



THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

INTRODUCTION THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

The early churches were home based. The first Christians met in homes in small groups (Acts, 1:13, 2:2, 2:46, 5:42, 8:32, Rom. 16:4-5, 1 Cor. 16:19, Col. 4:15 etc). This encouraged informality and ministry to one another. These studies on Ephesians are designed for such a context and for such participation. It is suggested that whoever facilitates the group encourages each member to take a turn in leading a study, but allow that some may not want to do this.

It is important that no one person does all or most of the talking. The leader at the study should always ask what others think is the answer to the question, and pause before saying one more word. Often it is good to ask after one or two replies have been made, "What do you think on this Mary/John/ Fong?" A good leader gets others talking.

Each study has some teaching and lots of questions. The ideal is that everyone read though the study before meeting and fill in or at least jot down something in their answers to the questions. After thirty years of going to home group studies I know not everyone will do this but it still remains the ideal.

Time management is a key factor in home groups working well and keeping members positive and regular. A time should be set to begin and end. Keep to the set times. In the group I am meeting with this year the group has decided that everyone should aim to arrive by 7.45 pm and no later than 8 pm. On arrival there is a cuppa ready and a biscuit. The study begins at 8:15 pm. If you come late there is no cuppa. The study finishes roughly at 9:15 pm. Then there is 20 minute prayer time. The prayer time begins with the leader for the night asking for prayer points to be given succinctly and briefly and then we finish by 9.45 pm. People talk on after that getting away when they must.

One last thing by way of introduction: do not forget that the Bible and this epistle are historical documents. Paul is a first century man and he is addressing first century Christians. Keeping this in mind will help us understand what Paul is saying when he speaks about the Jew Gentile division, no longer known in our churches today, about the plural leaders of the church with titles we no longer use, about male leadership in marriage and slavery. When we have worked out why and what Paul was saying in his historical context we can then ask, how what he said to these early Christians might speak to us in our own contemporary historical context.

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Paul and the Ephesian Church

The Ephesian church was located in the great Roman city of Ephesus, the Roman capital of Asia. It was a port city, in south western Asia, which is today Turkey. If we have not seen the ruins of one of the many great Roman cities of the first century it is hard to imagine how impressive and large these cities were. Ephesus is one of the largest and best preserved. I found it an amazing experience to go there. I saw dozens of large public sandstone buildings with huge fluted columns four and five metres high, an amphitheatre that seats more than a thousand people, paved roads, numerous temples, magnificent sculptures and lots of substantial homes. This was a city that had running water and a sewerage system. The many temples are a reminder that this was a religious age where everyone worshipped one or more gods. The most important god in Ephesus was Artemis, and the biggest temple was dedicated to her. She was often depicted as a huntress carrying a bow and arrows. About a third of the population were slaves. These were men and women spared after a defeat and then sold as servants and labourers. Some were treated well, some were not, some were educated some were not. Colour did not mark out a slave. Men ran that world. It was a patriarchal age. Fathers arranged the marriage of their daughters, who on marriage came under the authority and virtual ownership of their husband. Wealthy women, most notably wealthy widows often had more freedoms and choices. In this world people had obligations to others but there were generally few moral constraints. People were free to do as they like; the only worry was not to offend someone more powerful.

In Acts 18:18-22, 19:1-20 and 20:17-38 we can read of Paul's contacts and interactions with the people of Ephesus. After his missionary work in Athens and Corinth Paul set off by boat to go back to Jerusalem in about 51 AD. On route he stopped over very briefly in Ephesus, meeting with the Jews in the synagogue, promising to return (Acts 18:18-21). Later, when he returned he found Apollos ministering there and he met up with some disciples of John the Baptist who believed Jesus was the Messiah but did not know that after his resurrection Jesus had poured out the Spirit on all believers. Paul instructed them further and the Spirit fell upon them just as it had on all the believers on the day of Pentecost. Again, as on the day of Pentecost those who received the Spirit spoke in tongues to show objectively that the Spirit had come into their lives (Acts 19:1-7).

Paul returned to the synagogue and for three months taught there until a parting of the ways took place. He then began public lectures in the hall of Tyrannus for two years. Luke tells us that Paul was in Ephesus for three years (Acts 20:31). It seems Paul's ministry made such an impact on the city that people stopped buying the little statues of Artemis that her worshippers treasured. The silversmiths who made these religious artefacts stirred up trouble and a huge crowd gathered in the Amphitheatre, demanding that Paul and his fellow missionaries be cast out of the city. Paul had to leave (Acts 19:21-41).

Standing in that huge stone amphitheatre is an amazing experience. To be there is a powerful reminder that the story Acts tells is not a fairy story

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of long ago in a place far away. It is a story about historical people, with disclosed names, who went to specific places that you can visit today and we know very accurately when they lived and at what time they were at the places they visited.

Despite this dramatic and frightening end to Pauls' ministry at Ephesus the Christian community was firmly established in that huge and important city. This was one of Paul's most successful missionary endeavours.

On his way back to Jerusalem by ship some months later, Paul called into the port of Miletus 48 kilometres south of Ephesus and there he met with the leaders of the Ephesian church, who were all older men (elders) (Acts 20:17-38). Most of them were probably house church leaders.

It is about ten years later (about 61 AD) that Paul, now a prisoner in Rome waiting for his trial before Caesar, writes to the Christians in Ephesus to encourage and instruct them. It is generally thought that this epistle reflects Paul's most profound theology.

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THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

STUDY 1 INTRODUCTION TO EPHESIANS

Ephesians 1:1-14

Verses 1:1-2: Paul begins his letter to the Ephesians like other letter writers of his day would have done. He introduces himself and says who he is writing to. This way to begin a letter seems better than ours where we have to look at the end to see who has written to us.

Paul is very conscious that he is an apostle by the direct call and will of Christ. His Damascus Road experience (Acts 9:1-9) is what he has in mind.

He calls all the Christians in Ephesus to whom he is writing, 'the saints' – this is their status as believers

Q 1. *If you are a believer in Christ you too are a saint. How do you feel about this? Would you be shocked if someone at church or at your work addressed you as 'saint'? What is a better contemporary word to use rather than 'saint'?*

Verses 1:3-14: These verses make up one long sentence, the longest in the New Testament. In it Paul 'blesses God' (give thanks to God) for all the benefits God has bestowed on those 'in Christ' – an expression he uses eleven times in this section. It is as if he cannot stop praising God for the privileges of being a believer.

(Note: Five times in Ephesians Paul speaks of 'the heavenly places' or 'heavenlies.' He seems to mean by this expression much the same as if he had said heaven but he did not think all our blessings 'in Christ' await us in heaven in the future. Paul believed all our future blessings are now given to us but they are not fully enjoyed or experienced now. Their full enjoyment and realisation will come when Christ returns and we are with him in the heavenlies.)

Q. 2. *What are the blessings Paul says we have in Christ?*

Q. 3. *Are we conscious and thankful for these spiritual blessings and do we feel as excited about them as Paul? What are the personal blessings you are currently aware of? Are you prepared to share something of these with the group?*

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Q. 4. For Paul our spiritual blessings in Christ are of first importance. Material blessings are not even mentioned. I suspect if we were asked to make a list of the blessings God has bestowed on us we would first think of our material blessings, our home, health, people we love and who love us, friends, etc, etc. Is that true? Why is this so often the case today?

In verse 4 Paul says God the Father ‘chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world’ and in verse 5 that he ‘destined us for adoption.’ This is the language of election, even predestination. He list God’s choice of us as one of our great blessings in Christ. This is the key to understanding Paul on this matter. What he is saying is that every believer should thank God for their salvation in Christ. We are Christians not because we are more clever than other people, or more morally upright or anything else. If we believe in Christ it is all of grace. The only person to thank for our new life in Christ is God. Salvation is 100% a gift from God. We do not deserve it or earn it.

Paul is not saying you will only believe if you are elect, or once saved always saved, or anything else that sounds deterministic or suggests that God throws a dice for every person on which is written on one side, ‘you are elect/chosen’, and on the other, ‘you are not elect/chosen’.

Q. 5. Are we overwhelmingly thankful to God and God alone, for graciously giving us the great gift of salvation? If not why not? Are there people, mentors, friends, teachers or family members to whom you are thankful for your faith in Christ? Does such thankfulness take your focus away from the grace of God?

Verse 5: Paul speaks of God as choosing us as his adopted sons or daughters. Often books on adoption suggest that the parents say to their adopted children, ‘You were specially chosen and thus you are specially loved.’ To say this to the child makes the point that they very precious to their parents because they had chosen them. They had said, yes we want you with all our hearts. Paul is saying, you Ephesian Christians, and you who read my letter in years to come, remember God has made you a member of his family.

Q. 6. What thoughts cross your mind when you think of this truth? God has adopted you as a member of his family? Is family membership important to you? Do you see yourself as a member of a particular church family, or of God's broader family or both?

Verse 7: Redemption speaks of the setting free of someone by the payment of a price.

Q. 7. What is the price that has been paid for our redemption, and how costly was it?

Verses 9-5: Paul speaks of God revealing what had long been a ‘mystery’ (something unknown), namely, that all along God had a great plan to gather up all things in heaven and on earth in Christ. The Greek has the idea of bringing back to perfection or harmony or restoring what

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is damaged or distorted. The imagery implies the world is out of kilter, disharmonious, because of sin and in Christ God is putting things back together harmoniously.

We often think that the Gospel is essentially a message for individuals. God wants individual people, one by one, to personally believe in Christ, and salvation is ultimately about the individual believer being saved out of this world. Yes, each of us must respond to Christ as an individual but here Paul says God has a much bigger plan that involves the whole creation, both earth and heaven.

Q. 8. How could Paul's big picture of salvation/restoration reshape our thinking if we took it seriously?

Verses 13-14: As Paul comes to conclude his long recital of the blessings we have in Christ he speaks of the Holy Spirit. He says those who believe in Christ are marked by the 'seal of the promised Holy Spirit'. In the ancient world a seal signified ownership. In English we mean much the same when we say 'branded'. Christians are marked or branded by the Holy Spirit. What marks us out as Christians is the presence of the Holy Spirit in our life. Paul then calls the Spirit 'a pledge of our inheritance'. The Greek could be translated a 'down payment' of our inheritance. It is something we have here and now but when we come into our inheritance at the end there will be more waiting for us. Remember the comment above about our blessings in the heavenlies. Paul always thought what awaits believers in heaven is known and experienced in part now

Q. 9. On the basis of this Pauline teaching, the Spirit has been called a 'foretaste of the blessings of heaven.' What do you think of this way of speaking of the Spirit

Q. 10. How can we better understand the work of the Spirit in our Christian life and church?

Q. 11. In writing to the Thessalonian church Pauls says to them, 'Do not quench the Spirit' (1 Thess. 5:19). How do we metaphorically pour cold water on the work of the Spirit? What modern day examples are there of believers quenching the work of the Spirit?

Q. 12. What have you learned from this passage? A number of people in the group should be given the opportunity to respond to this question.

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STUDY 2 CEASELESSLY PRAYING FOR YOU

Ephesians 1:15-23

After praising God for the salvation enjoyed by the Ephesian Christians (1:3-14), Paul now prays for them. His prayer takes up four matters. First he thanks God for their faith and love; second he prays that God will spiritually bless them; third he praises God for his power made present in the life of the believer, and finally his attention moves to Christ reigning in heaven.

Read the passage aloud.

Verses 15-16: Paul thanks God for the Ephesian Christian's faith and love. Paul first mentions how he has heard of the faith and love of the Ephesian Christians. For this he gives thanks in prayer. Paul was a great encourager. As he begins to pray for them he first mentions something very positive.

Q. 1. *How do you encourage other Christians such as your pastor, church leaders and friends? Share a memory of when a church leader or Christian friend encouraged you.*

In verse 16 Paul characterises his prayer for the Ephesian Christians as constant and continuing. He does not cease praying for them.

Q. 2. *Many Christians go on praying week after week, month after month, sometimes year after year, for someone, possibly a loved family member. Do you think repetitive prayer is acceptable to God?*

Verses 17-19: Paul now prays that God will bless them spiritually, that is, through the Holy Spirit.

Q. 3. *When you pray for other believers what do you ask for and say? Give some examples.*

Paul asks that God may give them 'the Spirit of revelation and wisdom.' It seems he is speaking of gifts of the Holy Spirit. In most churches it seems people believe that God no longer personally reveals anything to individuals; and in some churches it seems as if God is literally 'speaking' to people all the time. What should we believe?

The Bible tells us that God can reveal his mind in many ways: a vision, a dream, an audible voice or by giving conviction that this is what he is 'saying'. When a believer shares what they believe God has laid on their heart this is 'prophecy'. Prophecy can have varied content, prediction,

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warning, guidance, application of scripture, encouragement, etc. When the revelation comes from God and is spoken, the recipient(s) sense God is speaking; when it does not come from God it does not resonate with them. The recipient(s) do not hear God speaking to them. Sermons are not prophecy. They are usually teaching and exhortation. However, many a sermon has prophetic content. Sometimes the preacher may sense that what he/she is saying is what God wants to be said to those addressed. When such words come from God people hear God speaking to them.

Some think the gift of wisdom (see 1 Cor. 12:8) refers to God-given insight, often disclosed to a counsellor. This could be so but in the Old Testament wisdom most commonly refers to practical knowledge, or the ability to choose right conduct. A wise person knows God and does what is pleasing to God. This may well be what Paul thinks is this particular gift of the Spirit. The Pentecostal Pastor and scholar, Gordon Fee, commenting on the gift of wisdom mentioned in 1 Cor. 12:8 defines it as, the 'recognition that the message of Christ crucified is God's true wisdom.' (The First Epistle to the Corinthians (Eerdmans, 1987), p. 592).

Q. 4. Do you think that God still reveals his mind directly to believers today? Have we ever had a powerful sense that God was saying something to you personally? Can you give an example?

Q. 5. Paul says, all prophecies must be tested (1 Cor. 14:29, 1 Thess. 5:21 etc.). Why do you think all revelations shared with others should be evaluated, judged, tested? How can you test a prophecy, especially if it is not predictive of anything?

Verses 19-20a: The power of God is available to every believer. Having prayed that God will continue to work in the Ephesian Christian's lives Paul next gives an exuberant description of God's power.

Q. 6. How great is God's power and where was it most profoundly shown?

In verse 19 Paul says this power is available to 'us who believe'.

Q. 7. Do we know the reality of that power in our lives? If not why not? What testimony can you share from your own experience or from what you have read or heard about others who have experienced the power of God in their life?

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Verses 20b-23: Having spoken of the power God revealed in Christ's resurrection, Paul next speaks of the present glorious reign of Christ and of the church over which he reigns. Paul depicts the resurrected Jesus as now reigning supreme over all. He makes it clear that God the Father has put him completely in charge. Thus when we acknowledge Jesus Christ as the ruler of our life we are doing what the Bible suggests is right. However, we are not obeying Jesus as a second God, or one of three God's but the one God who now reigns. How the one God can be eternally three persons stretches our mind beyond limit but this is what the New Testament reveals. To be a Christian is not simply to believe in God. Many people believe in God. We Christians are those who believe in the God revealed in Jesus Christ and made present in the person of the Holy Spirit.

Q. 8. In what ways does knowing that Christ now rules supreme in heaven encourage us as we face the challenges of life on earth?

Verses 22-23: Paul says God the Father has made Christ 'head over all things for the church, which is his body.' This is his first mention of the church in Ephesians. In this epistle the church is the whole Christian community on earth, waiting for the day that Christ returns to perfect and unite past and present members of this community. This community in its present earthly form Paul says is 'the body of Christ'. Paul believed that the church in some way makes the risen Christ present on earth, it is his body, and the church is central to the outworking of God's great plan to transform the world through Christ.

Q. 10. We probably think of the church in the first instance as our congregation or as an institution which has its strengths and weaknesses. How did Paul think of the church and how different is it from the ways we often think of the church?

Q. 11. Do we sense that Christ is present in our congregation? How could you help your congregation to be more Christlike?

Q. 12. What have you learned from this passage? A number of people in the group may like to respond to this question.

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STUDY 3 THE CHURCH AS TRUE ISRAEL

Ephesians 2:1-22

One of the most challenging questions Paul had to answer was the relationship between Jew and Gentile. The problem was this: in the Old Testament the Jews are depicted consistently as God's own people. Jesus ministry was directed to Jews. He called on them to repent. His ministry looked forward to a restored and believing Jewish people of God. It was only after the Jews rejected him and had him put to death, that as the risen Christ he sent his disciples to all nations to make disciples (Matt. 28:19). From Acts we learn that at first the apostles thought that the people of God would still be primarily Jews, Jews who believed that Jesus was the Messiah. However, God's vision was bigger. He made it plain to the apostles that the Gospel was also for the Gentiles and he put Paul in charge of the mission to the Gentiles. By the time Paul writes to the Ephesians there are more Gentile believers than Jewish believers.

In Ephesians chapter 2 Paul seeks to answer the question of the present status of Jew and Gentile. He argues that what God has done is to redefine what it means to be a Jew, one of God's elect people. It is now to believe in Christ. The old division between Jew and Gentile is gone. The only division that now is of significance is between those who believe in Christ and those who do not.

His argument is this. We are all sinners, Jew and Gentile; we are all saved by grace alone; those who believe in Christ are one new people of God, true Israel, the church.

Read aloud in the group the whole chapter, possibly by people reading two verses each.

Verses 1-3: Paul speaks of what all the Ephesian Christians once were.

Q. 1. *List what they and perhaps you once were.*

Q. 2. *What picture does Paul paint of life outside of Christ?*

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Verses 5-10: Paul speaks of the 'immeasurable riches of his grace.' Grace may be defined as God's undeserved favour.

- Q. 3. *In verses 1 and 5 Paul speaks of the Ephesians as once being 'dead' and in verse 5 of having been made 'alive together with Christ.' What is he talking about?*
- Q. 4. *Make a list of all the things we learn about God's grace in vv 4-10?*
- Q. 5. *When Paul says we are not saved by our 'own doing' (verse 8), what does he mean? How do you relate this to the messages that bombard us from contemporary society?*

In verse 11 and following Paul speaks directly to the Gentile majority in

Once you were

Now you are

Without Christ (verse 12).

In Christ (verse 13).

Aliens to Israel (verses 12, 19).

Fellow citizens of Israel (verse 19).

Strangers (to the people of God) (verse 12).

In the family of God (verse 19)

Without hope (verse 12).

With hope (verse 13).

Far off (from God) (verses 13, 17).

Brought near (to God) (verses 13, 17).

the church at Ephesus. His words imply the Jewish believers (or some of them) were suggesting that Gentile believers are second rate members of the people of God, or conversely, the Christians who are most pleasing to God are Jewish believers. Paul will have nothing of this. He is adamant; all believers stand on level ground before God. There can be no first and second class Christians. All are forgiven sinners, saved by the grace of God. To make his point he contrasts their status once as Gentile unbelievers and now as believers in Christ.

- Q. 6. *How do you think the Gentile believers felt when they read Paul saying these things? And how do you think the Jewish believers felt?*
- Q. 7. *Why is it that some Christians want to think they are a class apart, better Christians, than others? What are the sources of spiritual pride?*
- Q. 8. *How do you feel when someone seems to put you down in this way?*

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In Ephesians Paul writes to bring unity to the Christians in that city. He sees their disunity as a denial of their oneness in Christ.

Q. 9. Is there any significant disunity in our church? If so, what do you think Paul would say to us?

Q. 10. What do you think Paul would say about the disunity today among Christians throughout the world?

Q. 11. In verse 21 Paul speaks of the congregation as growing 'into a holy temple in the Lord'.

What does this imagery suggest to you? How could this imagery help us in our thinking about our congregation? What does it mean to 'grow' as a church? Look back over the last few years and identify ways in which your church has grown? Does it match the ways Paul thinks of a growing church?

Q. 12. What have you learned from this study? In what ways has it helped you think about what it means to be a church member? A number of people in the group may like to respond to this question.

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STUDY 4 PAUL, THE PRISONER & PREACHER

Ephesians 3:1-21

In chapter 3 Paul continues addressing Gentiles, reminding them of the privileges the Gospel has brought them.

In this passage Paul discloses quite a bit about himself. He is in prison in Rome awaiting trial before Caesar (verse 1, 13). He has been 'commissioned' by Christ to preach to Gentiles (verse 2, see Acts 22:12-18). God revealed to him that all along his plan was to include Gentiles within the people of God (verse 3-6). He is very conscious that 'I am the very least of all the saints' (verse 8) because I once persecuted the church (see Philippians 3:6-11).

Q. 1. Many Christians around the world today are in prison for their faith. How would you handle imprisonment for being a Christian?

Q. 2. How did Paul handle imprisonment? Was he super human or can his experience be a model and encouragement for us?

In this passage Paul uses the word 'mystery' four times (verse 3, 4, 5, 9). We have already noted Paul's use of this word in Eph. 1:9. In verse 3 Paul defines the word 'mystery' as what 'was made known to me by revelation.' The mystery revealed to Paul, the other apostles and the early Christian prophets (verse 5) is that all along God planned to include Gentiles within the people of God (verse 6). This Paul says was God's 'eternal purpose' (verse 11).

Q. 3. Do you find the idea that God is always working to his plan reassuring? If so why is it reassuring to you? How do you cope when you pray and trust but things go wrong?

Q. 4. Again we meet up with the idea that God reveals his mind to believers. Some Christians argue that with the passing of the twelve apostles and Paul all that is and will be revealed is found in the Bible. While we should all agree that Biblical revelation gives the norm, and that no revelation to an individual can contradict or add to this, what do you think of the idea that God still communicates personally to believers? Have you experienced a personal revelation from God?

In this epistle, written in the first century, Paul reminds Jewish believers that Gentiles are 'fellow heirs, members of the same body (the church), and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel' (verse 6). Today, the Jew-Gentile problem is not an issue in our churches. However,

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the man-woman relationship certainly is in many churches. The Salvation Army from the beginning has made it a principle that men and woman are fully equal and should share leadership but in many evangelical churches women are excluded from leadership.

In Gal.3:28 Paul parallels the Jew-Gentile, slave-master and the man-woman division saying each is transcended in Christ. (Paul of course is not saying that when we become a Christian our ethnic, sexual or social differences are obliterated. He is saying that in Christ they should not to divide believers.)

- Q. 5. *Do you think that women who God values the same as men sometimes are made to feel second class Christians in our churches? Why does this happen all too often? Are you personally aware of such a situation?*
- Q. 6. *Why does the church so often find it hard to put into practice Paul's teaching that despite the fact that we are differentiated by race, sex and social status and in other ways, we are one in Christ, spiritually and socially? What are the obstacles that you have personally experienced?*
- Q. 7. *The Greek word translated 'Gospel' could be equally well translated, 'Good News.' That's what the English word "gospel" means. Why is the message of Christ crucified good news? Crucifixion hardly seems good news.*
- Q. 8. *In verse 7 Paul calls himself a deacon/servant/minister of the Gospel. In his world these terms were used mainly of slaves. Are we too ministers of the Gospel? If so what does this mean?*
- Q. 9. *What does Paul say qualifies him for this ministry (verse 7)? Have we too got this qualification?*
- Q. 10. *If you were to write out a job description for a church leader, what would be your top 3 criteria?*

Paul cannot speak too exuberantly of what God has done for us in Christ. In Eph. 1:7-8 he writes of 'the riches of God's grace ... lavished on us'; in 1:18 of 'the riches of our glorious inheritance'; in 1:19 of 'the immeasurable greatness of his (the ascended Christ's) power for us who believe'; in 2:7 of 'the incomparable riches of his grace'; and now in 3:7 he writes of 'the boundless riches of Christ'.

- Q. 11. *What impresses us most about how Paul speaks of the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ? Do we think of what God has done for us in Christ in these exuberant terms? If not why not?*
- Q. 12. *What are the 'boundless riches we have in Christ'?*

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In verse 10 Paul speaks of God making known his wisdom to the rulers in the heavenly realm 'through the church' on earth. This is the only time in the New Testament that the church is said to do this. In this comment Paul seems to be suggesting that what has taken place on the cross—here referred to as a revelation of God's wisdom—that has brought into existence the Christian community on earth, is a challenge to the spiritual rulers in heaven opposed to God.

Q. 13. How do you think the church threatens the spiritual powers opposed to God?

Q. 14. What have you learned from this passage? A number of people in the group may like to respond to this question.

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STUDY 5 UNITY & DIVERSITY IN THE CHURCH

Ephesians 4:1-16.

In chapters 1 to 3 of Ephesians Paul speaks of the blessings and implications of the salvation we have in Christ. In chapters 4 to 6 Paul he speaks of the blessings and implications of being member of the community of salvation and the demands and challenges of living as a Christian in a fallen world.

Verses 1-2: Paul begins with an exhortation. Live like a Christian.

Q. 1. In these words Paul gives a short summary of important practical outcomes that should follow from salvation in Christ? What could be possibly added to this list? What do you think is the most important Christian virtue to be put into practice?

Verses 3-6: Turning to their communal life Paul first of all stresses the unity they have in Christ, a unity that has to be realised. It is a gift yet something they must work to achieve.

Q. 2. What things unite them and what must they do to maintain unity?

Q. 3. Why is church disunity so common? List some of the things that divide us as Christians and the things that unite us? What can we do about it?

Verses 7-16: As in 1 Corinthians 12 Paul teaches that Christians collectively constitute a community described as 'the body of Christ.' This metaphor highlights unity. However, here and in Corinthians Paul immediately goes on to speak of the diverse ministries in this one body. What Paul adds in Ephesians, written about ten years later, is that the diversely-gifted church leaders' main responsibility is to equip other believers for their ministry and that the goal of all ministry is the spiritual maturity of the whole church and its unity.

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In verses 7-9 Paul says that when Christ ascended into heaven he gave 'grace' (verse 7) or 'gifts' (verse 11) to each believer. A 'gift of grace' or simply a 'gift' in this context and in 1 Corinthians refers to a given ministry. A practical outworking of grace, a charisma, or spiritual gift. In 1 Cor. 12:7 Paul says that to each member of the body of Christ a ministry is given by the Spirit.

- Q. 4. *What do you think of the idea that each of us has been given at least one ministry? Would you like to hear more on this said in your church?*
- Q. 5. *What do you think is your gift of ministry? What do you think is the special gift given to each of the other members of your study group? Focusing on one person at a time in the group let people suggest the gifts(s) they see in each person present and ask the person themselves to say what they think is their gift/ministry.*

In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul emphasises the ministry of each believer, only mentioning in passing right at the end (verse 28) the leaders called apostles, prophets and teachers. In Ephesians chapter 4 Paul focuses mainly on the leaders emphasising their main ministry is to equip and empower all believers for their ministry.

In 1 Corinthians Paul names the church leaders, apostles (missionaries that founded churches – the 12 apostles were an inner core of much larger group called apostles), prophets who spoke as the Lord gave them something to share and teachers who expounded the Bible. In Ephesians Paul adds evangelists (people who worked at building up the local church through evangelism) and he speaks of the teachers as teachers and pastors (the title pastor could equally well be translated 'shepherd').

What this list of leaders, all in the plural, brings to our attention is that how we organise the church today as an institution is very different to New Testament times. Nowhere in the New Testament do we find one person in charge of a local church. All leadership was plural and it involved men and women. Women were missionary apostles (Rom 16:7); prophets (Acts 21:9, 1 Cor. 11:5, Rev. 2:20), house church leaders (Acts 12:12, Col. 4:15) and they taught (Acts 19:24-26).

- Q. 6 *There is no sin in the church changing the way it is lead as the outward and historical form of the church changes but would our churches today be healthier if more people were involved in the leadership of the congregation?*
- Q. 7. *Is it realistic to think that one or two people in any church can be good missionaries, prophets, evangelists, and teachers with pastoral responsibilities? Why not?*

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In verses 12-13 Paul says the work of all these leaders is to equip every member of the church (the saints) for their ministry. The goal of their work being the building up of the body of Christ, the unity of the church and the full maturity of every believer.

- Q. 8. *I have heard it said that in so many of our churches it is assumed, 'ministers minister and congregations congregate'. What do you think Paul would say of such an idea? What problems does it raise?*
- Q. 9. *What are the signs of a mature Christian?*
- Q. 10. *In verse 14 what is an indication of a lack of maturity in Christ?*
- Q. 11. *What does Paul suggest in verse 15 promotes Christian maturity? What is involved in 'speaking the truth in love?' In the past this text may have been used to justify unkind words from one Christian to another. Do these words of Paul support such behaviour?*
- Q. 12. *Explain what Paul is saying in verses 15b-16? You may like to use pencil and paper to draw or sketch what comes to your mind when you read these verses and you think of your own church.*
- Q. 13. *What have you learned from this passage? A number of people in the group may like to respond to this question.*

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THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

STUDY 6 WALK IN THE LIGHT

Ephesians 4:17-5:14

In this study we cover a longer section in the epistle to the Ephesians. It is united by the exhortation to choose to walk in light rather than darkness, given at the beginning and end of the passage (4:18, 5:8-13). Paul wants to impress on his readers the huge difference between living apart from Christ and living in Christ. It is his view that there is a huge gulf between the two. Within this section Paul takes up a number of issues. Paul exhorts his readers:

- Not to live like Gentiles. Today, this means not to live like unbelievers (4:17-19).
- Rather live like Christians (5:20-24).
- Avoid lying, anger, stealing and evil talk (4:25-5:2).
- Shun impurity (5:3-7).
- Live in the light (5:8-14).

Chapter 4:17-19: Do not live like Gentiles ,that is, like unbelievers...

- Q.1. *Paul lists nine things he believes are characteristic of life separated from Christ. What are they?*
- Q. 2. *Paul speaks as a first century man reflecting on what he sees all around him. Does what he says about unbelievers match up with what we see around us today? Try to focus on issues relevant to the group and society today rather than listing all the terrible things happening all around the world.*

Chapter 5:20-24: Rather live like Christians...

- Q. 3. *Paul lists in verses 22-24 three things they had been taught that are characteristics of living the Christian life. What are they? Are these the qualities we talk about when we encourage each other in our journey?*
- Q. 4. *What does it mean 'to be renewed in the spirit of your minds'? And 'to clothe yourselves with the new self'? Can you express these concepts with more modern phrases?*

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Chapter 4:25-5:2: Avoid lying, anger, stealing and evil talk...

- Q. 5. *How can we be angry but not sin? And what does Paul advise when we get angry? (4:26). (In considering this question refer to James 1:19-20 and Eph. 4:31).*
- Q. 6. *When we let anger control us what are we doing? See verse 27.*
- Q. 7. *What is 'evil talk'? (verse 29). Does 'evil talk' come from the mouths of believers? (In answering this question consider Eph. 5:4).*
- Q. 8. *Paul held that lying, anger, stealing and evil talk grieves the Holy Spirit (verse 30). What ideas does the word 'grieve' raise in your mind?*
- Q. 9. *In Eph. 4:32-5:1-2 Paul gives another list of primary Christian virtues. Do you find it hard to forgive? How can we become more tenderhearted and forgiving people?*

Chapter 5:3-7: Shun impurity. Paul returns to a list of sins seen in unbelievers which he thinks are totally inconsistent with being a Christian.

- Q. 10. *Why does Paul say that the sins he mentions in verse 5 are idolatry? What does idolatry mean for us in the 21st century?*
- Q. 11. *When Paul says that those who sin in this way (verse 5) have 'no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ', what does he mean? Can such sinners ever be forgiven?*

Chapter 5:8-14: Live in the light. Light is an important metaphor/image in the Bible. Jesus said, 'I am the light of the world' (Jn 8:12) and he spoke of unbelievers walking in darkness (Jn 3:19, 8:12).

- Q. 12. *What comes into your mind when you think of unbelief being darkness and faith light?*
- Q. 13. *What does it mean to 'live as children of light' (verse 8)?*
- Q. 14. *What have you learned from this passage? A number of people in the group may like to respond to this question.*

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THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

STUDY 7 CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

Ephesians 5:15-33

To understand this passage it is absolutely essential that we first understand the man-woman relationship in the ancient world. Paul lived in an age where women were dependent and under a male authority for all of their life. She was first under her father, then her husband or possibly a male guardian. Her father arranged her marriage in her early teens, and from then on she was virtually 'owned' by her husband. Except in the case of an older wealthy widow, a woman could not support herself. To leave one's husband left a woman bereft of home and food and made her extremely vulnerable. In this world the man had all the power. A man worthy of respect was one who ruled over his wife, children and slaves firmly and strongly, ideally with fairness. It was to people who assumed this understanding of the man-woman relationship that Paul wrote about marriage in his epistle to the Ephesians.

When Paul's letter was read for the first time the men present would have felt their whole taken-for-granted understanding of marriage was being called into question. They heard the apostle exhorting men to love their wife and to give themselves for her even to the point of self-sacrifice. The Greek word Paul uses here to speak of the love required is *agape*. It speaks of self-giving loving service – being loving. No one, except Christ himself had ever suggested such a thing. This was a revolutionary and novel view of the man's role in marriage. In contrast, when we hear these words of Paul read today most of us feel our whole taken-for-granted understanding of marriage is being called into question. Our attention is caught by Paul's statement, 'the husband is the head of the wife.' Hearing this and nothing else in the whole passage we conclude either that men should again assert their 'headship' over their wife, or more commonly, Paul is a man of his age who has got it all wrong. So we often hear people saying Paul was a 'misogynist'.

Ephesians 5:15 begins a section where Paul outlines what it means to be a Christian walking in the light.

Q. 1. *List the very practical advice Paul gives in verses 15-18. What piece of advice catches your attention?*

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When Paul exhorts his readers to be filled with the Spirit, he speaks of an ongoing infilling, not a once-for-all event. In verse 19 he links this growing experience of the Spirit with communal, interactive worship.

Q. 2. Do you find communal worship the place where the Spirit seems most real/active in our life? How could we make our Sunday worship more Spirit-filled? Do vv 19-20 give a picture of your regular worship?

Although most modern translations make verse 21 the beginning of a new section dealing with marriage Paul did not do this. Verses 21-33 on marriage actually follows on from what Paul says in 5:15ff. For Paul a transformed marriage should be part of walking in the light and being continually filled with the Spirit.

Verse 21. 'Be subordinate to one another.' These words sum up the distinctly Christian understanding of inter personal relationships. They say in other words what Jesus made central to the ethic he gave his disciples, "Love one another." Again the Greek is agape. We are to be loving and this kind of love always puts others first.

Q. 3. How can we in actual practice subordinate ourselves to others? Is this something very difficult to do? Does this go against the grain of how our hierarchical society and workplace is organised?

Now Paul takes marriage as his first example of such self-subordination done in the power of the Spirit. After this he will take children to parents and slaves to masters as other examples where subordination is a virtue (Eph. 6:1-9).

Paul begins by addressing wives in just three short verses (verses 22-24). What he says to them was what was expected. Be subject to your husband because he is your head/master/boss just as Christ is head/master/boss of the church, his body. No one in the first century on hearing these words would have raised an eyebrow. Paul was enunciating the taken-for-granted understanding of marriage.

Q. 4. Most of the many sermons I have heard on Eph. 5:21-33 given by male ministers spend most time on these three verses. Why do you think this might be so?

Next in verses 25-33 Paul addresses husbands. He has the most to say to them. This section comprises eight verses.

Q. 5. List the things Paul demands of Christian husbands in verses 25, 28, 33.

Q. 6. Give some examples of a man putting into practice agape-love for his wife.

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In verse 31, quoting Genesis 2:24, Paul makes the reality and the goal of marriage the unity of the husband and the wife.

- Q. 7. *If the oneness Paul speaks about is more than the physical, how do two separate people become one in marriage? What does this mean in practice? In our world of wanting instant gratification, how can we encourage one another to work at a marriage rather than expecting instant oneness?*
- Q. 8. *Can oneness of body, mind and spirit be known in a marriage if the relationship is unequal, the man making all the important decisions?*
- Q. 9. *In summing up in verse 33 Paul says, a man should love his wife and a woman should respect her husband. In a popular American book on marriage this brief concluding comment is turned into a basic rule for a happy marriage: wives need love most of all and husbands need respect most of all. What do you think of this idea? Do women not want respect from their husbands and husbands the love of their wives?*
- Q. 10. *In Eph. 5:25-33 Paul is subtly subverting the prevailing cultural understanding of marriage, replacing it with a distinctly Christian understanding of marriage. Why then did he first of all tell women to accept things as they were?*
- Q. 11. *In the past, and sometimes today we hear Christian people saying, 'the man is the head of the home.' Paul actually never says this. Indeed, in 1 Tim. 5:14 Paul tells women to marry and manage (rule) their homes well. What do you think of the traditional idea that the man is the head of the home? Is this the case today? Does a smooth functioning home need a head/boss just like a smooth functioning business or school or church?*

A Comment on Male 'Headship.'

In some church circles you might almost think that male 'headship' stands right at the heart of the Christian faith. One lady told me that at least once a month in her church this matter is raised in the sermon. Her story is not exceptional.

In the Bible the word 'headship' does not appear. Moreover, Jesus never once suggested that men were 'head-over' women, or the head in marriage and he said much in opposition to this idea.

Just twice Paul speaks of the man as 'the head' (Greek kephale) of the woman. First, in 1 Cor. 11:3ff, he says that the man is the head/kephale of the woman to introduce his rule that women should cover their literal heads and men leave their literal heads uncovered when they alike lead the church in prayer and prophecy. The clue to what Paul means when he says the man is the metaphorical head of woman is found in verse 8 where Paul speaks of Eve coming 'from' Adam's side (Gen. 2:21-23). In Greek and English a common metaphorical meaning of the word 'head' is source,

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beginning. So we speak of the source or beginning of a river as its 'head.' In this passage Paul is not saying men are 'head over women'. He endorses them leading in worship. His point is that unlike the man who is made from the dust, woman is made 'from' the man. She is made of the same 'stuff' as he is and is thus his 'partner' who can lead in church alongside him.

In the second instance where Paul uses the word 'head' of the man-woman relationship in Eph. 5:23 the context shows it carries the sense boss/master, another common metaphorical meaning of the word 'head', again both in Greek and English. Paul's argument is that just as Christ as the ascended and reigning Lord is 'head over' the church, so the husband is 'head over' his wife. However, Paul then goes on to subvert the idea that in marriage the husband's leadership means being the boss. In contrast, he argues the husband's role is to 'lead' by serving his wife even to the point of giving his life for her. Instead of depicting the husband as the master over his wife, he depicts him as the servant to his wife. His model of leadership is the incarnate Christ who lays aside his divine prerogatives, taking the form of a servant for our salvation (Phil. 2:4-8). Nowhere in Eph. 5 does Paul say anything at all about who makes the major decisions in the home or who has the casting vote. These questions are excluded by what Paul actually says. It is not the role of servants to make decisions. Their role is to serve.

If you have time you might discuss the next two questions.

Q. 12. Today, a number of contemporary responses to Paul's assertion that the man is the head of his wife are made. Which of the following would you endorse and why? Discuss the answers given.

- Paul meant what he said. The man is 'head over' his wife. He should make all the important decisions.
- Yes, Paul said the man is the head of his wife but then he turned what he said on its head, making the husband the servant of his wife. Male 'headship' demands sacrificial loving service by the husband for his wife, nothing else.
- Paul speaks helpfully to a patriarchal context where men ruled the home but in our age and culture all ideas of the man being the 'head over his wife must be rejected.

Q. 13. What have you learned from this passage? A number of people in the group may like to respond to this question.

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THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

STUDY 8 FAMILY LIFE & SPIRITUAL WARFARE

Ephesians 6:1-21

In this last chapter we have three separate sections, the first addressing children and parents, masters and slaves; the second depicting the Christian life as one ongoing spiritual battle, and the third giving Paul's concluding words.

Practical Advice to Those Living Under the One Roof

In Ephesians 6:1-9, following his words to husbands and wives, Paul continues to give practical advice to those living under the one roof. Often a family home included three generations and slaves. Again we must appreciate the taken-for-granted social realities of the first century if we are to understand Paul rightly. He is assuming most of the Ephesians were either slave masters or slaves. About a quarter of the population were slaves, often taken in war. Just like we have labour saving devices free Roman citizens bought slaves. Paul speaks against treating slaves badly but he does not condemn slavery as such. He sends the slave Onesimus back to his master Philemon. Only from the late eighteenth century did Christians begin opposing slavery. When it comes to children Paul also assumed the cultural norms of the day, believing that as long as parents lived they should be obeyed. The word 'child' in Greek and English primarily denotes relationship not age. In addressing children in this theological treatise Paul definitely did not have in mind small children.

- Q.1. *How do you think family life in Paul's day would have been different to what we know today? What changes have been good and what bad?*
- Q. 2. *How does it impact the way we understand Ephesians 5:21-6:9, that when Paul addresses husbands, fathers and masters he is talking to one male person who held those roles in the household?*
- Q. 3. *Perhaps we may not think we ought to obey our parents all our life, but what about honouring our parents all our life. What would this mean in practice? In what ways do you or people you know 'honour parents'?*
- Q. 4. *What behaviour might make grown up children angry with their parents? Do some parents need this advice? Why? In what ways can fathers sometimes exasperate their children?*

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- Q. 5. *Paul told slaves to obey their masters with 'fear and trembling' as if they are obeying Christ (v. 5). And in v. 6 to 'render service with enthusiasm'. These words show Paul was definitely not a social revolutionary. Why is this so? How might this injunction be translated into action in our contemporary world?*
- Q. 6. *How does the fact that the masters and the slaves Paul is addressing have the same Lord change things for both parties (v. 9). Should we compare or contrast the twenty first century employee and the first century slave?*
- Q. 7. *What impact does Ephesians 5:21 "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" and 6:9 "you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him" have on the way we understand this entire passage on how Christian households should function?*

Spiritual Warfare

In 6:10-17 Paul tells his readers the battles and pressures they are facing are not coming just from earthly opponents. In reality they are under attack by spiritual forces who use people and events to hurt them. I am sure we have all heard a children's talk on this passage but this is not childish teaching. We ignore Paul's words to our own peril.

- Q. 8. *What do you think of the idea that the church and individual Christians are under attack by spiritual powers opposed to God and his people? Can we set this aside as just old fashioned teaching about hell and satan?*
- Q. 9. *Do you sometimes feel you are under spiritual attack? If so what do you do about it? What does Paul advise?*
- Q. 10. *Four times in vv. 11-14 Paul urges his readers to stand firm under this assault. How do we do this? Do Christians all too often give way under pressure of one sort or another? How can we encourage one another?*

Paul's Concluding Words to the Ephesians

- Q. 11. *What does it mean to pray at all times' (v 18)? Do we do this? Can we realistically do this?*
- Q. 12. *After speaking about the spiritual battle Christians are involved in Paul asks the Ephesians to pray for him (v. 19). Do you think church leaders are more likely to find themselves under spiritual attack? If so why? Do we pray for our church leaders?*

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When Paul wrote Ephesians he was in prison in Rome (Eph. 4:1). The chains he mentions (6: 20) may well have been the chains that bound him to a prison guard. His experiences in prison may have inspired the imagery he uses in speaking of spiritual warfare. It seems, nevertheless, that Paul continued to use every opportunity to be an ‘ambassador’ for Christ.

- Q. 13. *Have we ever found opportunities to witness when facing really tough times? What does it mean to be an ‘ambassador for Christ’? You may wish to share your experiences of ‘fearlessly making known the mystery of the gospel’ even in personally tough times.*
- Q. 14. *What have you learned from this passage? A number of people in the group may like to respond to this question.*

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