

The Real Theme of the Epistle to the Ephesians

by Joh. Ph. Koehler

[This article appeared in German in the April 1916 issue of the *Theologische Quartalschrift*, pp. 103-119. This translation was prepared by Professor Irwin J. Habeck.]

Translator's foreword: The undersigned received deep and lasting impressions when as a student he attended lectures on the Epistle to the Ephesians which were presented by Prof. Joh. Ph. Koehler. It was only natural then that when the Lord made it his privilege to lecture on this epistle, he should want to use as resource material also whatever he could find of what Prof. Koehler had written about the epistle. The following is an article, which appeared in the *Theologische Quartalschrift*. Originally the undersigned planned to translate it only for classroom reference. But discussion with the editorial committee of the *Quarterly* revealed a consensus that since more than a generation of our pastors has not had the benefit of hearing Prof. Koehler, and since his German is not particularly easy to read, a service would be rendered to many of our pastors and theological students if a translation of his article were prepared. We may not share Prof. Koehler's views in every detail, e.g., that Paul wrote Ephesians just before his death. But besides giving us a valuable analysis of the trend of thought in chapters 1-3, he demonstrates that there is more to exegesis than examining a text with the microscope of technical knowledge. It is interesting to note too how half a century ago he had already exposed as untenable a current theological fad that one must know all about the historical background before one can interpret or apply a word of Scripture.

Irwin J. Habeck

I. The Pertinent External Circumstances

In the New Testament there are no hymns like the Psalms of the Old Testament. But several discourses of Jesus in the Gospel of St. John and several passages in Paul's letters, because of the rapture of the speaker or writer in a given moment under given conditions, rise to such poetic heights that in this respect they are hardly inferior to a psalm.

The poet speaks of things that can be apprehended only by the emotions; therefore he speaks with emotion for the emotions. In poetry, however, there is a difference with respect to the importance of that which is said, and how it is said. Some poets remain on the level of the small personal affairs of ordinary life. To the degree that a poet manages to understand and present them as they touch every human heart because they occur in the life of everyone, to the degree that he presents them in his poem in a manner which because it is true to life strikes a responsive chord in the heart of everyone, he will be acknowledged as a poet. But it still remains minor art.

The poetry of Holy Scripture is different. All about which it sings always is intimately connected with the greatest thoughts: God, judgment, salvation, and eternity. Therefore all poetry of the Scriptures as well as all of the best in Lutheran hymnology is major art.

But in this poetry too there is an external difference. Most poets stay with personal matters. This is connected with experiences, of which poetry is always the expression. Few walk way up upon the heights. For that reason their perspective is limited, and when they write poetry, also their poetry. Still it remains genuine great poetry insofar as it is able to relate in a manner typical for all people the smallest affairs of life to the most sublime thoughts. This is true of most of the psalms.

We speak of truly great poetry when a poet rises to the most sublime universal truths which comprehend the universe in one grasp, when he sees them as they affect every man personally, not only intermittently, but for time and eternity, and when he then is able to present them in sublime language that corresponds to these majestic thoughts, and still does this in such a manner that everyone can understand him. For that reason Dante and Goethe are considered the greatest of all poets because they did not, as many poets before and after them, sing about the more or less lofty or little ordinary details of human life; they rather, the one in his *Divine*

Comedy, the other in his *Faust*, sought to depict all being, God and the universe, just like the truly great philosophers, and still not merely like them with intellectual perception but with something higher, with poetic vision.

But these poets, who are honored by the great men of the world as the greatest of all geniuses, do not reach the level of two authors of the Bible who are known by every child among us: Isaiah and Paul. When those poets dare to approach what is the great theme of their poetry, they remain caught in the still moral, but nevertheless commonplace judgment of purely human affairs, as was the case with Dante. For him, just as was the case with the old Greek classical writers, everything ended in judgment. That was typical of Roman Catholicism and the Renaissance, the first beams of which shone into Dante's life. Or they move in entirely general pictures, as was the case with Goethe, which call forth, in the minds of some few readers nothing more than pantheistic-Gnostic, i.e., actually amoral, conceptions, but in the minds of most readers no conceptions at all. This is typical of the abstract rationalism of Goethe's 18th century.

But by contrast how easily grasped the entire presentation of Paul and Isaiah remains. They speak of very concrete matters, sin and grace. These concern every human being for time and eternity, and everyone can always understand what the biblical writers have to say about them. These are the most sublime ideas, higher by far than what is called morality, to say nothing of the pantheistic fog of thoughts in which also the philosophers have nothing definite in mind, but involuntarily admit that at this point their thinking can go no further. That wouldn't be so bad if at least something remained for the emotions. But that is out of the question in the case of philosophy.

In contrast, how powerfully the sacred writers sketch entire periods of human history with a few bold strokes; and they do this in such a manner not only that one in broad outlines that are faithful to history gets to see clearly what men have done, but also that one with more than philosophical insight perceives the importance of these actions in the working of God. Yes, they penetrate beyond history into eternity and speak in a manner that looks like philosophy because also their reason cannot fathom what they present. But their case is different from that of philosophers. They themselves admit that language and thinking are not adequate. But at the same time their speech pulsates so mightily with noticeable feeling that one can perceive that behind the terms and constructions which are often hard to analyze a powerful emotional life is hidden which is worth more than any words, if only the reader himself is also carried along. For even though he cannot fathom every expression with his logical reasoning, he receives instead of it out of these presentations the most important insights. For example, the doctrine of election by grace impresses him with the sole efficacy and sole importance and eternity of grace. The presentation in the Epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians that all things are summed up in Christ, the Savior of sinners, brings him to the realization that all knowledge and understanding, whether they concern great things or small, are correct only then when they stand in the proper relation to Christ, the Savior of sinners.

More important still is the fact that the powerful emotions, which could not be confined to words that can be comprehended logically, call forth the same emotion in the reader. No presentation, which is calculated mathematically or developed logically can accomplish as much. As soon as one analyzes such matters dialectically in order to transmit them to logical understanding, one makes them smaller and, in fact, kills all emotion that was in them. Hence there is something higher than philosophical understanding: the poetic vision. And when the holy writers come to the ineffable greatness of divine matters, they turn to poetic language. And with what childlike simplicity they understand the little affairs of everyday life and relate them to their great context so that the simple childlike emotion begins to understand these mighty contexts. This is done indeed by means of pictures, but still with a truth that appeals directly to the heart, which in turn bears witness to its truth.

Isaiah and Paul have this in common that they really are not poets but preachers who have a practical concern in presenting their message. But through the greatness of the subject of which it treats and through the mighty manner in which it stirs their emotions their speech receives a poetic strain so that there is hardly a psalm that has more of this quality. Owing to the fact that in point of time Isaiah was removed from the matters of which he prophesies, receiving his impressions by way of visions, his speech naturally is more picturesque and appears to be more poetic than that of Paul. The latter, being in the New Testament, is stationed on the

higher ramparts of historical fulfillment. Hence his language becomes more concrete, but the contents by the same token also greater.

Paul also has this in common with Isaiah that his literary work changes in character in the course of time. In their youth both were in the midst of practical life. Their speech is clipped and stirring and more like the shrill sound of the trumpet calling to battle. This is the case with the first twelve chapters of Isaiah and with Paul's Epistle to the Galatians. Then there is an intermediate stage for Paul after he has finished his work in the east and now turns his gaze to the west. At this stage he summarizes the results of his entire doctrinal activity in the quietly flowing presentation of the Epistle to the Romans. In the case of Isaiah, chapters 12 to 39, which are partly poetical, partly historical in content, may be put into this category. At the end of his life this poet sat down to write the great prophecy, which in chapters 40 to 66 in calm contemplation presents the warm, highly poetical picture of the Servant of the Lord in great detail. With Paul it is the Captivity Epistles, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, which have the same character, that is, the quiet, settled gentleness which lets emotion have the precedence.

Of these, Colossians and Ephesians are more closely related in this respect that they treat of the same matter in practically the same form. The more important and therefore very likely the earlier in point of time is the Epistle to the Ephesians. If the Apostle had been a man of letters, no doubt the relation of the two letters to one another would have been reversed. But he is a letter writer. There the first effort is better than the second. One dare not impose as a criterion upon the Scriptures our method of composing something according to a definite outline, a method that has become universal through the modern system of education.

Thus the Epistle to the Ephesians because of this external relation to the Epistles to the Galatians and the Romans excels the other writings of the New Testament. But this becomes even more evident when one approaches its contents.

Of what does the Epistle to the Ephesians treat? Again and again one reads the explanation that it contains the doctrine of the church. In itself the statement is correct enough, but it is entirely inadequate as the answer to the above question, for it fails to grasp the full greatness of Paul's subject in the Epistle. The very fact that one clothes the summary of contents in dogmatic garb serves to shrink it. For dogmatics, no matter how one uses it, is primarily concerned about the intellectual side of doctrinal content, since for polemical reasons it must define terms with logical precision. It is necessary to do that. It can also be done in the right manner. But it is necessary to call attention to the fact that this is not the pinnacle of theological effort.

Paul has his own way of writing letters. Usually they are prompted by a specific situation. A doctrine has to be clarified or emphasized, or there is something in life that calls for the admonition of his readers. For that purpose the Apostle starts with a prayer in which he praises God for giving the readers certain blessings, which stand in some relation to the situation that called forth the letter. At the same time Paul prays for progress for the congregation in the area upon which he had touched in his prayer of thanks. Thus Paul is wont to lay the evangelical basis for his following admonition.

In the Epistle to the Galatians a curse upon the false teachers takes the place of the prayer. In the Epistle to the Romans it is taken by a presentation of Paul's inner relationship to the Romans. In the Epistle to the Galatians it is the young man, the comparatively young Christian, who is writing. For him the heart of the new doctrine that he has learned stands in sharp contrast to the old errors he himself had once shared. This realization robs him of the composure that he preserved in the earlier letters to the Thessalonians and in those to the Corinthians, which followed shortly afterwards. Some suppose that Paul was angry. This can be rightly understood. But I do not consider this explanation necessary; rather it is sufficient and seems to be deeper and more comprehensive if one sees in the youthful urge to get at the important discussion the reason why this discussion actually starts with the curse upon the false doctrine, with which he begins. In the Epistle to the Romans the calm of comprehensive discussion of doctrine dominates. For that reason the Apostle saves all doctrine, which otherwise generally appears in the introductory prayer, for the following exposition.

Matters are slightly different in the case of the Captivity Epistles. In the higher critical discussions, which since the end of the 18th century until beyond the middle of the 19th did little more than to rehash the thoughts which had already been expressed in the first three centuries in the conflict of the apologetes with the

heathen critics, the attempt was made to explain these letters in the same way and to prove them genuine or spurious by trying to find in them clues to some practical problem in the local situation of the addressees which induced the writer to treat of a specific doctrine.

In the main what is lacking in these discussions is the mental composure and freedom from bias that results from mastering the material exegetically and historically. One can notice in them that those who were contending lacked in common an understanding of the purely external historical and linguistic situation; that they were still clumsy in their thinking about the emotional processes of a writer which led to his own peculiar presentation in grammar and style; yes, one can notice how they lacked the deep perception of the great Gospel content which in the entire course of eighteen hundred years was possessed almost alone by Luther. In short, there is lacking the mental composure and freedom from bias, which allow time for the interpreter to let the Scripture that he is to interpret work upon him in its own powerful manner, so that it is the word of Scripture alone influencing him.

The impetus for writing the letter which they found hinted at in the Epistle to the Ephesians is found in 1:15, where Paul speaks of having heard of the faith and love of the Ephesians. When he in the fourth chapter comes to speak of the admonition to keep the unity and of the various teaching offices, this too was taken to indicate what prompted him to write. So were the admonitions to put away the walk of the heathen, to put on the new man, to put away lying, wrath, stealing, corrupt communication, immorality, and drunkenness; the admonition to spouses, children, servants, and masters to live as befits their station; and the encouragement to be armed against the devil. The total picture that emerged for them was that in Ephesus there was a flourishing congregation, but that there was danger that the unity of the Spirit was endangered by the special interests of the offices and the individual classes. For that reason Paul wrote the letter in order to present the doctrine of the church and to draw from it the corresponding admonitions.

Apart from the fact that we do not even know for sure whether Paul wrote the letter to an individual congregation, it does not appear to me that this view agrees with Paul's practice in other cases, nor with the peculiar character of the Epistle to the Ephesians. It might work if the quotations referred to above were only so and so many dogmatical statements to be evaluated according to a dogmatical concern or their grammatical and dictionary value. But the assignment of an exegete goes further. His concern is not only the doctrinal content, but also the writing itself. It is incumbent upon him not only to discover the content by considering the outward circumstances, but vice versa, to discover the outward circumstances out of the contents in order now at last to be able rightly to understand the contents. And underlying the outward circumstances the important matter is the inner workings of the spirit, how out of Paul's thinking and feeling the peculiar language and composition in the Epistle to the Ephesians became just what they are. When one after such considerations looks at the content again, one senses its greatness and looks into its depths, and the individual parts become more than isolated sentences, which are to be regarded as prescriptions. Instead they become expressions fresh with a great, rich, glorious life which in every point are able to call forth the same reactions in the reader.

There is something of a parallel between the Epistle to the Ephesians and that to the Romans. It marks the conclusion of a process of inner development in Paul. In the Epistle to the Philippians Paul still reckons with the possibility of regaining his freedom. That is not the case here. For his own person he prays God that he might not faint because of his tribulations. As far as his readers are concerned, he comforts them with the thought that the tribulations he is enduring for them are their glow. He also asks them to pray that he might make a good confession in his forthcoming (probably last) trial. Hence the Epistle to the Ephesians was written later than that to the Philippians.

In the Epistle to the Ephesians the Apostle has wound up his entire activity and his entire life. Now not only all that he has taught, as was the case when he wrote the Epistle to the Romans, passes in review before his soul, but there is added also all that he had experienced. And all that the Apostle can think of now is to be thankful, and this he must express. And what he now says becomes typical for every Christian, yes, for the entire church.

II. The Contents

In 1:3 Paul in a solemn prayer praises God for every kind of spiritual blessing. Not as though there was also another kind of blessing. Rather, all that involves us, every shaping of the course of life, even guilt and adversity, appears as a blessing worked by the Holy Ghost from out of heaven in Christ. And it is the Apostle's concern in the prayer that follows that God might bring the readers to a realization of this blessing. For that reason in the summary of his petition in 1:17–19 and 3:14–19, the language rises to such heights that the Apostle is at a loss to find adequate expressions.

In line with this organization of the prayer there appears first of all a great hymn in 1:3–14, which is not only the longest closely knit periodic sentence in the New Testament, but also has the greatest comprehensive content in the entire Holy Scripture. Accordingly this hymn is not divided by grammatical or dogmatical considerations in such a manner that the portion concerning the election of grace, 1:4–6, is attached to verse 3 by the *καθώς* as a gauge for the blessing, upon which the redemption, 7–10, and the formation of the church, 11–14, follow; but it is governed by poetic instinct. The *καθώς* introduces the unfolding of the blessing, which, divided into parts by the three doxologies in verses 6, 11, and 14, appears in this succession: 4–6, the founding of the blessing before creation; 7–12, the historical development of the blessing; 13–14, the prospect of the consummation of the blessing.

Thus election by grace is the first great portion of the blessing. And it happens in this manner that both the election, and the predestination that accompanies the election aim at the separation of the elect from the rest of the world. "Holy and without blame" describes the character of the separated ones, and "adoption as children" describes the manner of the separation.

The second great portion of the blessed working of God, the historical unfolding of the blessing also has three parts: the redemption through the blood of Christ, the preaching of it, and the formation of the church. In the second part, however, the Apostle uses such a sweeping manner of expressing his thought that one can see that this is his real theme in this hymn. He says: God has given us "all wisdom and prudence" through the preaching that He gathered "together in one all things in Christ" for "the dispensation of the fullness of times." Here are three great comprehensive sentences, which allow for no exceptions. God alone is and does everything. He does everything in Christ. Only so must all things be understood. Unconditional trust and confidence and joy because of them let the Apostle see things in that light.

In the third part of the historical development, the formation of the church, the Apostle divides Christians into the two parts that in his activity always in some way met him separately, Jews and Gentiles. First, in verse 11, he speaks of the Jews. But before he comes to speak of the Gentiles, he closes the portion with the doxology of verse 12.

In the third part of the hymn, in connection with the experiences of the other part of the church, the Gentiles, the Apostle introduces the third grand portion of the blessed working of God: the consummation of the blessing in heavenly bliss. Since it has not yet taken place, he covers it with the picture of the "earnest" which we have in the fact that we have come to faith through the Holy Ghost. This is the first time that the church appears, in the term "purchased possession." The idea has already appeared in the terms "holy and without blame," verse 4; "children," verse 5; in the concept "have obtained an inheritance," verse 11; and in "Jews" and "Gentiles." But the church is not the subject of the hymn; rather the mighty working of God, which consists of grace and is carried out in Christ, is its theme. We might summarize thus: From eternity to eternity God has one grand thought, that is Christ, the Savior of sinners.

The hymn is followed according to Paul's constant manner by the prayer. In it he prays God to help the Ephesians to understand the greatness of the blessing of which he has just been speaking. But because of his highly poetical mood it again becomes a hymn of praise. And only when this has been finished at the end of the second chapter does the Apostle again think of his prayer for the enlightenment of the Ephesians, 3:1. But once more his impulsive spirit is distracted from the matter of praying by the fact that the mention of his name reminds him of his exalted position as apostle of the Gentiles. So once again in 3:3–13 he devotes himself to a glowing description of what great things God is doing, and not until 3:14 does he come to the conclusion of the prayer, which had already been begun in 1:15.

In this prayer, 1:15–2:22, he does not describe the blessing of God with the grand comprehensive perspective of the first hymn, but according to the personal experience of the Ephesians and the application of the blessing to them, which came to be mentioned in the division between Jews and Gentiles in the last part of the first hymn. On the one hand this leads to a description of how one church made up of Jews and Gentiles came to be. But on the other hand that is only a means to an end. The real matter Paul celebrates in a sublime hymn is the marvelous grandeur of the all-embracing working of God in Christ.

The thoughts follow in this order: The prayer extends from 1:15 to the end of chapter two. 1:15–18 is the introductory form of prayer, in which the Apostle says that he is praying for the enlightenment of the Ephesians. First he expresses the content of what the Ephesians are to understand in three mighty sentences which are introduced with $\tau\acute{\iota}\varsigma$ ($\tau\acute{\iota}$), but which stand in this relation to one another that the last two sentences unfold the grand content which is summarized in the first. The hope of God's "calling" is the one big thing about which Paul wants to sing. This hope has two facets: the riches of the glory of the divine inheritance and "the exceeding greatness of the power" with which the inheritance is prepared. So longing and confidence are again the mood of Paul, and these he wants to impart to the souls of his readers.

First of all, in 1:20–23 he presents the power which is manifested in the believers as identical with that which was shown in Christ in His vivification, seating at the right hand of God, revelation and presentation as the exalted Head of the church.

Thereby he wants to awaken the confidence of the readers that what God purposes is also carried out, just as this thought next to the "in Christ" was especially emphasized in the first hymn. Here where he brings the working of God into close relation to people upon this earth he cannot but speak of the mercy or love when he speaks of the power, and thus calls forth confidence. Vivification, seating at the right hand of God, subjection of all things under Christ's feet are evidences of power. This makes Christ the mighty Lord. But now the language becomes tender and appealing and presents the main thought: This One He gave to the church as head over all things. And the further development shows that the point is not so much the ruling as the intimate connection between Christians and their exalted Savior.

But again everything is grand: the mighty working of the great God, who has done such mighty things to our exalted Lord. At the same time these great things closely affect every Christian because he through his membership in the church and through its intimate connection with its exalted Lord shares directly in all of them. An incomparably powerful and still childlike and simple presentation, which at the same time calls forth worshipful amazement and childlike confidence!

With the last sentence Paul has touched upon the special theme of the next presentation. Now in 2:1–10 he comes to speak of the Ephesians, whose conversion was effected through the power which had just been described as having been brought to bear upon Christ. But now this conversion also appears as something grand in itself. The contrast between death and life, the nauseating power of the devil and the infinite love of God, and the great goal of eternity make of conversion a marvelous miracle. In detail, and yet with a few bold strokes Paul in 2:1–3 depicts the original life in sin as something which totally and in every respect is under the control of unholy spirits and the base impulses of the flesh, falls into every temptation, and brings the wrath of judgment upon itself. He first speaks of the Ephesians, but then also includes the Jews, for in this respect there is nothing in them in which they are better than the Gentiles. In spite of all outward activity of natural human life it is death because it corresponds to eternal death and leads to it. All the greater by contrast in 2:4–6 is the love of God, which was not called forth by anything in the objects of that love. Still upon us, who were thus dead in sins, it used the same power that before had been described as having been used upon Christ, the Son of God and our exalted Lord. The contrast between God and the children of the devil, between death and life, wrath and love, the putting of human beings whom this description fits on the same level with the beloved Son and the exalted head of the Church—all of this again and again calls forth the reactions which have been described above, worshipful amazement and childlike confidence. They may not seem to harmonize, but they reveal the great mystery of faith and a deep insight into the inner life of the man of God and into the essence of God. Here is revealed the almighty greatness of God, which no intellect of wise men and no might of great men can fathom, but which is nothing strange to the simplicity of a believing child.

Both sides are expressed once more in the two great sentences, 2:7–10. In all eternity, which is made great by the picture of converging hosts of which one cannot see the last, the grace of God is the one grand thought with which our thoughts will be busied as we stand before the face of God. And this grace even here in time is seen in such immeasurable greatness that even the works which we do are done by God, “before ordained” by Him before we do them so that we should walk in them as though decked with a glorious gift (“holy and without blame before him,” 1:4) in order that He might find pleasure in them.

Not until now does Paul come to speak of the church, 2:11–22. Here the greatness of the working of God, of which he had been speaking up to this time, recedes into the background. It is Christ who is acting here; and from mighty words expressing admiration and calling forth confidence the Apostle changes his tone to one of tender encouragement as he in the first part, 2:11–13, depicts the greatness of the blessing by the contrast between then and now. Once they were “far off” from God, from Christ, from the church. But now they have been “made nigh,” and that through the blood of Christ. This now becomes the object of Paul’s praise. For that reason his language now in the second part, 2:14–18, becomes so tender and appealing as is seldom the case with the Apostle. “For he is our peace,” that is the theme; and the picture of the union of Jews and Gentiles into one church only becomes the occasion for showing what Jesus has accomplished with His blood. And in drawing the picture of the church, how of two is made one, the main matter is something which seems to be mentioned only in passing as though it didn’t really fit into the picture, that the two have been reconciled to God and now have free access to the Father.

In the third part, 2:19–22, the idea of the church comes fully into its own with a jubilant tone which summons to joy over the fact that the church, free from all hindrances which lay in the natural condition in sin, is completely united with God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit (“the fullness of him that filleth all in all”).

In chapter 3 the Apostle rises to a new song. The first hymn was a holy cosmology in which Paul’s thoughts moved in the universe. The second hymn became historical, the history of the victory of the Gospel. The third hymn now becomes personal as the Apostle begins to speak of his position as apostle of the Gentiles and views the greatness of the blessing of God from this angle. Up to this point the thoughts flowed in an orderly development, only that language often was not adequate for the grand thoughts and for that reason ran into grammatical anacolutha. Now this also happens with the thoughts.

In 1:15 the Apostle had begun to let a prayer follow the ascription of praise. But it turned into another hymn. When its train of thought reached its end, the mind of the Apostle returned to his starting-point. In 3:1 he wants to finish his prayer. But it is the nature of the poetic mood to have an inner urge toward a rounding off. The Apostle had spoken of the mighty working of God in the universe and then of His mighty working upon earth among the nations, and that in both cases with personal reference to the Ephesians, who had come into the church as Gentiles. It would have been strange indeed if Paul said nothing about the most intimate involvement in this grand connection, that of his own person.

He was the apostle of the Gentiles. As such he had a very personal part in the mighty working of God, which he had been describing up to this point. It was he who with the Gospel of Christ had changed the entire course of the world. If it was something grand that the Gentiles came to the Gospel, then it was something equally grand that Paul was the means by which it was done. Everything of which Paul spoke in the first two chapters became his own spiritual possession through personal experience. The poet doesn’t get his thoughts by racking his brains—he experiences them. What touches the Apostle most in this world of thoughts is the experience of the high privilege that he could call the Gentiles. And as he now comes to speak of the matter, it again becomes praise of the grand and mighty working of God; and that he was involved recedes completely into the background because it was only the outward form, the means, to glorify the great blessing of God.

As in the first hymn the emphasis lay upon “in Christ,” in the second upon the power of God that showed itself in the church as well as in Christ, so in the third hymn the infinite wisdom of God becomes the subject. No Gentile and no Jew, not even the great saints of the Old Testament, ever thought that the Gentiles were thus to become part of the church, 3:6. Yes, for the holy angels it remains a marvelous mystery, 3:10, I Peter 1:12, which they delight to behold, how God’s wisdom in a wonderful manner brought it about that the church has free access to God, and that in the glorious form of faith, 3:12.

The Apostle first completes these thoughts, 3:1–13, before he in 3:14–19 comes to the prayer itself and closes it with the doxology of 3:20, 21. The thought of his chains, which permit him to do nothing else than to pray for his readers, leads him to the fact that he is the apostle of the Gentiles. It is for the sake of the Gentiles that he is bound. But this is neither a disgrace nor a burden for him, for as apostle of the Gentiles he has experienced what had been denied to the great ancients of the Old Testament: to usher in the grand period of fulfillment, the New Testament; in the mighty edifice of the church to be with the apostles and prophets of the New Testament a part of the foundation upon which, according to the Lord's prophecy to Peter in Matthew 16 the church is so firmly founded that the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. But whatever in this idea might have caused the Apostle personally to swell with pride immediately sinks into the background over against the exalted wisdom which is revealed in the building by the fact that the Gentiles as living stones are part of it.

But the personal element in the matter is so great for the Apostle that he must come back to it once more in verse 8 to use the contrast between his unworthy self and the high office again to depict the lofty idea of the manifold wisdom of God. This time it is done in this way that all of the thoughts of the first and second hymns, reaching from the election of grace to the faith of the individual member of the church, are gathered together in one single expression, which then is made especially lively by the picture of the angels who stand in amazement before the edifice of the church. And yet the church is not really the subject upon which Paul wishes to focus attention, but the grand fact that even the Gentiles, yes, to be even more general, that sinners are saved and become children of God who, in the viewpoint which is especially emphasized in the Epistle to the Ephesians, are "filled with all the fullness of God." All of this is so great and wonderful that Paul does not grow faint in his tribulations and also knows how to comfort the Ephesians concerning them.

Now at last he comes to the final prayer. As in 1:3 and 1:17, so here in 3:14, 15 there is a grand, solemn designation for God, which Paul doesn't use otherwise. The prayer consists of two sets of three great expressions: the first three cover the content of the prayer, the other three its goal. In the first three the first member is strengthening of spiritual life; the summary of the following two: that Christ might live in them through faith, that they might become firm in love. In the mighty surge of language the following sentence catches up with the preceding. The third member, "being rooted and grounded in love," appears to be either the anticipated subject of the following purpose clause or an elliptical nominative instead of a relative sentence, describing the readers more closely. No matter how it is analyzed, the context shows that the matter is to be taken as the third member of the first triad. In order to understand the greatness of the subject under discussion, neither *γνώσις* nor *πίστις* alone in their dogmatical distinction from other gifts of God will suffice, only the total spiritual life. This is how it is presented here in this triad and, in fact, always in Scripture.

In the purpose clause there are again three members: the first two contain the immediate goal, namely, understanding the infinite greatness of the blessing of God. At this point the Apostle in the surge of emotion loses the main term in the first member, and we must restore it out of the context. Of what are we to comprehend the breadth, length, depth, and height? The second member points out the direction in which we must search, "the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge." As we now review the total content of all that preceded, we find as the content of the second hymn, 1:18, 19, in which "exceeding greatness" was the theme, a similar combination of three members: the riches of God's glorious inheritance and the exceeding greatness of His power shown "to us-ward" as it was "in Christ." That was what there constituted the hope of God's calling. Thus the theme of the second hymn was stated. In the first hymn everything that is and happens in heaven and earth was included in the framework of one comprehensive blessing, which was then more closely defined by the threefold doxology as the glory of His grace. Here in the third hymn in verses 6 and 10 the Apostle concentrated more upon the infinite wisdom of God in His gracious working. Hence it would seem to me that it is the idea of grace, which was omitted in 3:18, and this in its most general scope; not just in the narrower view of the grace that shows itself in the formation of the church. At the end of the whole grand trilogy the Apostle returns to the first thoughts of 1:3.

He does something similar in the third member of the purpose clause, which states the goal of the knowledge for which he prays. The Christians are to be "filled with all the fullness of God." The term points back to 1:23, where it was applied to the church, "the fullness of him that filleth all in all." But here it is applied

personally to the individual Christian, as was the case at the end of the second chapter, 2:22, with the picture of the temple. This again is one of those grand expressions that can easily be restricted by trying to analyze it in logical terms.

It seems that Paul wants to summarize the thoughts of the last four verses, 3:16–19, in what he had just said, and in the process all of the thoughts of the entire three chapters. After he has sung the praises of God, he prays that his readers might understand what he has said. So this last prayer covers the entire ascription as it is stated in all three chapters. Now however for the purpose of attaining to this knowledge he prays for the strengthening of the inner life through the indwelling of Christ by faith and through the strengthening in love. Only so can one understand the greatness of grace: through faith, hope, and love. And these in turn are again strengthened through comprehending the grace of God and advance the knowledge of God still more toward the fullness of God, so that the Christian in all of his reactions, planning, willing, thinking, and doing becomes ever more like God.

So here the Apostle leaves the hymn of the church, which in the middle portion was only a manifestation, and returns to the first great general thought of the comprehensive blessing, with which he had begun.

To this the doxology at the close corresponds. God can do “exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think.” Our praise in the church will not be able to comprehend all of it. But the one matter that concerns us directly and in which all things are gathered together, that Christ Jesus is the Savior of sinners (the official title placed first), this we can comprehend through our close connection with Him, and of this we want to sing in all eternity.

When in the following exhortation the church again appears in the first section under the picture of a “perfect man,” 4:13, and then again in the admonition to husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church, the explanation could be that the Apostle does this because these pictures are familiar to him. But it is simpler to view them in the immediate context, which introduces the church in the first three chapters. And to this extent to regard the doctrine of the church as the summary of the contents is proper. But the other admonitions have nothing to do with this context, and above all the grand picture of the panoply against the attacks of the devil applies to the individual Christian, just as the picture of the fullness of God at the end of the third chapter. So while it is not incorrect in a certain sense to say that the content of the Epistle to the Ephesians is the one great eternal thought of God, Christ and His church, still the statement of content is more precise if it borrows the words of the beautiful stanza of Woltersdorf:

The King who poured out His own lifeblood
 To save His people from their sin—
 To Him may endless praise be given
 By angels and great hosts of men.
 Sing all the wonders He has done
 But most His blood, God’s own dear Son.