

New Testament wisdom literature (Ephesians 3:14–21)

Ephesians makes a case for theological reflection on the mysteries of life.

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The familiar lines from Ephesians featured this week remind me that, like many other Christians, I'm not always sure what to do with good ol' Apostle Paul.

At one level, I read these lines and feel my heart growing bigger: Jesus is at work to help us accomplish more than we can ask or imagine. I can also see the meaning of these words as I watch our backyard garden become lush and colorful in the rich soil while I read of Paul's hope that as Christ is dwelling in our hearts, we feel ourselves rooted and grounded in love.

Yes, Paul's prayer is thick with encouragement. But this is also the epistle whose household codes (5:22–6:9) have been a thorny topic in many Christian communities, which is part of the reason I'm not always sure what to do with it.

In his commentary on Ephesians, Tom Yoder Neufeld contends that this letter is an example of the biblical wisdom tradition in several ways—ways, I would add, that we often overlook. In contrast to biblical prophecy's pattern of speaking God's words in a concrete situation, biblical wisdom literature brings into focus Judaism's reflective side—along with deep curiosity about how our Creator-God creates.

For example, the concern with lifestyle choices admonishes us to “be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise” (5:15). There is also the letter's christology, reflecting the wisdom tradition through descriptions of Christ Jesus as

God's reconciling and recreating agent. Then there is Ephesians 3:14–19, which Yoder Neufeld deems a dramatic example of Paul's value of wisdom and insight. Paul is praying for the Ephesians, and by extension us, so that we might comprehend how God's love is actually beyond knowledge — we need to know what it is we can't know.

When I was a new seminary student, I once heard a professor of mission and evangelism explain that what sets Christianity apart from other world religions, and makes it more than a religion, is the fact that while other religions involve a process of gaining knowledge, to be Christian all one needs is faith—no (or very little) brain power needed. It took me a bit of time to figure out why I disagree with what this professor had to say. Not only do I think he was mischaracterizing other faith and religious traditions, I also think his comments shortchange Christianity itself.

By pointing out how aspects of the Jewish wisdom tradition show up in a New Testament text like Ephesians, commentators like Yoder Neufeld remind us that Christian living is about taking time to integrate our experience of being in the world as much as it is about making a particular profession of faith. I often tell people the academic study of Christianity has made me a better Christian, or at least a more pious one. As I have learned about the Bible, as I have paid attention to the varieties of Christian expression that have shown up around the planet, and as I have listened to people share deeply about how they are growing in God, I have come to understand—to comprehend—that Christianity is both spoken and silent, both word and wisdom, both knowledge and faith.

So if in these verses Paul is making a case for theological reflection on the mysteries of life, then I can join him in fathoming the unfathomable. After all, it is good to love God with our minds, too.