

Home Group Leaders Discussion Guide

Living as the Church—Ephesians week 1

You may be wondering why we would title a series on the book of Ephesians “*Living as the Church*”. Doesn’t every book/letter in the New Testament have something to say about living as the church? Well, sure, that’s absolutely true. But at the same time, the letter to the Ephesians is unique/distinctive in that Paul articulates the lofty ideals of the Church more in Ephesians than in any other book/letter.

This letter was written from prison, so Paul had the time and space to reflect on his roughly 30 years of ministry (most of which was proclaiming the Gospel and planting churches) and put pen to paper to describe a rich theology of the Church (or ecclesiology—the specific branch of theology that focuses on the Church).

Please allow me to share the opening page from The NIV Application Commentary of Ephesians by Klyne Snodgrass (the commentary that Keith mentioned during the sermon and encouraged us to get our hands on):

“Pound for pound” Ephesians may well be the most influential document ever written. Within the history of Christianity, only the Psalms, the Gospel of John, and Romans have been so instrumental in shaping the life and thought of Christians, but all three of these works are much longer than the few pages of this letter. Ephesians has justly been described as “the Switzerland of the New Testament,” “the crown and climax of Pauline theology,” and “one of the divinest compositions of man.” The explanation of the gospel and of life with Christ provided here is powerful and direct. If read receptively, it is a bombshell.

*This letter is the most contemporary book in the Bible. Apart from a few terms and the treatment of slavery, Ephesians could have been written to the modern church. It is about us. It describes human beings, their predicament, sin, and delusion, but much more **it describes God’s reaching out to people to recreate and transform them into a new society. Most of the letter is about two subjects: power and identity.** It describes the power God’s Spirit gives for living. It shows who we really are without Christ and who we become both individually and corporately **with Christ**. It is about how we understand ourselves and how we can get along with each other and God. The focus on **God’s new society** also makes Ephesians one of the most important works for understanding the church.*

Modern society is in a mess. For all the good things we enjoy, we seem to have lost all sense of definition and direction. Who are we really, and what holds us together? We all have a need to belong, but to what? Is there anything that merits our commitment? This life is hard. Where will we find the resources to make it? Our society’s moral guidelines have been erased. Are these boundaries and values that function as legitimate guides? What is a human life for anyway?

The church is supposed to have answers to such questions, but in our day it has lost both its direction and its voice. The lives of Christians are too often no different from the lives of non-Christians. The gospel has been 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.*
(Emphasis added, in bold.)

That's a pretty grand and elevated statement about Ephesians...and I couldn't agree more. (Personally, Ephesians is my favorite letter from Paul.) Historically, Romans is often considered Paul's "Magnum Opus", due in large part to the role the book of Romans played in the Reformation (along with Galatians). That is understandable in that what needed to be "reformed" at the time was the Church's understanding of salvation (Theologically, that's called soteriology.) But today, what really needs to be reformed is our ecclesiology...and, again, Ephesians is where we look for that. If we can get this down, we could be on the brink of a second great reformation (and we sorely need it).

For background information about the church in Ephesus, we need to look at Acts 19 (as was covered in the sermon on Sunday). Of all of Paul's missionary journeys, we know that his longest stay anywhere was in Ephesus. Also, the context of I & II Timothy was Ephesus, as Paul had written to this young leader of the Ephesian church with some practical advice and encouragement. All that to say, the Ephesian church was near and dear to Paul's heart. We even see a very emotional farewell to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:17-38.

As we look at the early Ephesian church in Acts 19 we see that a healthy church relies on the power of the Holy Spirit, repents of anything that does not honor King Jesus, prioritizes the spreading/sharing of the Gospel, and these combined makes an impact on the surrounding culture/society...though that impact can be unpredictable...which is very consistent with Paul's overall ministry. As Christians, our goal is to faithfully preach and represent Jesus and His Kingdom, regardless of how that is received. The results are not up to us. Nor should we be overly concerned by a negative response...Paul frequently faced negative responses. The main reason for negative response is that the Gospel flies in the face of the prevailing idolatry of the time/place. In the case of first century Ephesus, that idolatry took the form of sorcery and worshipping the goddess Artemis. (There was likely some emperor worship going on, as well as other forms of idolatry, but these are the specific ones that Luke highlighted in Acts 19.) An interesting thing about idolatry is that someone usually profits from it. So when people start repenting, someone stands to lose something...and most people don't take losses well...as we see in the second half of Acts 19.

I'd like to draw your attention to verse 10 and verse 20 of Acts 19. *"This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord."* (verse 10) and *"In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power."* (verse 20). Throughout the book of Acts Luke makes these little summary statements demonstrating the spread of the Gospel. What we need to be careful of is giving more credit to one person (Paul, in this case) and not enough credit to unnamed, Spirit led and filled believers who faithfully lived out the reign of Jesus in their lives. While Demetrius pointed the finger at Paul (see 19:26-27), we also know that if a critical mass of people had not responded to Paul's preaching (which is really an interchange between the Holy Spirit and those unnamed people) there would be no story here. The reason I bring this up is because we can easily get distracted by the exploits of Paul, and subsequently think, "I could never be like Paul." But the real momentum in this passage (and throughout church history I might add) is from unknown, unnamed believers (like you and me) who faithfully respond to and live for King Jesus.

Our study/series through Ephesians is going to help us catch a vision for what it means to be the Church in our time and place. The world doesn't necessarily need another "superstar" like Paul as much as it needs anonymous but faithful children of light who individually and collectively live out the reign and rule of Christ for those around them to see.

- Q. How familiar are you with Ephesians? (Perhaps in relation/comparison to other books in the Bible.)**
- Q. As a "brain dump", with Bibles closed, as a group list what you know from the letter to the Ephesians (i.e. key phrases, verses, concepts, subject matter)**
- Q. What do you think of the idea of the Church being a new, or alternative, society? How does that jive with your earlier understanding of the Church? How does that jive with the common understanding (be it by believers or unbelievers) of what the Church is.**
- Q. How would you define "the Church"? (An interesting exercise for your HG might be to come up with an agreed upon working definition of "The Church". Then as we go through Ephesians, tweak your definition as you see fit.)**
- Q. What specific forms of idolatry can you/we identify in our time and place? What drives people to that idolatry? What does the Gospel have to say to those people? What might we expect to see if these were repented from? (How might people and/or society at large react/respond? What sort of impact might it have?)**
- Q. How (in what ways, forms, expressions) is the Word of the Lord (the Gospel) spreading today? Who seems to be the most receptive? Who seems to be the most resistant? How are you, as "Joe/Jane Believer" making it known, or sharing it? How are we, as Riverside Church, making it known, or sharing it?**
- Q. Complete this sentence: The top priority of a Christian is (or should be) _____. Complete this sentence: The top priority of the Church is (or should be) _____. (**HG Leaders: if those two statements are answered differently, it might be worth exploring why. Also, be prepared for various answers to this...people might see things differently. This should be seen less as an opportunity to give the "right" answer, but more of an opportunity to hear what people think, so you can know what direction and focus future discussions might take.)**