



ETB: Ephesians 4:11-16

# *EVERY WIND OF DOCTRINE*

*BY BENNIE R. CROCKETT, JR.*

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“**C**HILDREN, TOSSED to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4:14, KJV) remains one of the most memorable translations of any text from Paul. For almost 500 years, major English Bibles from the William Tyndale Bible through the English Standard Version have included the phrase.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the Greek word translated “doctrine” in this verse (*didaskalia*) also refers to “teaching” as shown in the NIV, HCSB, and CSB translations with “every wind of teaching.”<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, Paul used *didaskalia* for the content of sound Christian teaching.<sup>3</sup>

“Every wind of doctrine” could have referred to deceitful doctrines proposed about Jesus’ identity or to prominent non-Christian teachings in Ephesus and western Asia Minor. Either way, alternative, deceptive, and distracting teachings threatened the Ephesians’ maturity in the fullness of Christ.

### Christianity in One Sentence

The Greek text of Ephesians 4:11-16 is one sentence of 124 words<sup>4</sup> in which Paul affirmed God’s gift of various people to equip believers for the work of ministry or service. Foundational for that collective ministry, however, is “unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God’s Son” so that believers would “no longer be little children, tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching” (vv. 13,14).<sup>5</sup>

With unity both in faith and in the knowledge of God’s Son, believers should “grow in every way into him who is the head—Christ” (v. 15).

Despite the clarity of Christianity’s essence in verses 11-16, identifying the content of “every wind of teaching” is difficult. Clues from ancient Ephesus and western Asia Minor illustrate the Ephesian Christians’ background worldview that possibly contributed to the development of “every wind of doctrine.” What was that background?

### Epicenter of Early Christianity

In the early church’s missionary expansion, Ephesus became a central city. Paul spent three years teaching and preaching to both Jews and Greeks in Ephesus and western Asia Minor (Acts 19:10,26; 20:31).

While in Ephesus, Paul encountered both Jewish magic and Greco-Roman polytheistic paganism at its height. Many who became believing Christians had previously practiced magic with spells recorded in their magic books (19:18-19). Ancient Greek texts have survived revealing varied pronunciations for God’s name “Yahweh.”<sup>6</sup> By comparison, the sons of Sceva believed that Jesus’ name had magical powers if invoked in a particular manner (vv. 13-14).

Others—possibly Gentiles—involved in magic in Ephesus, confessed faith in Christ, gave up their

magic, and publicly burned their magic books, which likely contained spells (v. 19). Along with pagan Plutarch (AD 100), Christian Clement of Alexandria (AD 200) referenced the “Ephesian Letters” (pagan magical formulas).<sup>7</sup> Plutarch used the Greek word *periergos* (“magic,” Acts 19:19) for magical ceremonies associated with the orgiastic cult of Dionysus, which Thracian women practiced in northeastern Greece (Eph. 4:19).<sup>8</sup>

As a major imperial city, Ephesus boasted Greek and Roman pagan cults. Most famous, however, was the cult of Artemis (Acts 19:23-37; Latin “Diana” in the KJV), the pagan goddess of hunting and protector of young girls. The Ephesian Temple to Artemis was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, and Artemis became known as a mother goddess. Idols of Artemis have been discovered throughout the ancient Roman Empire.

### Warnings to Ephesus

By the time Paul left Asia Minor in the mid-50s, the Ephesian church had developed a leadership structure with “elders” (*presbyteros*, Acts 20:17) and “overseers” (*episkopos*, v. 28). Paul wrote to churches in western Asia Minor, to the Ephesians, to the Colossians (100 miles east of Ephesus); plus he had personal knowledge of believers in Laodicea (80 miles east of Ephesus; Col. 4:15-16).

At Ephesus, a lone column is all that remains at the Temple of Artemis. The temple was built and rebuilt several times. Croesus, the Lydian king of Sardis, began the most impressive reconstruction in 560 BC. The marble Ionic temple, which measured 425 x 230 feet, stood until the end of the 3rd cent. AD.

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Additionally, Philemon may have been part of the Colossian church (Col. 4:9-10,14,17; Philem. 1-2,10,23).

Paul warned the Ephesian leaders that “savage wolves” would appear in the church and rise up to “distort the truth” (Acts 20:29,30). Possibly, that distortion relates to “every wind of teaching.” By the time Paul wrote to Timothy, false teachers in Ephesus had begun to debate “myths and endless genealogies” (1 Tim. 1:4; see 4:7; 2 Tim. 4:4; Titus 1:14), but Paul encouraged Timothy to avoid “irreverent and empty speech and contradictions from what is falsely called knowledge” (1 Tim. 6:20).

### Pagan Idols and Deities

In addition to the “great Artemis” idol (Acts 19:35) and the excess of imperial polytheistic shrines, non-Christians also asserted the emperors’ divinity in Asia Minor. On inscriptions, Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1) received the title “son of god” in Pergamum (110 miles north of Ephesus), Priene (33 miles

south of Ephesus), on the island of Cos (120 miles south of Ephesus), and in Paul’s hometown of Tarsus.<sup>9</sup>

Revelation 2:6 and 15 indicate that Nicolaitans were in both Ephesus and Pergamum toward the end of the first century AD. The Nicolaitans apparently practiced the worship of idols along with sexual immorality (Rev. 2:14-15). Around AD 185, Irenaeus of Lyons (modern-day Lyon, France) remarked that the Nicolaitans practiced “unrestrained indulgence.”<sup>10</sup>

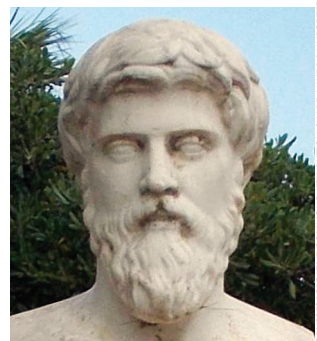
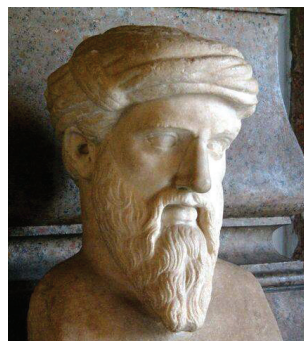
Pagans who became Christians likely brought their divided polytheistic loyalties into the church, which

provoked Paul to encourage the Ephesians toward unity (Eph. 4:1-6,13). Such divisiveness contributed to the growing Gnosticism of the late first and second centuries. Ignatius of Antioch (AD 35-107) also encouraged unity in the churches of Asia Minor.<sup>11</sup>

Early adherents of Gnosticism claimed special godly knowledge (1 Cor. 8:1-7; 1 John 2:4), and others claimed that Jesus only *appeared* to be a human (1 John 4:2-3; 2 John 7).<sup>12</sup> People in nearby Colossae seemingly had similar ideas calling forth Paul’s striking remark that “God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him” (Col. 1:19).

**Right: Bust of Pythagoras, the Greek mathematician and philosopher.**

**Far right: Bust of Plutarch at his hometown of Chaeronea, Greece. A Greek philosopher and priest at Delphi, Plutarch lived about AD 46–120.**



**Ruins of the northern agora at Miletus, which was a center for Greek philosophy and scientific thought. Perhaps the best-**

**known philosopher from Miletus was Thales (ca. 624–546 BC), who is considered to be the father of modern philosophy.**







**Above:** Gnostic seal that depicts the god Horus surrounded by animals. Horus was the Egyptian god of the sky, war, and hunting.

**Upper right:** At Laodicea, the archways in the top tier of the smaller of two theaters in the city.

**Lower right:** This Jewish incantation bowl has an Aramaic script that asks for protection for a particular man. People had superstitious beliefs about these bowls. A protective spell was written on the inside of each bowl, which was then buried upside down. This action had two purposes: the spell supposedly would ward off evil spirits, and the bowl served as a trap for any demons that came near.



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disunity and lack of knowledge of Jesus, God's Son. 6

## Other Winds of Teaching

Added to the religious confusion, Ephesus and western Asia Minor were the locus of classical Greek philosophy's birth. In the sixth century BC, philosophers in Miletus (45 miles south of Ephesus; Acts 20:15,17) speculated about the content of the material world's primary substance. For instance, Thales suggested water with a world full of deities;<sup>13</sup> Anaximenes, air;<sup>14</sup> and Anaximander, that which is unlimited.<sup>15</sup>

These early speculations preceded Heraclitus, the Greek philosopher of Ephesus (wrote around 500 BC), who attempted to explain change. Heraclitus famously remarked once, "One cannot step into the same river twice."<sup>16</sup> He went on to affirm that fire was the primary substance while arguing that *logos* ("Reason" or "Law") is that which exists and holds all reality into pantheistic unity. Heraclitus's doctrine of *logos* stands in contrast to John 1:1-5—also of likely Ephesian origin, though 600 years later—wherein John identified the *logos* as the Word who was God, who created the universe, and who became flesh

and revealed the Father (John 1:14,18; 5:17-20; 10:32-38; 14:9).

Other ancient teachers with connection to Ephesus included Pythagoras of Samos (6th cent. BC; Acts 20:15) who argued that numbers were the essence of reality<sup>17</sup> and Anaxagoras of Clazomenae (5th cent. BC) who argued that *nous* ("mind") gave order to reality.<sup>18</sup> Paul, however, used *nous* to remind the Ephesians that they should "be renewed in the spirit of your *minds*" (Eph. 4:17,23, emphasis added; Rom. 12:2).

## Maturity in Christ's Fullness

Ephesians 4:11-16 reveals that early believers could stray from church unity and the knowledge of God's Son. Roman polytheism and early forms of Gnosticism potentially overflowed into divisions within the Ephesian church, and the fullness of Jesus' identity as God's only Son faced continual challenges from these sources. Paul, however, affirmed that Christian growth into the head—Christ—prevents "every wind of doctrine" that contributes to church

1. See the following translations: William Tyndale (1526, 1534), Myles Coverdale (1535), Geneva Bible (1560), Bishops' Bible (1568), King James Bible (1611), English Revised Version (1881), American Standard Version (1901), Revised Standard Version (1946, 1971), New American Standard Bible (1971, 1995), and New Revised Standard Version (1989).

2. See the following translations: Good News Bible (1966, 1992), New International Version (1973, 2011), Holman Christian Standard Bible (1999, 2009), and Christian Standard Bible (CSB, 2017). Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from the CSB.

3. See Rom. 12:7; 1 Tim. 1:10; 4:6,13,16; 5:17; 6:1,3; 2 Tim. 3:10,16; 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1,7,10.

4. *Novum Testamentum Graeca*, Nestle-Aland, 28th rev. ed., Barbara and Kurt Aland, et al. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012), 596-97.

5. For similar language, see James 1:6; Jude 12-13.

6. See G. Adolf Deissmann, "Greek Transcriptions of the Tetragrammaton," in *Bible Studies*, trans. Alexander Grieve, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1903), 321-36.

7. Plutarch, *Moralia*, Table Talk 7.4; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 5.8.

8. Plutarch, *Alexander* 2.5.

9. Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, trans. Lionel R. M. Strachan, 2nd ed. (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1909), 350-51; W. R. Paton and E. L. Hicks, *The Inscriptions of Cos* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1891), 131.

10. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.26.3, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (1885; Reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 352.

11. Ignatius, *Ephesians* 4.2; 5.1; *Philadelphians* 5.2; 8.1; 9.1; *Smyrnaeans* 12.2.

12. Ignatius, *Ephesians* 7.2; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.12.6.

13. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* 1.5.27.

14. *Ibid.*, 2.2.3.

15. *Ibid.*, 2.1.1.

16. Plato, *Cratylus* 402A; writer's translation.

17. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* 8.1.25.

18. *Ibid.*, 2.3.6.

Bennie R. Crockett, Jr., is professor of religion and philosophy and is co-director of the Center for Study of the Life and Work of William Carey at William Carey University, Hattiesburg, Mississippi.