

INTRODUCTION TO EPHESIANS

(David Garland)

Ephesians is truly an amazing and wonderful letter. Its few pages cover an extraordinary range of theological topics with clarity and precision. The contents are simple enough and so foundational that the letter should be read and studied by every new believer. Yet the theological concepts are so profound that the most mature Christians never seem to master its depths.

The book begins by teaching us that the study of theology should be combined with praise and adoration of our awesome God, who has done so much for us. The apostle Paul punctuates his poetic expression of what God has accomplished for us in Christ with a refrain of praise to the glory of God and that should be our response as well.

This letter summarizes what it means to be a Christian better than any other book of the Bible. It clarifies the heart of the Christian faith, explores the dynamics of a personal relationship with Christ, sets forth God's overall plan for the church, and draws out the implications of what it means to live as a Christian.

Ephesians is distinct from Paul's other letters in that there is no conflict situation or glaring problem that has prompted the apostle to write. For instance, there are no Jewish Christians asserting the indispensability of circumcision and calendar observances (Galatians), no divisions over loyalty to different leaders (1 Corinthians), no competing apostles attempting to undermine his message (2 Corinthians), and no syncretistic faction demeaning the sufficiency of Christ (Colossians).

This does not mean, however, that the recipients are problem free and simply need a pat on the back. There are concerns, but they are of a more general nature. There is a hint of ongoing tensions between Jews and Gentiles in the church. Paul has a continuing pastoral concern about helping Christians converted from a background of magical practices and allegiance to other deities become deeply rooted in their relationship to Christ and his power. And Paul wants his many Gentile readers to keep growing in their new lifestyle as believers by ceasing their former sinful practices and living out the virtues commended to them by Christ.

Throughout the letter, Paul's tone is positive and upbeat, but, as usual, never compromising. The words he writes are meant exclusively for the Christian community and not for outsiders. In fact, some of what he says would be downright offensive to nonbelievers. A worshiper of Artemis/Diana would take great exception to his monotheism and intimations that the local religions were evil and even demonic. Similarly, a Jew from the local synagogue would continue to be incensed over the way Paul portrays Jesus in divine terms, affirms him as the fulfillment of



Israel's hope, and declares the Torah to be abolished. In a similar way, Ephesians has much to say that is not "politically correct" in the contemporary world. What's more, Paul has a great deal to say to the evangelical church of today that may cause us to squirm and feel uncomfortable.

When we carefully examine this essay that comes in at less than 2,500 words, it is remarkable how many issues it addresses that continue to be hot topics and issues in today's church. Here are just a few of these (put in more contemporary language):

- assimilation ministry and the training of new believers
- the issue of divine sovereignty and human free will
- spiritual warfare
- worship in the church, including the issue of diversity in form and style
- spiritual formation
- gender roles in marriage
- racial reconciliation
- God's design and plan for the church
- the basis and call for ecumenical unity
- the gospel in an animistic context
- the contextualization of theology
- living in a context of religious pluralism
- the gift of being an apostle
- the gift of prophecy
- the role of the Jewish law
- the local church and missions
- intercessory prayer in the Christian life
- the nature of spiritual power
- the ongoing work of Satan and demons

Pastors and teachers will discover that every paragraph of Ephesians is filled with content that is relevant to Christians in local churches today wherever they are located.