

Obsculta

Volume 6 | Issue 1

Article 3

May 2013

Doubting the Quintessence

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ISSN: 2472-2596 (print)

ISSN: 2472-260X (online)

Recommended Citation

VanderHeiden, Brian. 2013. Doubting the Quintessence. *Obsculta* 6, (1) : 3-8. <http://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta/vol6/iss1/3>.

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The following essay by Brian VanderHeiden is the winner of our Obsculta theological essay contest for undergraduate juniors and seniors. In addition to having his essay published, Mr. VanderHeiden receives a \$500 cash prize and a half-tuition scholarship.

The Obsculta Prize is meant to encourage young theologians to think, discuss, and write in the spirit of the Rule of Benedict. The name of the prize, like this journal, is the first word in the prologue of the Rule of Benedict. The full phrase translates as “Listen with the ear of your heart.” This simple admonition shapes not only the life of the monastic community at Saint John’s but also the way we seek to do our theology and preparation for ministry. In a world where people too often speak first and ask questions later, we seek to listen for the voice of the Spirit in Scripture, tradition, each other, and the world. Out of this listening we speak that Word of God in a way we hope can be heard and even inspire the world in which we live.

We hope the Obsculta Prize might encourage undergraduate students to think seriously about vocations in theology and ministry. If you know anyone who might be interested in submitting an essay to this contest next year, please encourage them to look into it. Contest essays can be on any topic of Christian theology, including comparative studies of other religions and pastoral or practical theology, as well as disciplines such as scripture, history, or systematics. The deadline for next year’s essay submissions will be March 1, 2014.

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St. Benedict at Marmion Abbey, Chase M. Becker

Introduction

The scholar Frederick Bruce labeled Paul's letter to the Ephesians as the "quintessence of Paulinism" in that it contained many prominent themes of other Pauline letters.¹ While some may have questioned whether it is the ultimate embodiment of Pauline thought, almost no one challenged St. Paul being the author of Ephesians until the eighteenth century. In fact, most scholars claim that Pauline authorship of Ephesians was "universally accepted in the early church."² Prominent members of the early Church such as Irenaeus and Marcion accredited Paul with the authorship of Ephesians, and Clement of Rome allegedly referred to the letter as early as A.D. 95.³ In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, prominent scholars began to question whether Paul was the writer of Ephesians, and today, about 80 percent of Pauline scholars have concluded that the letter is Pseudo-Pauline, or not actually written by Paul despite being attributed to him.⁴

Although the vast majority of scholars claim Ephesians to be the work of a different author, this conclusion is not easily reached. Instead, determining Pseudo-Pauline authorship of Ephesians requires a thorough examination of several factors. First of all, whether or not Paul wrote Ephesians is determined by how well the epistle compares to the undisputed Pauline letters. Romans, First and Second Corinthians, First Thessalonians, Galatians, Philippians, and Philemon comprise the undisputed Pauline body of letters, and thus, these form the basis for determining what is characteristic of Paul. That being said, this paper will show that three theological concepts in Ephesians (in comparison to the undisputed letters) are enough to place doubt on Pauline authorship of the epistle.

Although this paper will only address certain theological ideas in detail, it is important to briefly mention the other arguments against Pauline authorship (so that the reader may better understand the controversy surrounding Ephesians). In

¹ Peter O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 4.

² Ibid.

³ Wayne A. Meeks and John T. Fitzgerald, *The Writings of St Paul* (London: W. W. Norton & Company 2007), 113.

⁴ Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York/London: Doubleday, 1997), 620.

addition to the theology, many scholars argue that the language employed throughout Ephesians is uncharacteristic of Paul's vocabulary. As scholar Leslie Mitton notes, "About ninety words in Ephesians are not used elsewhere in Pauline letters."⁵ For example, in all of the undisputed letters, Paul never mentions the Greek word *diabolos*, which translates into devil (the undisputed letters use the title Satan instead).⁶ However, it is important to note that each undisputed letter contains its own distinctive vocabulary.⁷ Similarly, many scholars also note that the writing style of Ephesians seems to be atypical of Paul. In the undisputed letters, Paul writes in a rapid, energetic, and terse fashion whereas the sentences in Ephesians are "abnormally long and slow-moving."⁸ Furthermore, the style of Ephesians is very impersonal which is highly uncharacteristic of Paul. According to Acts 20:31, Paul preached in Ephesus for three years, and yet, the author never refers to the citizens of Ephesians as brothers or sisters, which is odd considering Paul addressed the Roman congregation as brothers and sisters despite the fact that he had never met these individuals. As scholar Raymond Brown notes, "It is almost inconceivable that in a friendly letter to Christians there he would not have included some greetings and reminiscences."⁹

Besides the linguistic and literary style, another argument supporting Pseudo-Pauline authorship is that Ephesians has a close relationship with Colossians. Scholars claim that many phrases in Ephesians can also be found in Colossians, and this suggests that the author of Ephesians borrowed ideas and phrases from Colossians. However, it must be emphasized that the similar ideas present in Ephesians and Colossians do not signify that there was one author who wrote both letters (and thus Paul could be the writer of Ephesians). Although other Pauline letters such as Galatians and Romans contain similar themes, the two "diverge from one another in the development of thought and the choice of words."¹⁰ In

⁵ C. Leslie Mitton, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973), 4.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 6.

⁸ Mitton, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Ephesians*, 4.

⁹ Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 620.

¹⁰ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Ephesians A Commentary* (Scotland: T&T Clark,

other words, Paul might have written about the same themes in multiple letters, but he adapted the themes to fit the particular circumstances of the congregations he was writing to. As this is not the case in Ephesians and Colossians, it is most likely that “the writer of Ephesians composed freely, with major ideas and phrases of Colossians making their presence felt naturally.”¹¹

Now that the other arguments against Pauline authorship have been briefly explained, the remainder of this paper will illustrate how the theology of Ephesians indicates Pseudo-Pauline authorship. Particularly, three theological topics of Ephesians will be analyzed to show how the author diverges from or develops the theology of the undisputed Pauline letters. First of all, Ephesians conveys a high ecclesiology in which Christ is the supreme ruler of a universal and institutionalized church whereas the ecclesiology of the authentic Pauline letters usually reserves the word church for local congregations or those united in the body of Christ. Similarly, with regards to marriage, Ephesians certainly expresses a high opinion of the union which does not correspond with the marital attitude of Corinthians. Third, contrary to the Pauline notion of eagerly expecting the second coming of Christ, many scholars claim that Ephesians presents a realized eschatology in which Christ’s resurrection of humanity has already been accomplished.¹² Ultimately, these three diversions (or developments) of Pauline theology are sufficient to doubt that St. Paul is the author of Ephesians.

Ecclesiology

The undisputed Pauline letters usually use the term church to signify a particular congregation. For instance, Romans 16:5, in stating “Greet also the church in their house,” indicates a house congregation. In his letters to the Corinthians, Paul refers to the “churches of Macedonia” and “the church of God that is in Corinth” to signify the congregation of a certain area or town.¹³ Paul is clearly using the word church to address the believers of the city or house-church.

However, there are some instances in which Paul seems to use the term church in a universal connotation. In Galatians 1:13, Paul claims to have been “violently persecuting the church of God,” and similarly, in Philippians 3:6, Paul labels himself “a persecutor of the church.” In both passages, no specific congregation is identified, and thus, “the church” seems to refer to a universal group of Christians. Furthermore, although not explicitly associated with the word church, the phrase “body of Christ” frequently appears in the undisputed Pauline letters and sometimes references a community of Christians. First Corinthians 12:27, in stating “Now you are the body of Christ and individual members of it,” indicates a community in which Christ is the “totality of the body with individual Christians as members of it.”¹⁴ Being included into the body of Christ occurred through baptism and by virtue of faith.¹⁵ In other words, similar to the meaning of church in Galatians and Philippians, the body of Christ denotes a group of individuals who are united in Christ through faith and baptism.

The Ephesian notion of a hierarchical and universal church diverges from the Pauline local congregation and united body understanding of church. The word church appears nine times throughout Ephesians, and in each instance, it refers to a universal church.¹⁶ For example, in Ephesians 1:22-23, the author claims that God has “put all things under his [Christ’s] feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body.” Because church is referred to as the body of Christ, it signifies a universal sense of the word as the body of Christ is not solely comprised by a single congregation but by the entire redeemed Christian community.¹⁷ However, this author’s concept of the body of Christ is very different from the Pauline. In First Corinthians, the assembly of believers (or church) is Christ. In Ephesians, however, the baptismal metaphor has been transformed, so that Christ is the Head of the Church, and thus the identity of believers with Christ has been comprised.¹⁸ Christ has become the authoritative “head which directs the body,” and the emphasis is not on unity through Christ but on “the supremacy of Christ as head over his church.”¹⁹ The phrases “put all things under his feet” and “head over all things” further assert the “supremacy of Christ” over the church. Therefore, instead of expressing unity of the Church as Christ, the church in Ephesians 1:22-23 refers to a universal congregation who is obedient to Christ.

Furthermore, in Ephesians 5:22-33, the author compares the marital relationship to Christ and the church, and as a result, reasserts that Christ possesses authority over the church. For instance, Ephesians 5:23 states, “For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.” In relating the church and Christ to marriage, the author further develops the ecclesiological notions set out by Ephesians 1:22-23. Once again, “the church, which is his

14 Mitton, *The New Century Bible Commentary*, 76.
15 *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, First Corinthians 12:12-13.
16 Smiles, *First Thessalonians, Philippians, Second Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians*, 98.
17 Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Ephesians A Commentary*, 80.
18 Vincent M. Smiles, email message to author, December 16, 2011.
19 Mitton, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Ephesians*, 76.

1991), 30.

¹¹ Vincent M. Smiles, *First Thessalonians, Philippians, Second Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005) 92.

¹² *Ibid.*, 91.

¹³ *The Harper Collins Study Bible* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1989) First Thessalonians 1:1.

body” does not refer to a specific congregation, but the entire Christian community. Furthermore, the parallel drawn between wives being subject to their husband and the church being subject to Christ affirms the authoritative status of Christ. As scholar Leslie Mitton notes, “Christ as the head commands the obedience of the body, his church.”²⁰ Thus, the Ephesian vision of the church entails a universal institution with Christ as the ultimate authority. Christian believers are no longer the totality of Christ’s body, but rather they are the subordinate body of believers which the head of Christ directs.

Christian Marriage

Similar to the concept of the church, the author of Ephesians attributes a high spirituality to marriage which lacks parallel with the marital concept of First Corinthians. The Paul of First Corinthians certainly did not have the most exalted view of marriage, and throughout the letter, he emphasizes that an unmarried life is superior to a married one due to the fact that “he who marries his fiancée does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better.”²¹ Furthering this idea, Paul states, “The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord; but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife.”²² In other words, the unmarried individuals have the advantage in that they do not have to concern themselves with marital stress and can thus focus their attention on God. Regarding widows, Paul claims, “She [any widow] is free to marry anyone she wishes, only in the Lord. But in my judgment she is more blessed if she remains as she is.”²³ Once again, Paul argues that the unmarried lead a blessed life in that they can be “anxious about the affairs of the Lord.”²⁴ Because the unmarried are concerned about the Lord’s affairs, they can offer “unhindered devotion to the Lord” and thus are made holy both “in body and spirit.”²⁵ Ultimately, part of the Pauline marital notion strongly emphasizes the sacredness of the single lifestyle in that it allows Christians to focus on God instead of their spouses.

Furthermore, this view of marriage was governed by a strong apocalyptic notion. In First Corinthians, the second coming of Christ was an imminent reality, and Paul repeatedly reminds his audience of this. Paul claims, “For the present form of this world is passing away.” In other words, this world will soon be transformed by the second coming of Christ. Paul makes claims such as “in view of the impending crisis, it is well for you to remain as you are,” and “the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let those who have wives be

²⁰ Ibid., 199.

²¹ *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, First Corinthians 7:38.

²² Ibid., First Corinthians 7:32-33.

²³ Ibid., First Corinthians 7:39-40.

²⁴ Ibid., First Corinthians 7:33.

²⁵ Ibid., First Corinthians 7:34, 35.

as though they had none.”²⁶ The phrase “remain as you are” refers to (among other aspects) the current marital status of an individual.²⁷ Therefore, Paul stressing a concentration on the Lord over good spousal relations gains new importance in light of the impending apocalypse. As one scholar notes, “He [Paul] thus harbors the apocalyptic belief that all present social structures will be dissolved, and also that the time preceding the ‘end’ will be characterized by acute distress (‘the impending crisis’). Under such circumstances it is clear that marriage is of little value and the raising of future generations an irrelevance.”²⁸ Since all social constructions will be abolished, it is crucial to focus on the one thing that will not: the Lord.

Contrary to the First Corinthian view, the Ephesian portrait of Christian marriage does not imply that one should remain unmarried nor does it assume an imminent apocalypse. However, before the Ephesian conception of marriage is explained, a few points must be clarified. First of all, unlike First Corinthians, Ephesians never explicitly states that marriage is better than a single lifestyle. Secondly, the author of Ephesians calls for some of the same marital behaviors that Paul does. Passages from Ephesians assert that “the husband is the head of the wife,” and this corresponds with First Corinthians 11:2 which states, “The husband is the head of his wife.”²⁹ However, in comparing the marital relationship with that of Christ and the church, Ephesians transforms marriage into an exalted “state of life uniquely blessed by God.”³⁰ Conveying this point, the author states:

“For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the savior...Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes so that she may be holy and without blemish.”³¹

Although the idea of subordination may not indicate high spirituality, the Ephesian notion of marriage is profound in the “Christian sense that all relationships have to be lived ‘in the Lord’ and with the unselfish, sacrificial love of Christ as the pattern and inspiration.”³² In other words, husbands should not just be affectionate towards their wives, but love

²⁶ Ibid., First Corinthians 7:26, 29.

²⁷ “Commentary on 1 Corinthians.” In *The Oxford Bible Commentary*. Oxford Biblical Studies Online, <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/book/obso-9780198755005/obso-9780198755005-div1-875> (accessed 19-Dec-2011).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, Ephesians 5:23.

³⁰ Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 636.

³¹ *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, Ephesians 5:23, 25-27.

³² “Commentary on 1 Corinthians.”

them like Christ loves the Church. Similarly, wives should not be submissive on the basis of societal constructions but on behalf of the church's exemplary subordination to Christ. Thus, Ephesians elevates the Christian marriage in that it is supposed to mimic the divine relationship between Christ and the church.

Furthermore, the Ephesian notion of marriage also adds a burden for individuals to seek marriage, and this is not present in First Corinthians. Commenting on the marital passages in Ephesians, one scholar notes, "A woman without a husband is incapable of existence, just as the church is incapable of existence without Christ, who redeemed her and sustains her life."³³ Therefore, a woman needs a husband so that she can live the elevated Christian lifestyle. Similarly, men are also obligated to marry as they should strive to imitate Christ, the prototype of the loving husband.³⁴

Thus, the inferred obligation to marry and exalted status of married individuals is very different from the notion of marriage offered by First Corinthians. Whereas First Corinthians stresses that marriage results in anxieties and distress, Ephesians asserts that marriage allows Christians to take part in the "unselfish sacrificial love of Christ."³⁵ The single life is praised in First Corinthians in that it allows humans to focus on God. However, in Ephesians, being single would not allow Christians to participate in Christ's relationship with the church to the same extent that a married couple could. Furthermore, the author of Ephesians never comments on how the apocalypse impacts marriage (or even mentions it in the same context) and this was a prominent influence on Paul regarding marriage. If anything, the author of Ephesians seems to believe that the apocalypse is not imminent due to the fact that the author provides married couples with instructions on how to raise children.³⁶ However, as noted earlier, raising children would be of little importance if the world was about to end. Therefore, the Ephesian view of marriage diverges from the conception of First Corinthians in that the marital relationship is both exalted and preferable to the single life.

Realized Eschatology

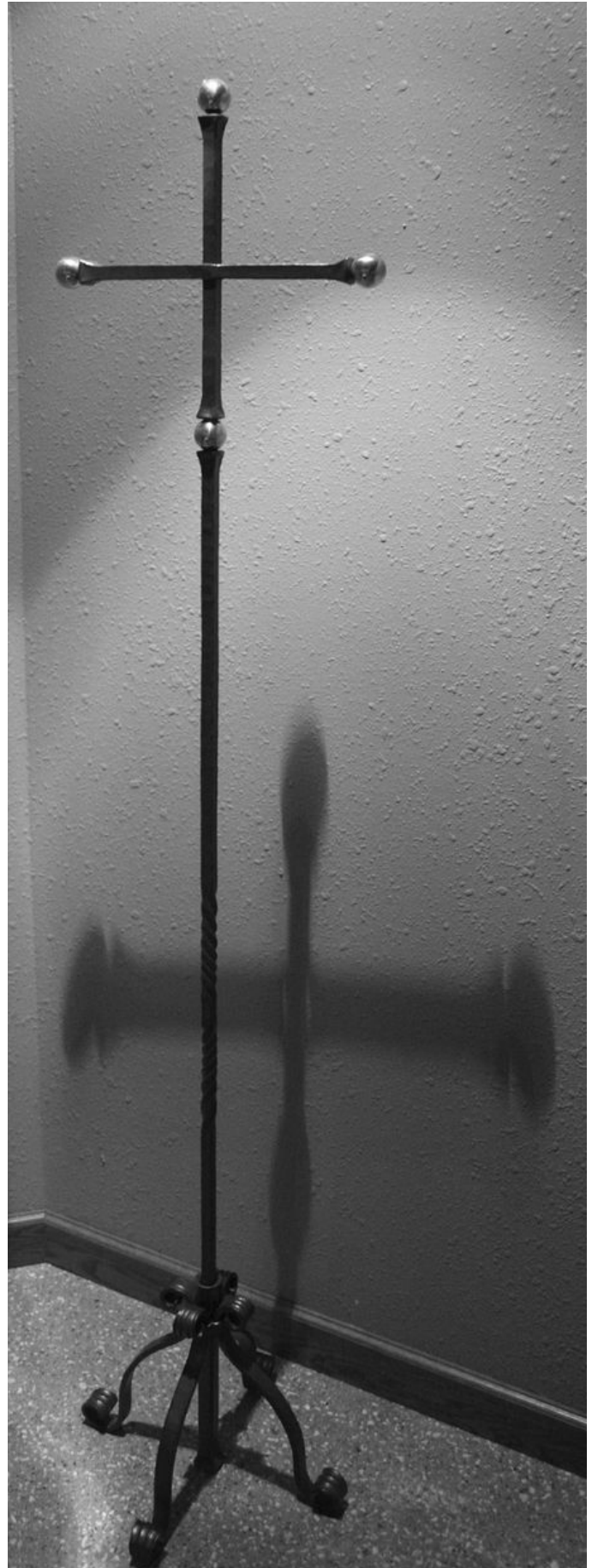
Unlike the Pauline notion of an eagerly anticipated resurrection, Ephesians portrays a realized eschatology in which

³³ Annette Merz and Brian McNeil, "Why did the pure bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11.2) become a wedded wife (Eph. 5:22-33)? Theses about the intertextual transformation of an ecclesiological metaphor," *Journal For The Study Of The New Testament* 79 (September 1, 2000): 137. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed December 13, 2011).

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ "Commentary on Ephesians." In *The Oxford Bible Commentary*. Oxford Biblical Studies Online, <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/book/obso-9780198755005/obso-9780198755005-div1-891> (accessed 12-Dec-2011).

³⁶ *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, Ephesians 6:4.



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humanity has already been raised with Christ.³⁷ In Ephesians, God has “raised us (believers) up with him and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus,” and has raised Christ “from the dead and seating him at his right hand in the heavens, far above every principality, authority, power, and dominion.”³⁸ First, of all, these two phrases imply that when God raised Christ from the dead, he also did the same for His believers (as he “raised us”).³⁹ Thus, most scholars interpret that for the author of Ephesians, the resurrection of humanity has already happened.

However, in the authentic Pauline letters, believers are called to hope for the future resurrection. In Romans, Paul asserts that believers “will certainly be united with him [Christ] in a resurrection,” and similarly, Second Corinthians claims that God “will raise us also with Jesus.”⁴⁰ Whereas Ephesians understands the resurrection of humans to have happened when God raised Jesus from the dead, the other Pauline letters promote a ready vigilance for the future resurrection. As scholar F. F. Bruce notes, “That God has already seated his people with Christ is an idea unparalleled elsewhere in the Pauline corpus.”⁴¹ Thus, there are two very distinct resurrection theologies operating between Ephesians and the other Pauline letters.

Conclusion

The theology of Ephesians differs remarkably from the theology offered by the undisputed Pauline letters with regards to the church, marriage and eschatology. First of all, Ephesians and Pauline letters offer two very different conceptions of the early Christian church. In the undisputed Pauline letters, the word church is usually used to denote a small congregation.

³⁷ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Ephesians A Commentary*, 77.

³⁸ *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, Ephesians 2:6, 1:19-21.

³⁹ O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 170.

⁴⁰ *The Harper Collins Study Bible*, Romans 6:6, Second Corinthians 4:14.

⁴¹ E. K. Simpson and F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians: the English text with introduction, exposition and notes* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans 2006), 287.

However, there are a few instances in which Paul seems to use church in a universal sense, particularly when he speaks of the “body of Christ.” In contrast, Ephesians diverges from both Pauline understandings in that it always speaks of the church in terms of a universal institution that is obedient to the ultimate authority in Christ. The emphasis of the Ephesian notion of church is that humans are the subordinate body headed by whereas Paul’s body of Christ entailed individuals unified in Christ.

Furthermore, the Ephesian notion of marriage directly conflicts with the one offered by First Corinthians. Ephesians portrays marriage as highly spiritual, and Christians are called to conduct their marital relations on the model of Christ and the church. Paul, on the other hand, argued that marriage brought stress and divided attention between one’s spouse and God. Also, there is a complete absence of apocalyptic language in the Ephesian text regarding marriage. On the other hand, Paul repeatedly warned the Corinthians of the imminent apocalypse. Finally, the eschatology of Ephesians breaks Pauline tradition in that it asserts God raised humanity when he resurrected Christ.

Paul, however, was still waiting in eager anticipation for the day in which God would unite humanity with Christ. Thus, there is reason to doubt that Paul was the author of Ephesians based solely on these three theological divergences. Clearly, Ephesians conveys a different ecclesiology, conception of marriage, and eschatology. As a result, the Pauline scholar Bruce should not have labeled Ephesians as the “quintessence of Paulinism” due to the fact that at least three theological concepts of Ephesians detract from its quintessence.⁴²

⁴² O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 4.

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