



I

Introducing Ephesians



For most of us our experience of church is mixed. It is a great privilege and delight to be a part of God's new community, to know that sense of love and acceptance and forgiveness; it is wonderful when we experience that quality of life and love which can only come from the regenerating work of the Spirit. But churches can also be very difficult. People fall out with one another, cliques form, powerful individuals

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hold sway, pastors are criticised. There is all too often a large gulf between what we are in Christ and what we are in reality. The result of this is that as the main distinguishing mark of being a disciple is destroyed (love for one another), so the main responsibilities of the church are diminished (evangelism, prayer and nurture). It can be very difficult for us to be what we know we are in Christ.

Ephesians is a letter for the church, a timeless exposition about becoming what we are in Christ. It sets forth the objective reality for all who are recipients of God's unmerited love and who have been made alive in Christ; and then it tells us how we might become what we are. Reading and understanding Ephesians is like being taken through the theological equivalent of a photographer's dark room. In the days before digital photography the picture was captured at the moment the



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camera's shutter opened, permanently set into the film, yet it still had to be developed. There, in the dark room, the picture slowly emerged; that which had been taken became a permanent reality for all to see.

In the same way we have been made alive and raised with Christ. As a result we have every spiritual blessing in him. The picture has been taken; but now the film must be developed, so that we can become what we are. Ephesians takes us on that journey, explaining the nature of the picture that has been taken and how the photograph can be developed, so that those who are God's people might become what they have been made in Christ.

It is a letter which has generated rich emotion, being described by one commentator as 'one of the most significant documents ever written.' It has been said by another that it matches Romans 'as a candidate for exercising





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the most influence on Christian thought and spirituality.' And yet it is a letter which many Christians know only in part. Its rich treasure for Christian thought and spirituality, and particularly its wonderfully developed teaching about the church, remains relatively untapped. We need to hear the message of this letter. We need to be challenged about our consumerist and individualistic views of salvation and of our relationship to the people to whom we have been joined together and of whom we are a part. And perhaps above all, we need to recapture the glorious reality of the local church as a beacon of the future and a picture of God's purposes in the world. The local church is not only the hope of the world; it also shows us where history is heading.



WELCOME TO EPHESUS!

The city of Ephesus, although once a Greek colony, had become by Paul's day

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the capital city of Roman Proconsular Asia. Powerful and cosmopolitan, it hosted the headquarters of the cult of Artemis (Diana), whose temple, which was rebuilt after being destroyed in the 4th century B.C., was now considered to be one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Sitting in the Amphitheatre today and looking out to the now silted-up port, it is easy to imagine the once-thriving commercial centre and the relatively low-profile arrival of Paul and his companions as he travelled from Corinth back towards Jerusalem on his second missionary journey expedition. His three-year ministry (52-55 A.D., see Acts 20:31) influenced all of Asia and left us with a treasure-trove of Biblical encouragement and warning.

Luke's account of Paul's Ephesian ministry dominates Acts 19 and 20. Initially Paul entered the synagogue, speaking boldly there for three months and arguing persuasively about the Kingdom of



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God. It is reasonable to assume that some of the Jews believed, not least because the letter he later wrote has so much to say about the relationship between Jew and Gentile but also because, when the opposition arose, Luke tells us that *'some of them* became obstinate and refused to believe', (italics mine). Those who refused to respond 'publicly maligned the way'. (Acts 19:9). Others, presumably, didn't.

Those who had believed and were responding to the teaching moved with Paul to the lecture hall of Tyrannus, where he began a series of daily discussions which lasted for two years. As a result, 'All the Jews and Greeks who lived in the Province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.' (Acts 19:10). The letter to the Ephesians, written perhaps some six to eight years later (59-61 A.D.), would have been to all those in the region who responded to the word of God, a group



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which extended beyond the bounds of the city of Ephesus.

Luke tells us that Paul's ministry was associated with extraordinary miracles, perhaps a step above the usual apostolic expectation (2 Cor. 12:12). It may have been the particular adherence of some to the cult of the day which necessitated greater displays of divine power. Certainly it seems possible that some professed faith before being confronted with the real power of the gospel: following the experience of the seven sons of Sceva, who sought to invoke the name of Jesus in an attempt to exorcise, many of those who believed 'now came and openly confessed their evil deeds.' (Acts 19:18). Presumably prior to this incident they had 'believed' without experiencing the power of the gospel or the need to repent.

As Paul prepared to leave Ephesus, Luke provides us with an account of the





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city-wide riot instigated by Demetrius the silversmith. He had become aware that the gospel was taking root and that Paul had 'led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia.' (Acts 19:26). The uproar which followed was marked by great confusion (some people did not even know why they were there; Acts 19:32) and perhaps just as much anti-Jewish as anti-Christian sentiment (as was seen by their response to Alexander the Jew). The fact that the officials protected Paul and the city clerk brought peace to the situation suggests that Luke's purpose in recounting this incident (in the words of John Stott) was 'clearly apologetic or political. He wanted to show that Rome had no case against Christianity in particular or Paul in general.'

What is clear from the book of Acts is that by the time Paul left, everyone in Ephesus and the wider province of Asia



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had heard the gospel and many people, both Jews and Greeks, had believed. Churches had been planted and leaders had been appointed, so much so that when we next hear about Paul and the church in Ephesus, it is in the context of his exhortation to the Ephesian elders.

AT THE ELDERS' MEETING

About a year has passed since Paul left Ephesus and now he arrives down the coast at Miletus, from where he summons the Ephesian elders. Acts 20:25-35 is the only speech in Acts directly to a Christian audience and overwhelmingly it concerns the health of the church in the region. The leaders must watch themselves and the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made them overseers. Negatively, they must be on their guard from false teachers who will emerge even from their own number. Positively, they must hold on to God and the word of his grace, which





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can build them up and give them an inheritance among those who are sanctified (Acts 20:30-32).

After Paul's departure the church in Ephesus has a mixed history. He later encourages Timothy to stay in Ephesus in order that he may 'command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer' (1 Tim. 1:3), concerned as he is that people may know how to conduct themselves in God's household, the pillar and foundation of the truth. (1 Tim. 3:15). It must have been extremely painful for Paul to see what happened to this fledgling church. As he writes his second letter to Timothy, revealing something more of the challenge for all churches in the last days, he reminds us that 'everyone in the Province of Asia has deserted me ... at my first defence no-one came to my support' (2 Tim. 1:15; 4:16).

Clearly the warnings of Acts 20 were needed and to a certain extent they were



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heeded. By the time we get to the book of Revelation the words of the risen Lord Jesus to the church in Ephesus suggest that the church was doctrinally pure and discerning; but now their problem had changed. They had lost their first love, they had failed to do the things they did at first; their evangelistic heart had gone cold.

As we survey the New Testament to see what happened to the church in Ephesus and in the province of Asia it makes for sobering reading. The gospel went out, faithfully proclaimed through patient daily ministry, so that all in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord. Jews and Gentiles became Christians; pastor-teachers were appointed and charged to keep teaching and keep watch. Their tears of friendship and concern for Paul gave no indication that things would ever change, except that is, for Paul's solemn warning ... 'even from your own number



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men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them' (Acts 20:30). Later Timothy had to be left in the region to command such teachers to keep quiet. The church prevailed but lost her first love; and today the church in Ephesus is no more.

Paul's letter picks up all these concerns – the gospel, the need for teaching, the interaction of Christians with one another and the church with the world – and he reminds us of the spiritual warfare in which we are involved, not only as people become part of the church, but as we seek to remain as the church. We have much to learn.

BEYOND THE CITY

In the light of Paul's experience in Asia Minor, his letter to the Ephesians may well have been designed to be circulated around the churches in Western Asia Minor, centred around the busy city of

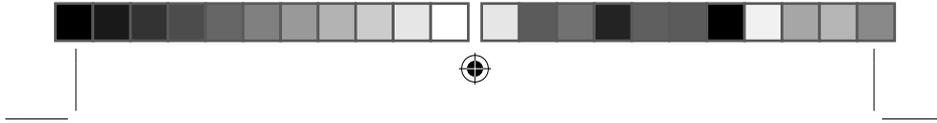


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Ephesus with its population of 250,000. Paul clearly knew at least some of those to whom he was writing (1:16 and 6:19-20) whilst at the same time he may well have written it with others in mind (see 3:2; 4:21), desiring all Christians to understand the significance of what it meant to be part of God's new community.

The far-reaching implications and universal importance of understanding this truth make it difficult to suggest a particular 'occasion' which generated the letter. Inevitably many suggestions have been made, but perhaps in God's goodness the lack of an obvious setting enables the church of every generation to identify and benefit from these timeless truths. The only 'controversy' or difficulty we discover is the relationship between Jew and Gentile before coming to Christ, and the relationship of the church with the world after people have come to Christ. Such concerns need not be generated by particular





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historical situations but remain battles and challenges for all God's people, even if the nature of the barriers and difficulties may have changed with time.

