by themselves, as standing alone and distinguished by their connection with "the Tribunal."

He places Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans together, as being all three connected with "the Cross"; while he places Philippians, Ephesians, and Colossians together, as being all three connected by their subject matter with "the Throne."

It is something to have such testimony as this in a matter so important. It is not affected by the different chronological order. The grouping is exactly the same; we have the same two groups, with Thessalonians standing out alone. This agreement with so thoughtful and learned a teacher will commend what we have written above to the attention of all earnest Biblical students.