

T. Austin-Sparks:

We shall not get very far into the practical meaning and import of this great unveiling until we have the key in our hand. Once we have that key everything will be explained as to its purpose and value. Strangely enough, that key is in the form of a small prefix which—unfortunately—does not appear in our translations. It occurs twice in “Ephesians” (in major connections); four times in “Colossians”; once in “Philippians”; in both letters to Timothy; and in “Hebrews” (whether Paul actually wrote “Hebrews” is not discussed, but we have no hesitation in saying that his influence and conception are definitely in it). In our translation we have the word knowledge in Ephesians 1:17 and 4:13; in Colossians 1:6,9,10; 3:10; and in Philippians 1:9. But in these and the other letters mentioned the word (in the Greek) has the little prefix epi. Epi means “full,” and while “to know” occurs alone in many places in the New Testament, it means—usually—the beginning of knowledge, such as “This is life eternal, that they should know Thee the only true God, and Him Whom Thou didst send, Jesus Christ” (John 17:3). But when we have moved on from the beginning and are come to the more mature state as in Paul’s later Letters, that which is set before us is “Full Knowledge” (Epi-gnosis). What Paul prays for therefore in Ephesians 1:17 is that believers who have already advanced in knowledge may still come to full knowledge. That is the word of maturity. This then is the key to all that is presented here, and what is presented is that which constitutes full knowledge. All that we will add until later is that this knowledge, or full knowledge, is not mental, intellectual, academic, obtained by reading, study, hearing (although it might come through such), but, as Paul emphasizes, it is by revelation of the Holy Spirit. For us now, since the Scriptures were completed, revelation is not something extra to the Scriptures, but revelation or illumination as to what is in the Scriptures; and that is inexhaustible. Back to that later.

Let us note some of the

Major Features of the Ultimate Disclosure

As to how the Apostle came by the full knowledge which he had, we can only say two things which are made known. One was the more general, “a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the full-knowledge of Him, the eyes of your heart being enlightened...” etc. That is the birthright of every believer, but it belongs to obedience to all truth or light already given. It is what John refers to: “the anointing which ye received... teacheth you concerning all things” (1 John 2:27). But, in Paul’s case, because of his special “stewardship” he was given special revelations, as when he was caught up (in vision, dream or trance) into the third heaven and heard unspeakable things (2 Cor. 12). If we follow this illumined and inspired mind of the Apostle, we shall be led into and through “ages” from eternity past to eternity yet to be. We shall be given a glimpse of what took place in each of these eras, and what the characteristic of each was, is, and will be.

There are four of these eras referred to:

1. “Before times eternal”;
2. from creation to Christ—the Old Testament era;
3. from the Incarnation to the consummation of the age;
4. “the age of the ages.”

Between 1 and 2 there is an event which has affected the whole course and character of things from 1 to 3, as we shall see.

Before Times Eternal

It is to be noted that the Apostle had barely begun this Letter (to the “Ephesians”) and opened the flood-gate of this pent-up revelation, than he carried his readers away back past all time and landed them in what he called “before the foundation of the world.” It is language which he used more than once: “before times eternal” (2 Tim. 1:9; Titus 1:2). Having taken that long flight back over centuries and millennia, he intimated what in that dateless past took place. Two things are indicated and stated. In the counsels of the Godhead, the Son of God was designated and appointed the eternal Sphere of all that would be of God. “In Him” is the definition (Eph. 1:4). Two hundred times the Apostle uses that term in varying forms in his writings. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews states the same thing in precise words: “Whom He appointed heir of all things” (Heb. 1:2). This is not knowledge exclusively Paul’s. Both John and Peter speak of the same thing as to the eternal position of the Son of God. But Paul unfolds so much more of that designation. There, then, first in the “before times eternal”, the Son of God—now given the name which became His so long after, “Our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph. 1:3)—was determined the inclusive realm of all that which would belong to God. As a race would be “in

Adam” (1 Cor. 15:22); as a nation would be in the single seed of Abraham (Rom. 4:13, etc.); and as the harvest is in the single grain of wheat, so the Son of God would be the content of all that which would eventually be of God. So the Apostle links with the Person the persons: “He chose us in Him.” This was in the Divine deliberations. We are not unfamiliar with this concept. Jesus Himself made reference to it: “for the elect’s sake...,” “...so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect” (Matt. 24:22,24; ASV). “Shall not God avenge His elect...?” (Luke 18:7), etc. Peter also uses the term (1 Pet. 1:1). In those eternal counsels there was determined and secured a “people,” a “body,” a “nation,” which just had to be to justify the appointment of the Son. No, we are not going to launch into a discussion of “predestination” or “foreordination.” All that we will say just at this point is that two things govern this matter of the Divine election. One is that it is corporate; it is a “Body” and, just as a physical body was prepared for God’s Son in incarnation—“a body didst Thou prepare for Me” (Heb. 10:5)—so a corporate “Body” was prepared for Him. It was as essential as it is for a spirit to have a body for all practical purposes. (More on this later.) The other governing thing is that this election is not to salvation, willy nilly, but to purpose. This is fundamental to this whole Letter to the “Ephesians.” See how large and powerful a place the “eternal purpose” has in Paul’s mind and writings. It is that “purpose” that determines so much in God’s ways! The exhortations, the admonitions, the encouragements, the warnings, the entreaties, are all related to “His purpose” in salvation. How vastly much there is bound up with that drawing aside of the veil upon those eternal counsels! Out of them come the deliberations and activities of God: “Who worketh all things after the counsel of His will,” “according to the good pleasure of His will” (Eph. 1:11,5, etc.). See also Romans 8:28–30.

We must, however, remember that there is one absolutely pre-eminent and predominant matter which determines everything and from which and to which all things are related. This is the one thing which explains everything which is in this Letter and all Scripture. It is the place of God’s Son. That indeed does explain the Calling, the Conduct and the Conflict. This, then, in and from eternity past, stands over all time and eternity to be; affecting, determining, governing “all things.” To substantiate this it is only necessary to pass an eye through this Letter and to note how often the Lord Jesus is actually mentioned. His personal name is mentioned some forty-four times, in addition to which note the many pronouns—“He,” “Him,” “His” and “Whom.”

It has often been said that the criterion by which truth or error in any system of religious teaching is determined is the place that it gives to the Son of God, Jesus Christ. That is a very sound criterion.