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PREACHING EPHESIANS: THE FOURFOLD FOUNTAIN OF GOD

TIM SENSING

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Much of my scholarship as a homiletician emerges from Craddock's oft quoted line "It is not how we preach the Bible, but how does the Bible preach." In other words, does the genre and rhetorical structure of a text make any difference about how a text is preached? The purpose of this paper is to explore both form and function of Eph 1:3–14 as it prompts theological insights about preaching this single pericope but also a way to think about homiletical theology and the whole letter.¹

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵ He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸ that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight ⁹ he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on

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While questions of authorship and identity of the recipients is debated in NT scholarship, I am foremost a preacher. When the worshippers open their pew Bible, they read "Paul" and the "Ephesians." While reviewing the debate might be a topic for adult catechism, for the purposes of preaching, I think, the debate has minimal difference.

¹ Homiletical theology emerges from a recent project of the Academy of Homiletics that has produced four books edited by David Schnasa Jacobsen: *Homiletical Theology: Preaching as Doing Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015); *Homiletical Theology in Action: The Unfinished Theological Task of Preaching* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015); *Theologies of the Gospel in Context: The Crux of Homiletical Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017); *Toward a Homiletical Theology of Promise* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018). Introducing the project, Jacobsen in *Homiletical Theology* writes "It argues that preaching is not about consuming theology, but a place where theology is 'done' or produced. In doing so, it aims to concretize a commitment to seeing preaching as a thoroughgoing theological act, relating deeply to its practice, theories, and contexts" (3).

earth.¹¹ In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will,¹² so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.¹³ In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit;¹⁴ this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

Ephesians 1:3–14, the longest sentence in the Greek NT, has intrigued scholars throughout the centuries. As a professor homiletics, I have found this pericope a wonderful invitation for students to explore the preaching of Pauline literature. I ask students, “Does your exegetical decision about genre affect your homiletical decisions?” Furthermore, “Does the theology of the text spark a contemporary theological meaning on Sunday?”²

Various interpretations have been proposed to explain the form and function of this text. No consensus exists concerning the text's literary form.³ It has long been understood that this section is immediately followed by a thanksgiving of the “normal” Pauline form and structure (1:15–19).⁴ Therefore, Ephesians is the only letter with both a eulogy and a thanksgiving.⁵ While finding evidence of an early Christian hymn is a popular option,⁶ Lincoln summarizes most scholarship,

² I offer my own examples of completing the assignment later in the paper.

³ Holland Hendrix, “On the Form and Ethos of Ephesians,” *USQR* 42 (1988): 3–5, reviews scholarship addressing Eph 1:3–14 form-critically. Peter T. O'Brien, “Ephesians I: An Unusual Introduction to a New Testament Letter,” *NTS* 25 (1979): 506–8, reviews the literature that analyzes the hymnic structure, including the Qumran texts with their “hymnal language” and long sentences. See also Harold Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 153–61; after a complete review of the literature, Hoehner concludes the text is a Christian eulogy.

⁴ Paul Schubert, *Form and Function of the Pauline Thanksgivings* (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1939), 8.

⁵ Peter T. O'Brien, *Introductory Thanksgiving in the Letters of Paul* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 3n. Both 2 Cor 1:3–7 and 1 Pet 1:3–12 begin with a eulogy comparable to the one in Ephesians. However, the uniqueness of Ephesians lies in the inclusion of both openings, the eulogy, and the thanksgiving.

⁶ Seeing the passage as a reconstruction of a pre-Pauline hymn is the traditional approach. Several have found signs indicating the end or beginning of several stanzas of a hymn. J. Coutts, “Ephesians 1.3–14 and 1 Peter 1.3–12,” *NTS* 3 (1956–57): 116–24. William G. Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 60–62, includes this section with hymn-like meditations or possibly initiation hymns. He then lists the identifying hymnic and liturgical materials necessary for making such determinations. However, he warns against over confidence in generalizing since the sources are vague. Doty later affirms (115) the usual connection is between a hymn and a liturgical prayer used at the occasion of baptism. See also the casual connection to hymns that simply assumes the traditional approach in Michael Wade Martin and Mikeal C. Parsons, *Ancient Rhetoric and the New Testament: The Influence of Elementary Greek Composition* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018), 230n47.

Other solutions have also been proposed. Charles Robbins, in “The Composition of Eph. 1:3–14,” *JBL* 105 [Dec. 1986], seeks the answer in source backgrounds of Greek

saying, “In general it has to be said that these proposals that the passage is a hymn which is being quoted or a reworking of an original hymn are unlikely. Its language and style are too similar to the rest of the first three chapters for it to be possible to isolate an entity which is clearly different.”⁷

More recent form critical explanations find affinities between 1:3–14 and the Jewish *berakah*. Barth defines a *berakah* as a benediction elaborating on a specific topic quoting or borrowing Christian liturgical traditions.⁸ Lincoln agrees, saying, “The heaping up of words and phrases in this profuse and effusive style are a deliberate attempt to express the riches of which he speaks in an appropriate way. This is the language of prayer and worship.”⁹ Selby concludes, “Regardless of the precise structure, then, the passage represents a communal expression of worship to God intended to move an audience along a spatial-temporal narrative framework from praising God for the gracious outworking of God’s plan, from God’s reordination before creation to the outpouring of God’s grace and redemption within human history, to its final consummation with the bringing of all things together ‘in heaven and on earth’ at the end of time.”¹⁰

rhetoric that is an endeavor to divide the sentence into eight periods (677–87). However, Barth, in *Ephesians 1–3*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1974), finds no criteria for establishing reconstructions of hymnic materials (100). Jack T. Sanders, in “Hymnic Elements in Ephesians 1–3,” *ZNW* 56 (1965), concludes that 1:3–14 is neither a quotation nor an insertion but rather flows smoothly into what precedes and follows (224–25). He finds no evidence of a different language or style used by Paul. He states that all attempts at “restructuring” a hymn here, i.e., at bringing rhythmic formal order to the passage, fail. Paul himself writes using this hymnic language and style. O’Brien concludes, “It is probably best to refer to the paragraph as . . . [not] a hymn. Rather, it is an ad hoc prosaic creation in which the author, by means of exalted liturgical language (some of which was possibly borrowed from early Christian worship), praises God for his glorious plan of salvation, and edifies the readers” (Peter T. O’Brien, “Ephesians I: An Unusual Introduction to a New Testament Letter,” *NTS* 25 [1979]: 509).

⁷ A. T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1990), 44. For more recent works on Ephesians that support the thesis of this paper, see Allen Verhey and Joseph S. Harvard, *Ephesians; Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville: WJK, 2011), and Stephen E. Fowl, *Ephesians: A Commentary*; NTL (Louisville: WJK, 2012).

⁸ Barth, *Ephesians*, 98. Background for the *berakah* is found in the following works: Claus Westermann, *The Praise of God in the Psalms* (London: Epworth, 1966), 87–89; J. M. Robinson, “The Historicity of Biblical Language,” in *The Old Testament and Christian Faith*, ed. Bernhard W. Anderson (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 124–58; and A. Murtonen, “The Use and Meaning of the Words *Lebarek* and *Berakah* in the Old Testament,” *VT* 9 (April 1959): 158–77. O’Brien, *Introductory*, 234, sees *berakah* as conforming more closely with the latter stages of eulogy found in the liturgically full and solemn language of some Psalms and Rabbinic literature.

⁹ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 12. See Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 41–43, for a common way to understand the pericope’s “movement of thought.”

¹⁰ Gary Selby, *Not with Wisdom of Words: Nonrational Persuasion in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 113. Selby sees the liturgy as a *berakah* (112,

However, Hendrix questions the use of *berakah* when he states, “If we refrain from mining much later rabbinic and Jewish liturgical sources for parallels to Ephesians, the rather slim evidence for early Christian adaptation of Jewish prayers and forms of worship does not compare positively with Ephesians.”¹¹ He goes on to affirm that there are no comparable sermons, speeches, prayers, or other liturgical forms comparable with Ephesians in early or contemporary Jewish literature.

Is there a comparable form? Hendrix proposes that the form of honorific monuments and inscriptions in the Graeco-Roman world is a credible alternative.¹² He states, “Formally, Ephesians reads like an honorific preamble which cites an honorand’s benefactions (in this case, those of God and Christ) followed by a resolution introduced by ‘therefore, I beseech you.’ The resolution then spells out the implications of receiving the benefactions of God.”¹³ The purpose of the declaration was to apprise the audience of its obligation to honor and pledge allegiance to one so generous.¹⁴

Whether one chooses to identify Eph 1:3–14 with the *berakah*, an honorific inscription, or a mixed form,¹⁵ the focus and function of the text is usually discerned in similar ways. Throughout the disagreements related to genre, most commentators agree with Calvin’s view: “The lofty terms in which [Paul] extols the grace of God toward the Ephesians, are intended to rouse their hearts to

114). While difficult to find consensus on the structure, Selby convincingly analyzes the text by discerning two grammatically and syntactically parallel structures (114–18).

¹¹ Hendrix, “Form,” 5.

¹² Hendrix, “Form,” 5, gives the background for honors given benefactors in the Hellenistic periods. Hendrix’s proposal would correlate with N. A. Dahl, “Ephesians” in *HBC*, ed. J. L. Mays (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 1212, who concludes that “The rhetoric of Ephesians is a variant of the demonstrative (or epideictic) genre, which was used, for example, to praise the excellence of a god, an outstanding person, a virtue, or a city and its laws.” See Fredrick J. Long, “Ephesians: Paul’s Political Theology in Greco-Roman Political Context,” in *Christian Origins in Greco-Roman Culture: Social and Literary Contexts for the New Testament*, eds. Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 273–75, for support of Hendrix’s proposals.

¹³ Hendrix, “Form,” 7.

¹⁴ Hendrix, “Form,” 7. Moral obligations of the beneficiary was a fact of life in antiquity. See also Frederick W. Danker, *Benefactor: Epigraphic Study of a Graeco-Roman and New Testament Semantic Field* (St. Louis: Clayton Pub. House, 1982). Danker, 451, states, “No document in the New Testament bears such close resemblance in its periodic style to the rhetoric of inscriptions associated with Asia Minor as does the letter to the Ephesians. Yet even the long sentence consisting of 1:3–14 is brief compared to some examples cited earlier. Formally considered, Ephesians consists substantially (1) of a preamble that rings numerous changes on the benefactions of God in connection with Jesus Christ (1:3–3:21), and (2) of a resolution that is introduced by the phrase *παρακαλῶ ὑμᾶς*, in which the oral implications of the receipt of such benefactions are given consideration.”

¹⁵ If one chooses to see the genre as a mixed form, this discernment is in keeping with current scholarship that sees much of the NT genre as borrowing, mixing, and merging various forms.

gratitude, to set them all on flame, to fill them even to overflowing with this thought."¹⁶

Yet praise is not the only function. Paul also introduces the ethical concerns he has for the readers. God's blessing has a purpose. The church is to be "holy and blameless." And through worship, the worshipper is transformed. As the adage says, "We become like that [or who] we worship." How then ought one to live in light to what God has done? Believers are to live a life of praise, thankfulness, and appreciation. The community sees the church as an image of people who live their lives in appreciation for what God has done for them. Through blameless living, Christ is attractive, thus revealing in us the attractiveness of God. As Paul says in the doxology, "Now to God who by the power at work within us . . . be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations" (3:20–21).

Ephesians 1:3–14 not only brings forth praise from the readers but also has an epistolary purpose, presenting both theological and paraenetic motifs. O'Brien states, Paul "has introduced and prefigured many important theological and paraenetic themes. His purpose: epistolary, didactic and paraenetic."¹⁷ Paul, by praising God for what God has done, both for the Jews and Gentiles, reveals God's inclusion of the Gentiles in God's plan of salvation.¹⁸ How does a congregation, especially an ethnically diverse and divided congregation, honor such a great benefactor? By living morally. Ephesians 4–6 functions formally as a resolution that sets forth the honors one is obliged to offer the benefactors God and Christ.¹⁹ Lincoln concludes, "It can be seen that in this way the eulogy fulfills the function that an introductory thanksgiving normally has in a Pauline letter, signaling or announcing in summary form much of the subject matter of the body of the letter."²⁰

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 196.

¹⁷ O'Brien, "Ephesians," 511. The moral appeal is based on our new standing in Christ. See also Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 19. Selby, *Not with Wisdom of Words*, 118, states the liturgical purpose is more than gratitude but is "persuasive, intended to transport its hearers into a symbolic *experience* of unity as a way of preparing them for the explicit doctrinal explanations and exhortations that will come later in the epistle." He later describes this paraenetic function as "mimetic" performance or representation, 119–21. In doing so, Selby agrees with Schubert's analysis in "Form and Function" by noting that the Pauline thanksgiving anticipates the themes and purposes of the rest of the letter (although Selby and Schubert are speaking of two different pericopes in Ephesians). Selby sees the performance as bringing "worshippers into a consciousness of the reality that it proclaims" (120).

¹⁸ O'Brien, "Ephesians," 516. Selby, *Not with Wisdom of Words*, 107, 124–25, asserts that the primary purpose of Ephesians is to exhort the church to embrace unity in the midst of Gentile and Jewish Christian tensions. The *berakah* itself functions to bring two groups together in liturgy to enact unity through their common praise.

¹⁹ Hendrix, "Form," 9.

²⁰ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 19. It is a seemingly false dichotomy to divide the section of 3–14 into trinitarian subsections. God is the subject of the entire section. Even the

While the text functions to carry the rhetorical weight as an introduction to the whole letter, 1:3–14 also bears its own rhetorical and theological weight. If a preacher opts too quickly to the epistolary, didactic, or paraenetic aspects, the focus, function, and form of the eulogy is overshadowed, and the homiletic diet of the church is anemic. Healthy preaching through Ephesians aspires to bear witness to 1:3–14 so that the church is formed by God's glorious praise. The eulogy functions in such a way as to appeal to the readers' experience of these blessings and to stimulate them to participate in the grateful praise of God.²¹

The focus and function of the text, therefore, revolves around the word blessing. Blessing is either given by God or to praise God (a blessing humans offer to God or to other people).²² Paul is using the same word in 1:3 to convey both senses. All eight occurrences of *blessing* in the NT are used of God.²³ *Blessing* is used in the NT exclusively for God in doxological contexts. It is used in the OT over four hundred times with the following connection: "The praising of the name of Yahweh is the most distinctive expression of the practice of religion by the congregation. The Israelite who knows that his whole life is in the hands of the Creator cannot find any better expression for his faith and gratitude and hope than by giving God the glory."²⁴

Three coordinate aspects are expressed by the preposition *év*. God is blessed for blessing the believer "in" every spiritual²⁵ blessing, "in" the heavenlies,²⁶ and "in" Christ. The whole spiritual blessing has a singular intensive meaning. God's blessing is not to be divided into parts for it is indivisible and a perfect whole.²⁷ The blessing traces the whole movement of God's redeeming grace

passive verbs contribute to the thought of God's acting for his praise. As a whole, this section functions as an honorific praising God's eternal purpose and activity on the behalf of his people. Paul's style includes repetition of words, repeated genitives, a large collection of prepositional expressions (including fifteen instances of *év*), several relative clauses, participial and infinitival constructions, and collections of synonyms, all of which have the effect of intensifying the force of the concepts he is conveying. See both, Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 12, and O'Brien, "Ephesians," 506.

²¹ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 44.

²² Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 19.

²³ O'Brien, *Introductory*, 236.

²⁴ O'Brien, *Introductory*, 755, 758.

²⁵ "Spiritual" as being derived from the Holy Spirit. See 1:13–14 and 5:19.

²⁶ "In the heavenlies" occurs five times (1:3, 20; 2:6; 3:10; and 6:12). This is the second of the adverbial phrases that modify "having blessed." It qualifies "in every spiritual blessing." "In the heavenlies" is used in a local sense, "heavenly places," which is the sphere of spiritual activities of the unseen universe lying behind the world of sense. See A. T. Lincoln, "A Re-examination of 'the Heavenlies' in Ephesians," *NTS* 19 (1973): 469. Additionally, according to J. Armitage Robinson, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians* (London: MacMillan, 1904), 21, the passage in 6:12 indicates that there are also elements in this sphere that are in disorder. It is a spiritual world above and beyond physical and a realm of divine transcendence. Blessings are in the heavenlies because Christ ascended to them.

²⁷ Barth, *Ephesians*, 78.

from its origin in the Divine mind to its final consummation. Paul begins in the eternal past with God choosing people to be in Christ “before the foundation of the world”, and he ends in the eternal future with “the redemption of God’s own possession.”²⁸

The final phrase, God “has blessed us,” is “in Christ.” Fitzmyer classifies it as a mystical genitive. It expresses close union of Christ and the Christian. It is an inclusion that connotes a symbiosis of the two.²⁹ “In Christ” is used eleven times. It is instrumental in the sense that it is through Christ’s agency and local in the sense that “Christ” is the place in whom believers are incorporated.³⁰ These are not blessings stored up in heaven for the believer to claim in the future but are benefits that belong to believers now because God in Christ has blessed them. Christians partake in these blessings because they are incorporated into the ascended Christ.³¹ Ephesians 1:4–14 expounds upon the spiritual blessing Christians have received (in the heavenlies and in Christ) as part of God’s plan and action. While rich in meaning and grand in scope, none of the blessings are explicated but function together to remind the Ephesians of their experience in Christ and to overwhelm their hearts with gratefulness. The list functions as a single rhetorical complex of God’s blessing to ignite awe in our hearts. The listing of blessings, while not exhaustive, functions as a single diamond that refracts light in an array of colors, all to God’s glorious praise.

The homiletical question remains, does the form of a text make any difference about how a text is preached? I think so, as I illustrate in the following sermonic interlude. *God’s Standing Ovation* is my example of completing the homiletical exercise I assign in my “Preaching Pauline Literature” class. The assignment explores my assertion that the text has more than one sermon possibility. Or said another way, no single sermon can carry the weight of the entire text. *God’s Standing Ovation* has a singular focus and function and does not split congregational consciousness between the single pericope’s function and the function that the text has as a prelude for the whole letter.³² The sermon

²⁸ John McNicol, “The Spiritual Blessings of the Epistle to the Ephesians,” *EvQ* 9 (1937): 65. McNicol goes on to describe six spiritual blessings in a chain: (1) election, (2) adoption, (3) reconciliation, (4) illumination, (5) assurance, and (6) foretaste. “In Him” links all these blessings together. They are not separate blessings, but different manifestations of the one great gift of God, which is Jesus Christ.

²⁹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Paul and His Theology: A Brief Sketch* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989), 90. Our union “in” Christ by blessing is theosis.

³⁰ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 21.

³¹ Lincoln, “Re-examination,” 471.

³² The function statement has a strong active verb “inspire.” A cognitive verb is not used because it begs the question of congregational response. Once the congregation “understands,” what then? How do we want the congregation to respond once they “know” about God’s blessings? “Inspire” is one option if 1:3–14 is allowed to carry its own rhetorical weight. A paraenetic sermon from 1:3–14 must have a different verb. If “and” is used and two verbs are given in the function statement, then congregational consciousness is split, lessening sermonic precision. In essence, we would have two sermons blended together, striving to accomplish multiple ends. While the two blended

focus: Our blessed God deserves all honor and praise. The sermon function: To inspire the church to stand in praise of God's glorious grace. The plotline of the sermon is scripted using three episodes, notated as E1, E2, and E3. The plotline is illustrated by seeing the flow of the first sentences of each episode. [E1] Temples have been built to honor gods; monuments have been erected to remember the exploits of people. [E2] Likewise, let us remember the Bible School teacher who also deserves all honor and praise. [E3] But the greatest benefactor of all, worthy of all praise and honor, is God. Blessed be God.

While the text's focus and function and the sermon's focus and function are comparable, the question remains for the preacher about sermon form. Does the form of the text affect the sermon's design? The following sermon interlude is scripted to mimetically represent the honorific inscription. The question remains open as to whether scripting a sermon to mimetically represent a *berakah* or another form would be different. Many of my students script the sermon imitating *berakah* by employing the poetic language of Jewish prayer or Christian eulogy scripted as stanzas interspersed with three repeating refrains, Blessed be God . . . to the praise of God's glory.³³ The sermon's function is to lift the congregation's eyes in adoration. While similar, a sermon following the form of *berakah* is different from one imitating an honorific oration in mood and voice. The stance of the preacher beside the congregation in *berakah* is either prostrate on the ground or hands lifted high. The songs surrounding the sermon are first person plural, similar to *We Praise Thee O God* or *We Will Glorify*. The stance of the preacher proclaiming an honorific oration is one facing the congregation and pointing to God. The songs associated here are third person, exhorting congregants to sing *Doxology* or *To God Be the Glory*. Additionally, in my opinion, the homiletical practice of imitating the text's form would preclude the teaching sermon that examines each of God's blessings individually, for that is not what the text does. Similarly, a paraenetic sermon based on holy and blameless is best preached from Eph 4:1–6:9. My students, influenced by class readings, do not turn in didactic or paraenetic sermons.

God's Standing Ovation: A Sermonic Interlude I

[E1] Temples have been built to honor gods; monuments have been erected to remember the exploits of people; and all small towns have some building, park, or statue named after one of their own. ACU has buildings and classrooms, endowments and chairs, all named after benefactors. We read about these benefactors on web sites, certificates, plaques, and promotional literature. Athletic stadiums change their names due to corporate benefactors. All of us find ourselves on the receiving end of the contributions of others.

sermons might work in concert (if one verb is subordinate to the other), more often the aims compete in unhelpful ways.

³³For examples of how the text as *berakah* is poetically structured, see Selby, *Not with Wisdom of Words*, 113–18, or Sanders, "Hymnic Elements," 214–32. See the second sermonic interlude for a paraenetic example.

[E2] Likewise, let us remember the Bible School teacher who also deserves all honor and praise. She steadfastly taught on Wednesday nights for the better part of thirty-five years. She taught both mothers and now daughters of many in the congregation. She taught them about the love of Jesus, the discipleship of Peter, the missionary activity of Paul. She let the faith of Abraham and the patience of Job flow out of her own life to touch every child who crossed the threshold of her classroom. Although her name will not be recorded in annals of history and no monuments will be erected in her name, the ten-dollar silver tray given to her by three generations of students extolling her graces will be cherished every day by one of God's dearest and best. As a culture, we reserve the standing ovation for such lives and such performances.

[E3] But the greatest benefactor of all, worthy of all praise and honor, is Jehovah God, Yahweh, Adonai El Shaddai. "Blessed is God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavens with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." Let us behold what God has done for us [read text].

All this God did to the praise of his glory. God deserves a standing ovation. God chose us to be holy and blameless. In love God destined us for adoption. God redeemed us. God made known to us the mystery of his will. In the fullness of time, God gathered all things in Christ. In Christ we obtained our inheritance. God marked us with the seal of the Holy Spirit. All to the praise of God's glory!

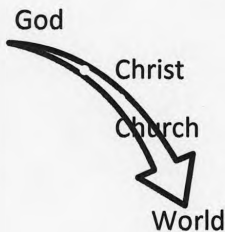
How much more could be said! We stand in ovation as God moves across the stage of history choosing God's own. And we see God move again and the applause for God waves through the crowd. God has redeemed us, God has gathered us, and God has sealed us. Blessed be to God our benefactor.

Doing Homiletical Theology: Blessed Be God Who Blesses

From my analysis of the opening pericope of Ephesians, both its form and function, I deduce the theological trajectory for preaching the rest of the letter.³⁴

³⁴ James Thompson, "Reading the Letters as Narrative," in *Narrative Reading, Narrative Preaching: Reuniting New Testament Interpretation and Proclamation*, eds. Joel Green and Michael Pasquarello (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 86–87, describes three narrational substructures for interpreting Pauline texts. The three substructures include Paul's own story, the story of the recipients of the letter, and "a grand narrative of the God of Israel." Understanding these narratives facilitates modern day readers' ability to recreate the occasion of the letter. However, in Ephesians, the occasion of the letter eludes interpreters' ability to, as Thompson encourages, "discover the convergence of these worlds" because the narrational evidence of Paul and the recipients' stories are mostly missing. (Minimal exceptions include references to their former lives as Gentiles. The argument for unity between the Jewish and Gentile Christians emerges from Paul's theological argument rather than his narration of circumstances). The missing narrational elements from Paul and the Ephesians' life leads interpreters to speculate on a multitude of possible scenarios for the occasion of Ephesians. The missing elements also contribute to Jeal's conclusion in "Rhetorical Argumentation," 312–13, that interpreters have no consensus on the letter's circumstances or purpose. Although Ephesians does not rely upon concrete elements of narration to tell its story, it does allude to aspects

My thesis: God blesses through Christ the church; therefore, the church blesses the world.³⁵ My thesis gives rise to my image of the four-tiered fountain of God. The imagine of a four-tiered fountain visualizes how God’s glory spills over into Christ and Christ’s glory pours into the church, and the church’s glory drenches the whole world. In other words, God, Christ, and the church all function as benefactors. In the analysis to follow, church leaders will be inserted in this list as the intermediary benefactor between Christ and the church.



“God blesses us with every spiritual blessing” is the major plotline in Ephesians. The plotline of our blessed God is seen as Paul prays that we may “know . . . God’s incomparably great power for us who believe” (1:19). “And God put all things under Christ’s feet and has made Christ the head over all things for the church, which is Christ’s body, the fullness of God who fills all in all” (1:22–23). Again, imagine a four-tiered fountain where God’s glory spills over into Christ and Christ’s glory pours into the church, and the church’s glory drenches the whole world. For the church to realize God’s purposes in the world, the grace God gives through Christ will be poured out to all by the power of God.

That power makes us alive in Christ by God’s grace (2:1–10). And that power makes two one flesh so that in Christ all peoples everywhere are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by the Spirit (2:11–22).³⁶ Paul reminds us that he dedicated his life to this ministry (3:1–13) so that

of God’s salvation history underlying the narrative universe of Paul. “Moreover,” Fowl, *Ephesians*, 3, notes, “this blessing also allows Paul to narrate God’s drama of salvation, a drama that was initiated before the foundation of the world and that reaches its climax as everything is brought to its proper end in Christ.” Understanding the plotline of God’s grand narrative of salvation undergirding Ephesians is key to seeing Paul’s theology then and now.

³⁵ The church pouring forth from God’s fountain for the sake of the world is not explicit in Ephesians but implicit in 4:1 (our worthy calling) and the ethical exhortations of 4:17–6:9.

³⁶ Jeal, “Rhetorical Argumentation,” 310, 320–21, notes, that Eph 2 contains two anamnesis sections that makes an argument from pathos to remind the readers of “their pre-Christian past and their present by means of a ‘then/now,’ structure.” Jeal provides several examples of how the argumentation from pathos increases identification to spur

through the church the manifold wisdom of God should be made known.³⁷ Paul therefore prays that we may apprehend God's power so that in the church God is glorified (3:14–20).

In Eph 4:7 my thesis is plainly supported when Paul states, "Each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift." Just as God "has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places," so too Christ is the benefactor of gifts to the body of Christ for a purpose.³⁸ At this point in the letter, Paul has already asserted the place of Christ in the heavenly realms. Exalting Christ above all things, God appointed Christ as head over everything (1:20–22). Now, in this position of authority, Christ shows care and concern for his people by giving gifts to his church. Christ blesses his body with individuals gifted to lead. Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers are individuals who become benefactors by equipping God's people. They too impart blessings. They supply what is needed so that every member and thus the whole body may be spiritually mature.³⁹ When preached, my thesis about benefactors (God, Christ, church leaders, church) is a theological performance.

Having ascended higher than the heavens, Christ gives leaders to his church for a particular reason. Leaders accomplish the immediate purpose of equipping the saints and the ultimate goal of promoting the church's growth to maturity.⁴⁰ Ephesians describes God's glorious vision for the church and how

the Ephesians toward growth, maturity, unity, and ethical actions. Similarly, note especially Jeal's discussion of household language (321–22).

³⁷ "Ephesians shifts the playing field. The focus of the mystery is not the cosmic Christ of Colossians but the body of Christ, the church. The problem is not how Gentiles can participate in God's salvation while remaining free from the law. Instead, Ephesians identifies the problem as one of unity. The series of 'with' or 'co' terms in 3:6 makes this point about the church: The Gentiles are 'heirs with' (συγκληρονόμα), 'body with' (σῶσσωμα), and 'shares' (συμμέτοχα) of the promise in Christ through the gospel.' This perspective makes it quite natural for Ephesians to speak of the union of Christ, the head, with his body, the church, as a 'mystery' (Eph 5:32)." PHEME PERKINS, *Ephesians, NIB* 11 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 358.

³⁸ Ephesians 4:8–10 is a single sentence functioning as a peshet on Ps 68:19. As peshet the sentence is an interpretation of Psalms by referring to events connected to the past, present, and future. Using Phil 2:6–11 as a guide, Christ's descent refers to the incarnation. In Christ's triumphant ascension, Christ led captive his vanquished foes of sin and death and gave gifts to the church. To accomplish such a monumental task, Christ gave gifts for the equipping and building of the body. These gifts that Christ gives to the church enables the church to continue the victorious march over sin and death.

³⁹ Jeal, "Rhetorical Argument," 315. Jeal collects all the purpose clauses throughout Ephesians to conclude that maturity of the church was Paul's primary aim and cannot be differentiated from Paul's exhortation that the Ephesians be gathered together as a united community. See also Charles H. Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 16–17.

⁴⁰ Comparison with other Pauline passages describing giftedness highlights this corporate focus of Eph 4:11–16. While the author of both Rom 12 and 1 Cor 12 addresses unity, he places primary emphasis on diversity in order to establish the significance of each individual member's contribution to the body. However, Eph 4 serves a

God empowers the church to accomplish God's intent. Therefore, we are called as the church to walk the worthy life. We are called as a church to continue the path of growth and maturity. God calls the church to participate in God's new community of salvation, unity, and peace.⁴¹ Our identity formation is found in joining God's plan of what God is doing in Jesus Christ and in the church for the sake of the world. For the church to realize God's purposes in the world, the grace God gives through Christ will be poured out to all. Thus we not only applaud what God has done for us in Christ; we are called to join God in God's work by walking a worthy life.

The leaders listed in Ephesians serve the church on behalf of Christ for the sole reason to equip and build up his body. For this reason, Paul utilizes both body and building metaphors throughout the letter. These images accomplish more than simply describing the church; they point to Christ. In each case Paul uses the imagery to portray the relationship between Christ and the church. Paul's first mention of the church as a body, in Eph 1:23, ties directly to Paul's claim of Christ as the head. Then, as Paul shifts to the picture of a building in Eph 2:20–22, he again asserts Christ's identity as the chief cornerstone. Just as Christ has joined and built together the church, also the leaders are called to do likewise.

From his position of power and prominence, then, Christ gives leaders to his church for the purpose of maturing the body. As indicated by Eph 4:14, the church faces pressures that threaten to inhibit its growth and development primarily because of the ethnic tensions that exist between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Christ provides leaders for exactly this situation. Leaders recognize the goal of their giftedness, specifically to facilitate the growth and unity of the body into the fullness of the head.

Willingly, they dedicate themselves to teaching, training, proclaiming, paring, serving, and building the community of faith; selflessly, they give of themselves so that the church might grow fully into the whole measure of Christ. Furthermore, even in the face of threatening pressures, rather than instill dread or panic, these leaders mature the body by cultivating an environment of love. Such dedication, therefore, fulfills Christ's intent in giving the gift of leaders to his church.

We not only applaud what God has done for us in Christ; we partner with God in God's work. So again, "We speak of God's being in and through God's action."⁴² God is a minister as seen by what God does. God blesses. By blessing, God demonstrates a pastor's heart. God as pastor informs and shapes what it means to serve as a leader in God's church. Leaders join God's action of blessing through the church for the blessing of the world. God equips, overflows his blessings to us because, as noted earlier, God is a minister. As Rood states, "It's

different purpose. As Eph 4:7 indicates, Paul sees the diversity of Christ's gifts, but in Eph 4:11–16 this diversity fades into the backdrop of unity.

⁴¹ Jeal, "Rhetorical Argumentation," 316.

⁴² Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, 169.

possible that the act of ministry can do this because it correlates with God's own being. . . . [Ministry] constitutes the fullness of God. In other words, what makes God God is the action of ministry. These actions reveal the very being of God. Even over and against the closed spin of the secular, the pastor is never far from divine action if the focus is on ministry."⁴³

The paraenesis of Ephesians calls us, the church, to walk the worthy life holy and blameless (1:4; 4:1) as a gathered⁴⁴ people of God (4:1–6). To summarize Eph 4:7–16, Christ has given the church gifts and abilities to leaders so that when those gifts are properly used it will lead to growth and unity. Leaders equip the body of Christ for works of service (4:7–12a). Works of service by the body of Christ produces spiritual growth (4:12b–13). Spiritual growth in the body of Christ results in unity (4:14–16). Ministry is to be carried out on all fronts until the church reaches unity. The unity of the church that God establishes by the blood of Christ is to be both attained and maintained by the body of Christ.

Ephesians describes God's glorious vision for the united church and how God empowers the church to accomplish God's intent. Therefore, the rest of the story is found in Eph 4:17– 6:9, where Paul gives concrete paraenetic ways the church will act in the world. Ephesians 5:1 functions as a focal point to the paraenesis by calling the church to imitate God. "We speak of God's being in and through God's action."⁴⁵ Leaders and ministers will know their being as it is expressed by way of imitation through their actions by blessing the church. The church will know its being as it is expressed by way of imitation through its actions by blessing the world.

My second sermonic interlude, "Ministering with a Purpose," is designed to illustrate the second purpose of the paper, namely, doing homiletical theology. Theology and exegesis do not simply inform the sermon, but the sermon itself performs a theological act. God is a benefactor of spiritual blessings to the church. Christ is a benefactor of gifts to the church. Church leaders are benefactors of equipping to the church. Therefore, the mature and unified church is a benefactor for the world. The preaching of benefactor as the four-fold fountain of God is a theological assertion. The sermon focus: God in Christ blesses the church with the gift of leaders in order for the church to live into its worthy calling. The sermon function: To exhort the unified church to reach its maturity by receiving blessing and therefore giving blessing. The form of the text is paraenesis.⁴⁶ The plotline of the sermon is scripted using five episodes

⁴³ Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, 174.

⁴⁴ See 1:10 NRSV. As God has gathered all things, so too do leaders gather together the congregation in order to maintain the unity.

⁴⁵ Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, 169.

⁴⁶ The sermon script here seeks to imitate a paraenetic style of an extended exhortation connected to παρακαλῶ of 4:1 and the "we must" statements of 4:14–15. Episodes are developed using argument, image, and story. E4 is a longer episode than the others because it carries the weight of the extended argument in the text. See Tim Sensing,

notated as E1, E2, E3, E4, and E5. The plotline is illustrated by seeing the flow of the first sentences of each episode. [E1] What is the good life? Down deep, we all want to be happy. We desperately seek fulfillment. [E2] Our longing for fulfillment is not unique. There was something lacking also within the community at Ephesus. [E3] So what now? Now that we are made alive in Christ by God's resurrection power, how do we mature into that full and flourishing life as God's united community? [E4] You see, our hands are full of God's gracious blessings. [E5] What is the good life? Look around you. See the fullness of God, blessed by Christ, in every face that has gathered here in order to bring honor and glory to God as you fulfill your worthy calling.

Ministering with a Purpose: A Sermonic Interlude II

But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. It is said, "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people." (When it says, "He ascended," what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens so that he might fill all things.) The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love (4:7–16).

[E1] What is the good life? Down deep, we all want to be happy. We desperately seek fulfillment.⁴⁷ As US citizens we are guaranteed the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Our deep desires for peace, contentment, blissful nirvana are connected to our longing for a return to the land of Eden. People seek fulfillment in a thousand and one places. We all know the list. The bulleted points are imprinted on our own hearts. Like the short man trying to hammer a nail into a rafter by standing on a chair that is propped up on a box that is placed on a bucket, he finds out quickly he cannot hit it very hard with a foundation such as that. At the end of the day, all our pursuits come crashing to the floor. Or in the bleakest terms possible, Paul says we are dead (2:1–3). Deep down we want to be happy, but there is something lacking, incomplete, and empty.

Muslims crave salaam. Hindus seek the universal brahman, the ultimate experience of unity and wholeness. Buddhists aspire to the peaceful quiet of nirvana. Taoists

"Toward a Definition of Paraenesis," *ResQ* 38 (1996): 145–58; "A Strategy for Preaching Paraenesis." *ResQ* 38 (1996): 207–18.

⁴⁷ The idea of the lack of the good life and seeking fulfillment connects to Paul's call to maturity. While not explored in depth in this paper, being mature in Christ is connected to Paul's language of the church being filled with the fullness of God.

suggest that we should wisely surrender to the unstoppable flow of yin and yang in the tao. Everywhere human beings show their brokenness and reveal their longing for peace. The world is not right. Things are not as they should be. Shalom has been dashed into a thousand pieces and in a thousand ways. Yet it has left a sweet residue on the wrecked fragments of our world. Like an aroma that invokes a vivid recollection from childhood, we sense the memory of peace, and we long to get it back somehow. We crave good relationships with one other, with our world, and with our God.⁴⁸

[E2] Our longing for fulfillment is not unique. There was something lacking also within the community at Ephesus. For Paul, our good life, being filled to the brim, comes from God blessing us with every spiritual blessing that includes making us alive in Christ (2:4). Our full life in God is because God has filled us with fullness (1:23) or as our text here says, “to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” Our lives are continually transformed into God’s fullness by imitating God in Christ. Paul centers his exhortations to the Ephesians by saying, “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (5:1–2). A full and flourishing life is formed by becoming like Christ. Paul is calling the church, those blessed and called of God to be holy and blameless. Therefore, Paul exhorts the church, “to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (4:1–3).⁴⁹ Our longings for fulfillment are not unique; and just as God has blessed the church at Ephesus, God blesses us with every spiritual blessing.

[E3] So what now? Now that we are made alive in Christ by God’s resurrection power, how do we mature into that full and flourishing life as God’s united community? While Paul will give concrete ethical examples later, he first establishes that the church is God’s location for becoming what God has called us to be. God does not leave us empty-handed. God supplies the church with every spiritual blessing (1:3) with the power of the resurrection (1:19) so that the church will be equipped to live such lives that God is glorified in every way. Then Paul says, [E]ach of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift (4:7).

In describing how God has equipped the church, Paul takes the reader back to Psalm 68. Let’s go back in time and picture King David arriving back to

⁴⁸ Jeff Childers and Fred Aquino, *Unveiling Glory: Visions of Christ’s Transforming Presence* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2003), 8.

⁴⁹ James Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry according to Paul: A Biblical Vision* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 19–20, concludes that “A very consistent understanding of ministry emerges in all of the letters, allowing us to define it in precise terms: ministry is participation in God’s work of transforming the community of faith until it is ‘blameless’ at the coming of Christ.” Thompson identifies “blameless” as a key word for a Pauline understanding of a fully formed person, one who is morally transformed. See *Moral Formation*, 3–4, 185–86.

Jerusalem after victorious battle over the Philistines. David, with one fatal shot from his sling, toppled the mighty Goliath. [T]he women came out from all the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with tambourines and lutes. As they danced, they sang: ‘Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands’ (1 Sam. 18:6–7). Gifts would be given to David to honor him as the triumphant warrior. The procession would proceed down the streets of Jerusalem to the palace of the king. Celebration overflowed into every home. David would lead a host of captives as a sign of victory. It is with that imagery Paul describes the church.

For the church, Christ’s kingship is different from David’s. [Read Eph 4:7–12a] In Christ’s triumphant ascension, he led captive his vanquished foes of sin and death and gave gifts to the church. To accomplish such a monumental task, Christ gave gifts for the equipping and building of the body. These gifts that Christ gives the church enable the church to continue the victorious march over sin and death. Christ’s gifts enable the church to fulfill its highest calling. Christ’s gifts to the church empower the church to live a flourishing and abundant life. You know what church Paul is talking about?⁵⁰ Look around. Paul is talking about us and we are not left empty-handed.

[E4] You see, our hands are full of God’s gracious blessings. First, Christ’s grace equips the church, equips us, for works of service. Christ has given the church gifts of leaders so that, when those gifts are properly used, it will lead to our growth and unity. Apostles and prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers are themselves the gifts Christ has given to prepare us. Our shepherds here are the equippers of the saints. They supply us with what is needed so that every member here may be spiritually fit.

Do evangelists, pastors, and teachers have three roles: to equip the saints to do the work, to build the body? No! But to bring us, the saints, to maturity so we can do the work of ministry that results in the building up of our body so that God is glorified in the world. A famous line is attributed to Bud Wilkerson the legendary coach of Oklahoma football: “What contribution does professional sports make to the physical fitness of Americans? Very little. A professional football game is a happening where fifty thousand spectators, desperately needing exercise, sit in the stands watching twenty-two men on the field, desperately needing rest.” Not so with a grace-equipped church. To use Wilkerson’s numbers the church is a place where twenty-two leaders are serving fifty thousand saints in the exercise of ministry. Or in our case, we are a church with three shepherds partnering with a preacher for our equipping in order to impact our community with the love of God.

What if you own a toolbox with just one screwdriver? Different size screws require different screw drivers. Sometimes you need a Phillips screwdriver, and a flathead screwdriver just will not do. Have you ever tried to turn a screw with

⁵⁰ For the remainder of the sermon, imitating Paul’s own style, I alternate between the inclusive nature of the church experienced by us (we) and the paraenetic calling of “you” (plural).

a pair of scissors? You can do it, but it is not very productive. As a congregation, you need to be one of those mechanic toolboxes that takes up the whole page of a catalogue. Know that you are a specialized tool for a particular purpose. Be a tool employed for God's service, and together we all will be the whole toolbox available for the master mechanic.

Subsequently, the works of service performed by you, the church, produces spiritual growth (Eph. 4:12b–13). For the church to perform works of service, everyone is needed—you are needed. You are interdependent upon one another. Each is needed to supply what is lacking so that the body will be built up. Each part is vital. If you were to hurt your wrist to such an extent that it throbbed with pain, the whole body would stay up the whole night trying to find relief for the one part. While it is common to emphasize how we all contribute to the whole, Paul is emphasizing how as a whole, unified, we can accomplish more together than any of us can accomplish alone.

Therefore, your spiritual growth results in unity, fullness, and maturity (4:14–16). Imagine the crew of a Coast Guard vessel sent into the sea on a treacherous rescue mission. When the crew of that ship is doing its work, properly trained, focused on the course, working together, then the ship can sail to its destination. The crew consists of a captain, first mate, engineer, navigator, helmsman, maintenance personnel, and a cook, all functioning as they were trained. Otherwise, that crew will be tossed about. If the crew is not lost at sea, it will return to base, the mission unaccomplished, with its folly evident to all. Not so with a united crew. Such a crew is woven together as a seamless fabric all working together so that the tapestry of the rescue is seen in its full glory. The equipped and unified crew will accomplish its task.

The church has a master weaver who has blessed us in every spiritual blessing. Christ is now the giver of gifts, being both the source of growth and the standard of growth. Being in Christ, we together are to grow into God's fullness so that we accomplish our calling.

[E5] What is the good life? Look around you. See the fullness of God, blessed by Christ, in every face that has gathered here in order to bring honor and glory to God as you fulfill your worthy calling. You are the blessing of God in Christ intended to bless the world. Out of your overflowing fullness of God, drench others with God's blessings. God blessed the church, igniting our purpose for ministry. As God pours forth God's essence into Christ, Christ pours forth blessing into the church, so that the unified, holy, blameless, and mature body of Christ will pour forth blessing for the sake of the world. This is the four-fold fountain of God in Ephesians "to the praise of God's glory." Paul still speaks and says to you, "Live out your calling." God has blessed you in order for you then, out of your fullness and as the united body of Christ, to bless others.

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