

diluted to ineffectual pabulum and so garbled by cultural trappings that it bears little resemblance to the pages of the New Testament. The Western church, including the American church, is not the—or even a—New Testament church.

We need nothing less than a new reformation, and Ephesians is the document to bring it about. This short little letter is a surprisingly comprehensive statement about God and his work, about Christ and the gospel, about life with God's Spirit, and about the right way to live.

The Message of Ephesians

THE LETTER IS consistently theocentric and Trinitarian. Its message about God's grace and love is encouraging and rewarding. God is not some remote being; he is the prime actor throughout the letter. From the beginning the letter shows we were always meant to belong to God and that God has been and is at work to make the reality of our relationship with him happen. In Christ and by the Spirit God brings us to himself and gives us what we need for life.

All the privileges of life are found in *union with Christ* and conveyed by the Spirit. Ephesians presents a gospel of union with Christ more powerfully than any other New Testament letter. Nothing short of attachment to him will rescue us from the human plight, and nothing can define us as human beings more than attachment to him. From living with him we learn how to live for him.

The understanding of the gospel in Ephesians challenges and redefines the superficial understanding of the gospel prevalent in our day. This gospel requires people to act; this faith works. Believers have a responsibility to make choices and to change the pattern of their lives. An easy believism or passive faith cannot survive under the penetrating message of this letter.

Repeatedly Ephesians distinguishes one's former way of life with life in Christ. These *formerly-now* contrasts offer a painful but realistic assessment of life without God, and they also give engaging descriptions of conversion and its effects. Nowhere else in the Bible is conversion so clearly described as here. In fact, the contrast in 5:8 functions as a summary of much of the letter: "For once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light." Such portrayals of life before and with Christ are designed to keep people from living like everyone around them and to call them to mirror their relation with Christ in their daily lives.

Consequently, Ephesians provides some of the most direct and practical guidelines for living found in Scripture. Not every subject is covered by any means, but the foundation and guidelines are so clear that application to

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Introduction

other issues follows directly. Be warned, however: Ephesians does not give a list of rules to follow, nor can response be superficial or easy. This letter requires us to change our inner being and character in a radical way. Life can no longer merely happen, for all our activity must now take place in, to, and for the Lord. Truth and love as defined by Christ become the twin forces guiding all else. In fact, Ephesians has more focus on truth and love than nearly all other New Testament documents.³

The concern for truth and love undergirds an emphasis on relationships, both between God and human beings and among people. Ephesians is relentlessly relational. All relations in this letter are viewed—not individualistically—but from the perspective of union with Christ. From life with Christ we relate to God and to others. We are part of Christ and part of each other (cf. 4:25; 5:30), a statement that also functions as a fitting summary of what it means to be a Christian. Not surprisingly, then, the themes of unity, peace, and the body of Christ have a dominant role in the letter. We come to God bound to Christ and to the other believers in him. God is honored in the company of people bound together in Christ.

In explaining what this group is and how it functions, Ephesians provides some of the most insightful theological thinking on the church in the New Testament. Various images—body, building, family, and marriage—combine to stress interrelatedness, belonging, connection, and mutuality. Our world is fractured by racism, individualism, and classism, and all of us know the pain and the enormity of these problems. Ephesians holds up another model, one that destroys racism and divisions, for it tells of God's providing a wholeness that binds us together. Our churches need to recover their identity as corporate representations of people being joined together in Christ. Ephesians tells us how to be the church.

One of the largest failures of the church is in worship and prayer. Ephesians does not discuss these subjects; rather, a good deal of Ephesians is worship and prayer. The first chapter is entirely praise and prayer, a primer on worship that demonstrates how to worship and engages us in worship. Possibly the first three chapters are prayer. Also, Ephesians throughout incorporates worship language from the early church, so much so that large chunks of the letter have been identified by scholars as tradition or hymns that Paul borrowed from earlier sources. Not all such identifications are convincing, but Ephesians is prime material for learning how to worship and pray.

Furthermore, Ephesians focuses on evangelism, though the focus is much different than the halting attempts of the modern church. The theology of

3. Among the letters, only 1 John has more focus on both, and only 1 Corinthians has more focus on love.

the gospel and the understanding of the church presented in Ephesians require us to rethink how evangelism is done. This letter has the potential to revitalize how we do evangelism.

With all the concern about Christian identity, Ephesians also has a pervasive emphasis on the mind. The revelation that comes in the gospel changes our thinking process. Conversion is a renewal of the mind, a transition from a darkened stupor to alert and enlightened wisdom. Too often Christians neglect the treasure of their own minds, and our churches and our society show it. Life's problems are large, and threats to life and right living are real, but Ephesians will not allow us to fear or retreat. Rather, it calls us to think, to learn, to become wise, and to act. If you are not willing to work mentally, Ephesians asserts that Christianity is not the religion for you.

Ephesians truly is the letter for today.⁴ This is the message we need, for it tells us who we are, who God is, and what we are to do. It tells us that for Christians the origin and recipient of every act is Jesus Christ (see esp. 6:5-9). This letter, almost two thousand years old, comes as the word of God, seeking entrance with us and response from us. It offers both direction and confidence for living. We and our churches need to make this letter part of our very being.

What Is This Letter?

DESPITE THE GRANDEUR of the letter and the breadth of its influence, Ephesians is something of an enigma. We do not know to whom the letter was sent, from where it was sent, or why it was sent. (Those who do not accept Paul's authorship would add *by whom it was sent*.) All of Paul's letters include a co-author like Timothy or Silas except Romans and Ephesians, the two most influential Christian letters. It is startling that precisely for these two New Testament letters their purpose continues to be a matter of serious debate.

More detailed treatment of introductory issues may be found in the standard New Testament introductions and technical commentaries. In this commentary a summary of the most important issues is provided, as well as an assessment of the options and an indication of how decisions affect the application of the letter. The most important subjects requiring analysis are the letter's destination, purpose, and authorship, which are to some degree intertwined.

4. See the treatment by Neil Alexander, "The Epistle for Today," *Biblical Studies: Essays in Honour of William Barclay*, eds. Johnston R. McKay and James F. Miller (London: Collins, 1976), 99-118.

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