

WOOLHAMPTON PARISH

THE GOD WHO SPEAKS' – YEAR OF THE BIBLE

BRIEF GUIDE TO BOOKS OF THE BIBLE

LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

E*phesians* is unique among New Testament writings for its description of the church as one, holy, catholic & apostolic.

It is this teaching on the nature of the church that is the key contribution of Ephesians.

The understanding of the church which Ephesians sets forth has developed out of and built upon the Pauline tradition and, therefore, goes beyond Paul's own teaching. Paul tended to speak of "church" primarily in terms of local community, whereas the author of Ephesians, writing at a later period, has seen the churches develop into an institution which he calls "the church". ***For the author of Ephesians, the church is the cosmic (i.e. catholic or universal) body of Christ, with Christ himself being its head.***

Although Paul made no distinction between the head and body when he spoke of the "body of Christ", he did stress the unity of the whole, while noting the diversity of the parts.

The author of Ephesians applies these insights to the concept of the cosmic church, but the emphasis clearly falls on **unity**. The author stresses, in particular, the oneness of Jewish and Gentile Christians in **the body of Christ, the church**. They are united through the reconciling peace of

Christ which has been attained by the redemptive shedding of his blood on the cross.

Cleansed by this redemptive action of Christ and sharing in that redemption through the washing of baptism, the church has been made holy, blameless, spotless and without wrinkle. This has already happened, so the notion of the imminent end of the world has receded into the background and is of little concern in this letter.

Finally, the **church is also apostolic**. The author looks back with reverence to the time of the "holy apostles". Using building imagery, the author speaks of their role as the foundation on which the church is built, with Christ as the capstone. At the time the author is writing, toward the end of the first century A.D., it was important to stress continuity with the apostolic tradition and origins of the faith in the face of some esoteric, revelatory forms of Christianity which departed at key points from traditional teaching. By writing in Paul's name, the author clearly wanted to anchor his or her own teaching in the apostolic tradition.

In the light of the subsequent history of the church, it is significant that the author of Ephesians saw no conflict between the existence of an institutional church and the work of the Holy Spirit. In fact, the Spirit is mentioned more frequently in Ephesians than in many other writings within the Pauline tradition. **Even as there is one body, the church, so there is one Spirit.** Despite this frequency of the Spirit's presence in Ephesians, however, the author has not yet developed a systematic understanding of what the Spirit is and what its role is.

(by Ivan Hevener OSB in *The Colledgeville Bible Commentary*)

Now read: Ephesians chapter 1.

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