

The Ephesian Moment

At a Crossroads in Christian History

Christian salvation depends on a historical event: Christ suffered under Pontius Pilate. But that event can only be understood as part of a historical process. Had it been otherwise, the incarnation might have immediately followed the fall, in a single saving action. As it is, we can only understand who Christ is, and why he is so called, by reference to a story covering many centuries. That story includes the emigration of one small clan out of Mesopotamia, the growth and diversification of that clan into tribes in Palestine and Egypt, the gradual solidifying of those tribes into a nation and eventually into a kingdom, the rise and fall and fall and rise of that kingdom and its eventual collapse. According to the early Christian commentary on this history that we know as the Epistle to the Hebrews, God's self-revelation proceeded over the whole of this period "many times and in many ways," here one aspect of the divine being and activity, there another, until "at the end of these times" God spoke by the Son. That act brought together in visible, personal form all the scattered revelations that had come fragmentarily, "many times and in many ways" (Heb. 1:1-2). God was in no hurry over the incarnation; when the Word became flesh, that event crowned a historical process of redemption that had lasted not just centuries but millennia.

But in crowning the process, God did not wind it up, even if some of those who knew Christ best expected the two events to take place in quick succession. In fact, the historical process of redemption was not finished; and it has so far run for another twenty centuries, and we do not know even now whether we are living in the last days or in the days of the early church. A glimpse of the significance of the process since the incarnation is provided by that same early commentator, the writer to the Hebrews. After summarizing the achievements and the sufferings of the key figures in the story of Israel, all illustrating his theme of faith as the mainstay of the Christian life, he says,

What a record all of these have won by their faith! Yet they did not receive what God had promised, because God had decided on an even better plan for us. His purpose was that only in company with us would they be made perfect. (Heb. 11:39-40)

The significance of Abraham's faith, and the promised reward of that faith, were not clear in Abraham's lifetime. They were not even made clear in the incarnation, when God "spoke" by a Son. They were delayed until they could be shared with "us." By "us" the writer means, of course, that miscellaneous group of early believers in Christ, Jewish and Gentile, to whom he was writing. They were tied into Abraham's story, and Abraham into theirs. *Abraham was waiting for them.* The point about the long catalog of saints of Israel that makes up Hebrews 11 is that it tells a story that had not finished. The greatest of the heroes of faith would not be "made perfect" until certain events had taken place long after their death. The history of salvation is not completed in any of its exemplary figures, even the greatest of them. The story of Abraham or of Moses is incomplete in itself; even such great figures cannot be complete, "made perfect," without those who follow them.

The same principles must surely apply to the two millennia that have ensued since the letter to the Hebrews was written. “They”—the addressees of the letter for whom Abraham is waiting—have not yet been “made perfect,” because they are waiting for us, for the later generations of faith. Abraham is waiting for us, as for them. The whole company of faith between are bound together as part of a single story, a single act of salvation. No part of the story is complete in itself, nor will it ever be. We can see, readily enough, the incompleteness of those who went before, yet we are not the final stage of Christian formation. Others will look at us and see, perhaps with wonder, our incompleteness. The work of salvation is a historical process that stretches out to the end of the age.

And, the end of the age itself is not (as it has sometimes been presented) an act unrelated to the historical process. It is not a sudden act of divine despair that abandons the process on Earth as useless. Such a view would imply that Christ’s work of redemption was somehow not enough, that God needs to inaugurate a new act of salvation that involves the equivalent of a celestial sledgehammer. Equally, the end of the age is not (as presented in some other accounts) a sort of evolution in which the heavenly kingdom grows naturally out of a set of conditions achieved on Earth. It is possible instead to see the end of the age in terms of summary: the completion of the process of “summing up” the work of redemption in Christ. Thus, the Ephesian letter speaks of “the power that is working in us” (i.e., in the midst of the believing community) being the same as the “mighty strength” demonstrated in Christ’s resurrection and exaltation. The exalted Christ is thus “given” to the church, and “the church is Christ’s body, the completion of him who himself completes all things everywhere” (Eph. 1:19-23).

The theme of the church as Christ’s body is crucial to the Ephesian letter. When we think of the church as the body of Christ, we usually think of it as comprehending different races (Jew and Gentile), different lifestyles (Hebraic and Hellenistic), or different people with different gifts and functions in the body. All these aspects are mentioned in the letter. In all these aspects, space is the medium in which the body of Christ functions; its various manifestations are contemporary one with another, representing different social realities at a single point in time. But if the church is Christ’s body, then its temporal dimension also has to be taken seriously. The body functions in time as well as in space; time is also an element in which salvation is worked out: its various manifestations across time are necessary for its completion, for “the completion of him who himself completes all things everywhere.” Christ takes flesh as he is received by faith in various segments of social reality at different periods, as well as in different places. And these different manifestations belong together; they are part of the same story. Salvation is complete only when all the generations of God’s people are gathered together, for only then is Christ’s humanity complete. By the same token, the church has to be viewed across time. No one single segment of time encapsulates it; the segments belong together. The work of salvation is cross-generational.

Time is valorized by the incarnation, by the fact that the divine Word took flesh in a datable historical setting. The fact that Christ continues to be formed in local Christian communities whose ways of life are quite different from the one in which the incarnation took place means that for Christians, “sacred time” is not confined to the period of the incarnation, but extends to the whole historical process in which the work of salvation

goes on, Christ's presence being demonstrated as he is received by faith. The process may be a painful one, as the New Testament makes clear (e.g., Gal. 4:19-20); and the community's actual representation of Christ may sometimes be a misrepresentation. Nevertheless, genuine manifestations of Christ cannot be separated from specific segments of social reality that occur in time.

This creates a characteristically Christian understanding of history. For thousands of years, devout souls in India have sought deliverance from the bondage of history, to escape the continuing tyranny of time and rebirth. Even where deities enter the world for its salvation, it is only for an era; the tyranny of time is reasserted. The illumination that the Buddha received, and that all subsequent Buddhas and Bodhisattvas receive, is outside of history, independent of history, timeless. Even though Muslims share with Christians the sense of a historic revelation, they have a sense of historic closure; obedience to Allah lies in faithful reproduction of conditions that obtained at the time the Qur'an was revealed. For Christians, the historical element is never abandoned, because time is the stuff within which God's saving activity in Christ takes place. And sacred history is never closed off, because that saving activity of Christ continues until its final summing up.

Christian faith, therefore, is necessarily ancestor-conscious, aware of the previous generations of faith. It cannot divinize the ancestors, however, for their continuing significance comes only from God's activity in and towards them. The work of salvation is cross-generational, and never completed in one generation. And the generations—two millennia of them since the incarnation—are parts of a single body, and that body needs them all.

But we must return to the spatial dimension of the body of Christ. Here the different manifestations that make up the body are contemporaneous with one another, and this is the particular theme of the Epistle to the Ephesians. The rhapsodic note in this letter is unmistakable from the opening verses onwards. The "mystery"—the secret now open—is the special place of the Gentile nations in the saving purpose of God (Eph. 3:3-6). In principle, the fact that Gentiles would be saved was not very new, or very secret; Jews had always believed that the other nations would be blessed by means of Israel's Messiah. The novel element, strikingly, indeed devastatingly, demonstrated in the impact of the gospel in the wider Hellenistic Roman world, was the sheer scale of Gentile salvation, the huge significance of the Gentiles' role in the story of Israel.

To understand the rhapsody at this realization, and the stunning nature of the newly discovered "mystery," we must remember the nature of the earliest church. The original Jesus community, led by his own chosen disciples, was as wholly Jewish in their way of life as in the ethnic origin. They kept the law, and delighted in it. They worshiped in the temple, and they loved it, and saw it as their home.¹ They observed animal sacrifice and the rites of purification (see Acts 21:21-26). This was the way of life Jesus had followed, and he had said that not a jot or tittle would be deleted from the law by his agency, and he had called the temple his Father's house. It was the style of life the apostles had led, and Peter had never eaten anything common or unclean. It was the style of life splendidly demonstrated in the Lord's brother James, leader of the Jerusalem Christians, and widely known in the city as Righteous James, righteous in Jewish terms of heartfelt obedience to the Torah. These people loved God's law, and

¹ Note Acts 2:42, where "the prayers" are those of the temple liturgy.

lived the law the Jesus way. This led them to radical new expressions of that law: they willingly shared their property, for instance, and they shared their meals in the enjoyment of the company of other followers of Jesus.

Then came troubled times and another new departure. Persecution drove many of them out of their city, and some, arriving at metropolitan Antioch, began to share their faith in Jesus with the Greek pagan neighbors. And those Greek pagans responded. After study and discussion, the leaders of the Jesus community agreed that it would be wrong to apply to these people the traditional requirements for Gentiles who wished to enter the community of Israel. These traditional requirements included circumcision, the mark of God's covenant with Israel. Circumcision, however, was no longer to be the gate for believers in Jesus from a Gentile background. Nor were the food laws, or the laws of ritual purity, or the other requirements of the Torah to be enforced for them. The well-trodden way of Torah had been joyously embraced by all previous believers in Jesus, including the most senior in faith, who had been his personal disciples, and those acknowledged to be closest to his spirit. These new, raw believers, however, were left to find, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, a way of life that expressed Jesus under the conditions of Hellenistic society. This was necessary because the new believers were to represent Jesus in Hellenistic Antiochene society. Christ's life was to be demonstrated among Antiochene Hellenistic pagans in intelligible human terms, just as it had once been demonstrated in Palestinian Jewish society. This meant developing a whole new Christian lifestyle for conditions that no previous believer had had to cope with. It meant facing a whole array of situations that simply had not arisen, and could not arise, for any Jerusalem believer—such as, what to do in a pagan friend's house if offered meat that might have been bought from a pagan temple (see 1 Cor. 8:8-13). No Jerusalem believer would be likely ever to have been at a pagan dinner table. Hellenistic former pagan believers would be living in a world that made no allowance for the Sabbath. Many of the guideposts for Christian living suddenly were removed; Torah and circumcision were gone as parameters for that living. It was necessary, nonetheless, to develop a lifestyle that could function in Hellenistic pagan society and yet display Christ recognizably there for what—and who—he is.

Traditionally, observant Jewish society and Hellenistic pagan society could be viewed as distinct entities, and the distinctiveness of each was marked by the meal table. Jews ate with Jews, Gentiles with Gentiles. The events reflected in Acts 15 produced two distinct Christian lifestyles corresponding to these ethnic and cultural divisions, the one for Jewish society, the other for Hellenistic society. One might expect as a result that these would be two Christian communities, a Jewish church and a Gentile church. The Ephesian letter has not a dream of such an outcome:

In union with him [Christ] *you too are being built together with all the others* to a place where God lives through his Spirit. (Eph. 2:22)

Emphatically, there was to be only *one* Christian community. That community had become more diverse as it crossed the cultural frontier with the Hellenistic pagan world; and Christian obedience was tending to increase the diversity by developing parallel lifestyles that would penetrate and influence Jewish society on the one hand and pagan society on the other. But the very diversity was part of the church's unity. The

church must be diverse because humanity is diverse; it must be one because Christ is one. Christ is human, and open to humanity in all its diversity; the fulness of his humanity takes in all its diverse cultural forms. The Ephesian letter is not about cultural homogeneity; cultural diversity had already been built into the church by the decision not to enforce the Torah. It is a celebration of the union of irreconcilable entities, the breaking down of the wall of partition, brought about by Christ's death (Eph. 2:13-18). Believers from the different communities are different bricks being used for the construction of a single building—a temple where the One God would live (Eph. 2:19-22).

Then comes a bold change of metaphor: they are different parts of a single body, a body of which Christ is the head, the mind, the brain, under whose control the whole body works and is held together (Eph. 4:15-16). Old believers and new believers, Jewish believers who had seen the salvation of Israel and Hellenistic ex-pagans who now worshiped *Kyrios Iesous*, were part of a single, functioning organic life system. And this was because they were “in Christ”; and Christ, the New Adam, incorporated all human diversity and was manifested in different cultural forms as people who were formed by these cultures put faith in him, and he was formed among them. As the body of Christ is thus built up, “*we shall all come together* to that oneness of our faith and knowledge of the Son of God” (Eph. 4:13); the coming together of diverse elements from different quarters produces common convictions, a common assurance, about Christ. This in turn brings the church's maturity, “the very height of Christ's full stature” (Eph. 4:13). The very height of Christ's full stature is reached only by the coming together of the different cultural entities into the body of Christ. Only “together,” not on our own, can we reach his full stature.

It is usual to see the great celebration of Ephesians 2 in terms of the reconciliation of two races, Jew and Gentile; and the words have in modern times spoken powerfully to situations of racial division. But in their own time these also stood for two cultures; and, in the church, they stood for two contrasting Christian lifestyles. Two lifestyles met at the institution that had once symbolized the ethnic and cultural division: the meal table. One of the most noticeable features of life in the Jesus community in Jerusalem had been that the followers of Jesus took every opportunity to eat together. Doubtless, the followers of Jesus took the same custom to Antioch, and beyond. But at that point, all the followers of Jesus were Jewish. What was to happen when there were also Gentile followers of Jesus, uncircumcised, following Hellenistic eating patterns? Would it still be the mark of the followers of Jesus that they ate together? The test was the meal table, and clearly, many old believers found it difficult to break the tradition of centuries and sit at table with fellow servants of the Messiah who still bore all the marks of their alien background. What could be defended on grounds of theological principle sometimes demanded great resolution in the face of peer pressure. Thus, Peter can argue from traditional premises for the liberty of Gentile believers (Acts 15:7-11), but find it more convenient not to share a table with them when there was a chance of being observed by his home constituency (Gal. 2:11-14). The shared table was the acid test. It stood for diverse humanity redeemed by Christ and sharing in him.

Each Christian lifestyle, representing a culture converted to Christ, expressed something that the whole body needed. Hellenistic Christianity was not a Torahless soft option for benighted heathen who could do no better, as some Jerusalem believers

undoubtedly thought it. Nor was Judaic Christianity a system of legalistic bondage for people who had never known the benefits of a cosmopolitan culture, as some Hellenistic believers may have thought it. Nor was it the case that each was an authentic form of Christian faith complete and valid in itself, apart from the other. Each was necessary to the other, each was necessary to complete and correct the other; for each was an expression of Christ under certain specific conditions, and Christ is humanity completed.

The understanding of Christ—knowing the “full stature”—thus arises from the coming together of the fragmented understanding that occur within the diverse culture-specific segments of humanity where he becomes known. When Ephesians was written, there were only two major cultures represented in the Christian church, the Jewish (reflecting a spectrum of attitudes and accommodation to Greek thought) and the Hellenistic. They could easily have formed separate churches, but that thought does not occur to the author. Two races and two cultures historically separated by the meal table now met at table to share the knowledge of Christ.

The Ephesian moment—the social coming together of people of two cultures to experience Christ—was quite brief. Circumstances—the destruction of the Jewish state in 70 C.E., the scattering of the Jewish church, the sheer success of the mission to the Gentiles—soon made the church monocultural again; and in the eastern Mediterranean the Christian movement became as overwhelmingly Hellenistic as once it had been overwhelmingly Jewish.

But in our own day the Ephesian moment has come again, and come in a richer mode than has ever happened since the first century. Developments over several centuries, reaching a climax in the twentieth, mean that we no longer have two, but innumerable, major cultures in the church. Like the old Jerusalem Christians, Western Christians had long grown used to the idea that they were guardians of a “standard” Christianity; also like them, they find themselves in the presence of new expressions of Christianity, and new Christian lifestyles that have developed or are developing under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to display Christ under the conditions of African, Indian, Chinese, Korean, and Latin American life. And most of the world’s Christians are now Africans, Asians, or Latin Americans.

There are two dangers. One lies in an instinctive desire to protect our own version of Christian faith, or even to seek to establish it as the standard, normative one. The other, and perhaps the more seductive in the present condition of Western Christianity, is the postmodern option: to decide that each of the expressions and versions is equally valid and authentic, and that we are therefore each at a liberty to enjoy our own in isolation from all the others.

Neither of these approaches is the Ephesian way. The Ephesian metaphors of the temple and of the body show each of the culture-specific segments as necessary to the body but as incomplete in itself. Only in Christ does completion, fullness, dwell. And Christ’s completion as we have seen, comes from all humanity, from the translation of the life of Jesus into the lifeways of all the world’s cultures and subcultures through history. None of us can reach Christ’s completeness on our own. We need each other’s vision to correct, enlarge, and focus our own; only together are we complete in Christ.

The return of the Ephesian moment is of special importance on two accounts: theological and economic.

The purpose of theology is to make or clarify Christian decisions. Theology is about choices; it is the attempt to think in a Christian way. And the need for choice and decision arises from specific settings in life. In this sense, the theological agenda is culturally induced; and the cross-cultural diffusion of Christian faith invariably makes creative theological activity a necessity.

The materials for theology are equally culturally conditioned. They are inevitably the materials at hand in the situation where the occasion for decision has arisen, in interaction with the biblical material. The materials at hand have to be “converted,” turned toward Christ, in the process. The classical doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation are largely constructed out of the materials of middle-period Platonism, converted in this way. (Conversion, we must constantly remind ourselves, is about turning *what is already there*; it is more about direction than about content.)

These same classical doctrines of Trinity and incarnation sprang from the need to think in a Christian way about issues that had arisen out of the cross-cultural diffusion of the faith. The first believers were Jews who saw Jesus in terms of Jewish history, tradition, and belief. But when they came to share that faith with Greek-speaking Gentile peoples, they found it was of little use to talk of Jesus as Messiah. The word meant nothing to Greeks, and needed endless explanation. They had to translate, to find a term that told something about Jesus and yet meant something to a Greek pagan. They chose the word *Kyrios*, “Lord,” the title that Greek pagans used for their cult divinities (Acts 11:19-21). Jewish believers (and the action was taken by Jewish folk) had long seen the title Messiah as key to the identity of Jesus, the truest expression of his significance. It was a rich term, full of biblical allusions and echoes of the history of Israel and pointers to its ultimate destiny. The transposition of a message about the Messiah to a message about the “Lord Jesus” must have seemed an impoverishment, perhaps a downright distortion. Was it not dangerous to use language that was also used in heathen cults, and that might give the idea that Jesus was one more of the “Lords many” of the eastern Mediterranean? And should Gentile converts be deprived of knowledge about Israel’s national savior?

But it turned out that the transposition was enriching without being distorting. Employing a term used of Hellenistic divinities gave a new dimension to thinking about Christ. It also raised questions, some of them awkward, that a Jewish believer, even on knowing Greek well, would be unlikely to ask. Were the question raised of the relationship of the Messiah Jesus to the One God, Jewish believers could readily use a phrase like “Jesus is at the right hand of God.” The significance of that statement was well understood by the Sanhedrin: Stephen’s use of it brought him to his death. But a Greek would be puzzled by such a phrase- did it really mean that the transcendent God had a right hand? What Greeks wanted to know was the relationship of that ultimately significant Christ to the Father. Thus, inevitably, the language of *ousia* and *hypostasis* enters. Were Christ and the Father of the same *ousia*? Or different as to *ousia*? Or similar in *ousia*? To find out meant a process of exploring what Christians really believed about their Lord, using the indigenous methods of Greek intellectual discourse. It was a long, painful process, but it issued in an expanded understanding of who Christ is. Christian theology moved on to a new plane when Greek questions were asked about Christ and received Greek answers, using the Greek scriptures. It was a risky, often agonizing business, but it led the church to rich discoveries about Christ that could never have been

made using only Jewish categories such as Messiah. Translation did not negate the tradition, but enhanced it. The use of new materials of language and thought, and the related styles and conventions of debate, led to new discoveries about Christ that could not have been made using only the Jewish categories of messiahship. They were not incompatible with those categories. Looking back, all the signals could be seen there in the Scriptures; but only the Greek questions and consequent processes of thought made them explicit. Nor was it necessary to abandon the old Jewish categories: messiahship continues to mean all it ever did. Crossing a cultural frontier led to a creative movement in theology by which we discovered Christ was the eternally begotten Son; but it did not require the old theology to be thrown away, for the eternally begotten Son was also the Messiah of Israel.

Similar developments can be traced in later Christian theology as a result of the gospel crossing other Christian frontiers. It might be shown, for instance, how the classical doctrines of the atonement, and the very feasibility of systematic theology as an exercise, arose from the crossing of the cultural frontier between the Roman world and that of the Western barbarians. It is in this connexion that we must see the great southward shift of Christianity that has resulted in the return of the Ephesian moment. The majority of Christians now belong to Africa, Asia, and Latin America. These regions will increasingly be the places where Christian decisions and Christian choices will have to be made, where creative theology will become a necessity and where the materials for constructing that theology will be such as have not been used for that purpose before. New questions will be asked about Christ that arise from the endeavors of Christian people to express him, to think in a Christian way, and make Christian choices in settings that have been shaped by the venerable traditions of Africa and Asia. And the materials for constructing theology will be African and Asian, as surely as earlier generations used the materials of Platonism and Roman and customary law. If past experience is anything to go by, the process can only enrich the church's understanding of Christ.

The economic implications of the Ephesian moment may profitably be pondered in the light of the United Nations report on population published early in 2001. This deduces that the world's population is increasing by 1.2 percent, or seventy-seven million people, each year, with half that increase coming from six countries: India, China, Pakistan, Nigeria, Bangladesh, and Indonesia. The increase in population growth will be concentrated in countries that are least able to support it. The report projects that by 2050 Africa will have three times the population of Europe, and this despite the anticipated deaths of three hundred million Africans from AIDS by that time. On the other hand, the population in Europe and most other developed countries is projected to fall: in Germany and Japan by 14 percent, in Italy by 25 percent, in Russia and Ukraine by possibly up to 40 percent. This will require migration to maintain economic levels in the developed world; and the prime target for immigration will be the United States, which, with a million new immigrants a year, will be one of the few developed countries to increase its population. By 2050, U.S. population could rise to four hundred million, but entirely as a result of immigration.

The Ephesian moment, then, brings a church more culturally diverse than it has ever been before; potentially, therefore, nearer to that "full stature of Christ" that belongs to his summing up of humanity. The Ephesian moment also announces a church of the poor. Christianity will be mainly the religion of rather poor and very poor peoples, with

few gifts to bring except the gospel itself, and the heartlands of the church will include some of the poorest countries on earth. A developed world in which Christians become less prominent will seek to protect its position against the rest. The Ephesian question at the Ephesian moment is whether or not the church in all its diversity will demonstrate its unity by the interactive participation of all its culture-specific segments, the interactive participation that is to be expected in a functioning body. Will the body of Christ be realized or fractured in this new Ephesian moment? Realization will have both theological and economic consequences. Perhaps the African and Asian and Hispanic Christian diasporas in the West have a special significance in the posing of the Ephesian question, and the United States, with its large community of indigenous believers and growing Christian communities of the diasporas, may be crucial for the answer that will be given to it.

Andrew F. Walls, "The Ephesian Moment," *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002), pp. 72 – 81. Used by permission.