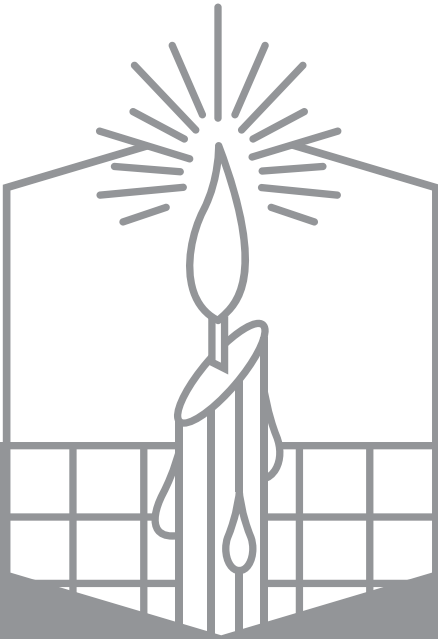


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A 6-SESSION STUDY
FOR DIALOGUE IN
COMMUNITY AROUND
THE SCRIPTURES



CATCHING GOD'S VISION FOR THE CHURCH

First Principles from Ephesians

BY JEFF REED

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These materials are designed to integrate with BILD International resources, which are designed to help churches train leaders.

All Scripture, unless otherwise noted, is from the New American Standard Bible.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

05

**CATCHING GOD'S
VISION FOR THE
CHURCH**

07

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES:

Becoming Established in Our Faith - 7
Design of the Series - 8
Design of the Study Guides - 10

13

SESSION 1

**DEVELOPING A MATURE,
STRATEGIC CHURCH:
THE INTENT OF THE
LETTER**

24

SESSION 2

**PAUL'S
STEWARDSHIP:
FULLY UNVEILING
THE CHURCH**

33

SESSION 3

**GOD'S MASTER PLAN:
BUILDING A MATURE
GLOBAL CHURCH**

43

SESSION 4

**THE WORK OF THE
MINISTRY: BUILDING
UP THE BODY OF
CHRIST**

55

SESSION 5

**THE PROGRESS
OF THE GOSPEL:
STANDING FIRM AS
BEACHHEADS**

64

SESSION 6

**RESHAPING
OUR LIVES**

69

**GLOSSARY OF
KEY BIBLICAL
TERMS AND
CONCEPTS**

71

**LIFELONG
LEARNING**

73

ENDNOTES

DEVELOPING A MATURE, STRATEGIC CHURCH: THE INTENT OF THE LETTER **1**

Paul spent three years laying foundations in Ephesus. It was one of the most strategic cities in the Roman Empire. Paul understood this, which led him to set up operations in Ephesus in order to evangelize the region. He spent night and day building an eldership in Ephesus. But at the time of writing the letter, he had not seen the church in four years. It was time to step back into their lives in a strategic way. He consistently re-engaged his churches in one of three ways: a personal visit, sending one of his co-workers, or by addressing them through a letter.

Read this letter carefully, and seek to determine why Paul wrote it and what he expected to accomplish in the lives of the Ephesian churches through this correspondence. What clues are given in the letter itself to help you understand Paul's intent in writing?



Study the Scriptures

READ THE PASSAGES: EPHESIANS—THEN REFLECT ON
EPHESIANS 1:15–23; 3:14–21

Think Through the Questions:

1. Why did Paul write this letter to the Ephesian churches? What were his main concerns? What was he trying to accomplish?
2. Why do you think Paul chose the Ephesians to write his manifesto to, talking about the full unveiling of the Church? Why do you think he did not choose Antioch or Jerusalem?
3. What did he want them to fully grasp? to be fully enlightened concerning? What is the core revelation in the verses he wrote between the two prayers, which he thinks will transform them?
4. In what way is this letter appropriate for the next stage of development of the Ephesian churches in light of their strategic location?

Summarize the Core Teaching of the Passage:

Write a paragraph in the space below that summarizes Paul's overall intent for writing a letter to the Ephesians. Following that, write a brief statement that describes how each of the sections contribute to Paul's overall intent. You should end up with one big intent statement and two corollary, subordinate statements.

Intent for Writing the Letter to the Ephesian Churches:

To _____

by (chapters 1–3) _____

by (chapters 4–6) _____



Consult the Scholars

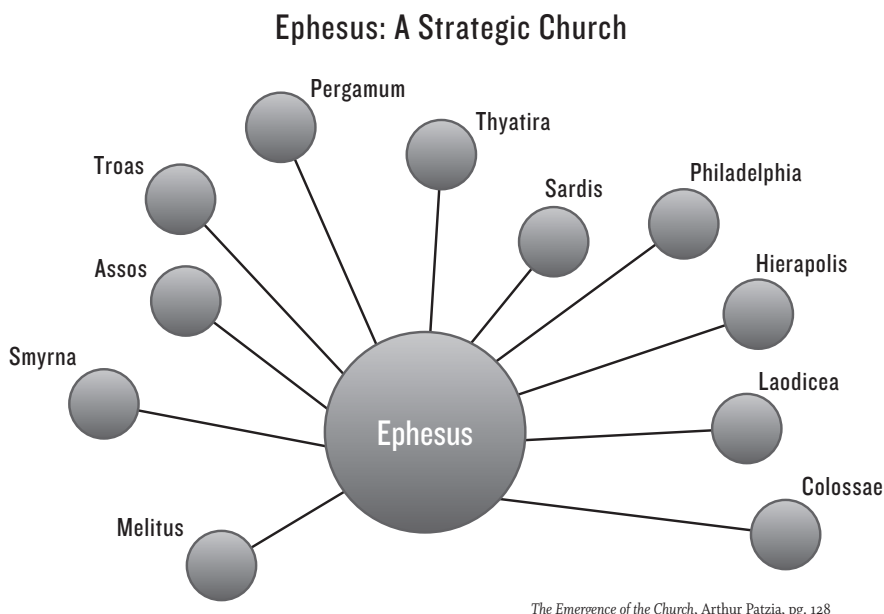
The following comments are designed to help you better understand the passage and to stimulate your thinking on the implications of the teaching.

Read and Reflect on this Brief Commentary on the Intent of the Ephesian Correspondence:

The Story of the Ephesian Church. The story of the churches in Ephesus is unique because we get to see a whole generation of the church. (Note: Paul views the churches in Ephesus as one church, though there were probably multiple house churches spread throughout the city.) In Acts we see a brief history of evangelism in the Jewish synagogues. This was around mid September 51 A.D. all the way to John’s letter to Ephesus in the mid 90s A.D., as recorded in Revelation 2:1–7 as dictated by Jesus. Let’s review this story briefly before we comment on Paul’s letter to Ephesus. The context in which the letter was written will shed significant light on Paul’s intent.

The initial history of the Church is recorded in Acts 18:8–19:41, followed by a significant section in Acts 20:17–38. Luke devotes almost three chapters, in the heart of his record, to the missionary journeys of Paul to this church. That makes it strategic in the book of Acts and, as you will see, strategic in Paul’s mission strategy. The church was probably born in mid-September 51 A.D., although Paul did not begin focusing on Ephesus until the spring of 53 A.D. He then spent three years there. After three months of preaching in the synagogues, he withdrew to the School of Tyrannus, where he taught large numbers of people for two years concerning the kingdom of God. Many in the region around Ephesus

heard the gospel and several churches were planted. See the chart “Ephesus: A Strategic Church.”



Acts 20:17–38 adds to the picture of Paul’s strategic investment in the churches in Ephesus. It documents the fact that he spent night and day for three years investing in building an eldership to serve the churches. Then he left them alone for four years before writing to them the New Testament letter we know as Ephesians, although not much is said about his involvement with them at that time. We see the Ephesian church again in two years, however, when Paul wrote his first letter to Timothy. In that letter, Paul encouraged Timothy to remain in Ephesus to deal with the problem elders there and to replace them with qualified men. Finally, we get a rare look at the beginning of the second generation of the Ephesian church in John’s letter to the seven churches in Revelation. There Jesus warns the Ephesians not to forget their first love.

Ephesus clearly became a very strategic church in Paul’s network. The church was located in the third largest city in the empire. Paul invested an enormous amount of time in this regional church. He based there for three years; used it as a base to impact a region of the Roman Empire; invested heavily in the eldership at the foundation, more than with any other church; revealed the fullness of his stewardship in a manifesto-type letter written to them; and two years later he placed his top co-worker, Timothy, there to rebuild aspects of its leadership team. He was banking on this church being a strategic, regional anchor for his network of churches.

Luke also saw that Ephesus was strategic. He devoted almost three chapters to Ephesus in the heart of his description of the missionary journeys. In light of the fact that these letters were tools for establishing churches and that Acts was catechetical in mission strategy, it is very safe to assume that we can add Paul’s work with this strategic church to our modern day mission strategy for how to establish mature, strategic churches within church-planting movements. It builds on the simple model we saw in the Thessalonian correspondence—founding, shaping, and stabilizing—creating a bigger, more sweeping cycle that follows the same pattern. Upon the foundation of an established regional church, the strategy in the Ephesian correspondence brought in the importance of vision for the community and a future, long-term process of defending the community. See the chart “Developing a Strategic Church.”

Developing a Strategic Church

Middle of Sept., 51	Spring 53–Spring 56	Autumn, 60	Autumn, 62	Mid 90
Birth of Community	Establishing the Community	Vision for Community	Defending the Community	The Next Generation
Unbaptized Disciples	Taught the Whole Counsel of God	Purpose, Call & Onemindedness	Setting in Order What Remains	Renewal of First Love
Acts 8:18–19:7	Acts 19:8–41; 20:17–38	Paul’s Letter to Ephesus	Paul’s Letter to Timothy	John’s Letter to Ephesus Rev. 2:1–7

The Intent of the Ephesus Letter. Now back to Paul’s purpose in writing this letter. In one sense it is quite different from the Thessalonian correspondence that we just studied. In the letters to the Thessalonians, Paul addressed a church he planted within six months of its birth. His intent was to stabilize them in the teaching of Christ by addressing three problems that were cropping up in the church. This letter is quite different. No problems are mentioned. It appears that he has not seen them for four years since he left and that they are not intimately familiar with his situation, or he with theirs. Yet he is fully aware of their strategic nature. So why does he write?

A significant aspect of his intent in writing the letter can be seen in the two prayers that encase his major revelation about the Church in Ephesians 1–3. He prays that their minds would be enlightened to understand the fullness of the revelation of Christ and His Church, which is happening at that time. He then talks about the fact that he has been given a unique, two-fold stewardship: to preach the gospel to the Gentiles and to bring to full view the Church, which in ages past was hidden. Specifically, he shows how the Jews and Gentiles will be one in the Church, not in the nation of Israel. And that Christ, who is the head of the Church, has a plan (administration) that is far beyond anything anyone could imagine. The Church is now the center of God’s plan, and Christ will amaze even the rulers and authorities in heavenly place with what He will demonstrate through His

Church. This deals once and for all with the idea that the churches were a remnant of faithful Israelites who would remain within Judaism and eventually restore it. The second prayer focuses on Paul's intent that the Ephesians would fully comprehend this, causing Christ to fully dwell in their hearts and giving them the expectation that God would do powerful things through His Church.

All of this gives shape to his intent for writing this to the Ephesians. In a sense, it is a letter to all of his churches (of course, as are all of his letters). But if you think about it carefully, it is very logical. This is a strong church, regionally strategic amongst his churches. Paul's own understanding of this revelation of the Church is now becoming clear. It opens up a clear vision that will compel the churches in Ephesus to rise to their call, to their new position in the plan of God, to fulfill their mission. If they grasp this and become one-minded around it, they will be filled with power to accomplish aspects of their mission beyond any of their expectations. It is important that they receive this revelation, develop a powerful vision of their call, and circulate this amongst all of the churches in the region that grew out of their base.

In the first half of the letter, Paul focuses on this central revelation of the Church and prays that they may fully grasp it, resulting in a deep dwelling of Christ in their midst—in their hearts. In the second half of the letter, he lays out how they are to mature as a church into one mature community—one mature man if you will—painting a picture of Christ to the watching world. After focusing specifically on how they are to walk as a community, he then turns his attention to the process of engaging in the powerful, Spirit-filled mission of the churches.

Read and Reflect on Key Quotes:

The following quote is taken from Paul Trebilco's work *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius*. Trebilco's work is the most exhaustive research on the Ephesian church to date—over 800 pages. It is a very significant contribution to our understanding of the early Christians.

“It is my contention that the life of the early Christians in

Ephesus sheds a good deal of light on early Christianity in general.

As we will see a number of leading personalities of early Christianity have a connection with Ephesus and the range of New Testament and early Christian texts which are linked with Ephesus is probably greater than that for any other city in which there was an early Christian community.

“Ephesus was also the capital of the province of Asia and the leading city of Asia Minor, where the church grew very rapidly. There is no doubting the importance of the church in Asia Minor in the first two centuries. Paul spent a considerable period of time in Asia Minor and Luke devoted a significant amount of Acts to Paul's travels in this region. That

the early Church grew very quickly in Asia Minor is shown by the number of centres in which, according to our evidence, the early church became established by the end of the second century. Thus Aune notes that 'In the aftermath of the fall of Jerusalem following the first Jewish revolt of A.D. 66–73, Anatolia had become perhaps the most important geographical center of Christianity in the ancient world'.

“As the leading city of the province of Asia, and a key city in the wider area of Asia Minor, Ephesus clearly has a significant place in early Christianity. A number of scholars have recognized that Ephesus was a very important centre of early Christianity. For example, von Harnack saw Ephesus as the ‘third capital of Christianity’ and added that ‘for a while it looked as if Ephesus was actually destined to be the final headquarters of the faith.’ Beasley-Murray notes that: ‘the church in Ephesus was the most important in Asia Minor, and possibly the most influential church in the world at the end of the first century AD.’”

Later on, Trebilco adds these comments on the churches in Ephesus.

“We have noted that, towards the end of the Pauline mission in Ephesus, there were at least two house churches (see 1 Cor. 16:19-20). We do not know whether ‘the whole church’, that is, all the Christians in Ephesus at that point, could or did meet together. At various points in this study we will note that Christians in Ephesus continued to meet in house churches throughout the period we are examining (*approximately 50 A.D. through 125 A.D.—my words*). However, we will propose in subsequent chapters that, after the Pauline mission, the evidence of the Pastorals and the Johannine Letters suggests that all the Christians in Ephesus, that is, all the house churches which made up various groups, did not meet together. This issue will also re-emerge in our discussion of Ignatius’ letter to the Ephesians.”¹

Record any insights from the brief commentary and quote:



Think Through the Issues

Today few people really believe that churches are the center of anything. Missions are driven by mission agencies. World evangelism and discipleship are driven by parachurch organizations. And all serious leadership development is done by professionals in seminaries. Church is a nice place to go; it is helpful in raising good kids; and it is responsible to give financially to agencies and parachurch groups. But it is not the center of the action. In the West, Christians are leaving churches in droves. Yet in God's plan, churches are to be at the center. Therefore, we need to invest in churches in a way that they become mature, strategic ministry centers, full of power. Discuss what it would take to build churches that are power centers for carrying out the purposes of God in this age.

ISSUE: Developing mature, strategic churches

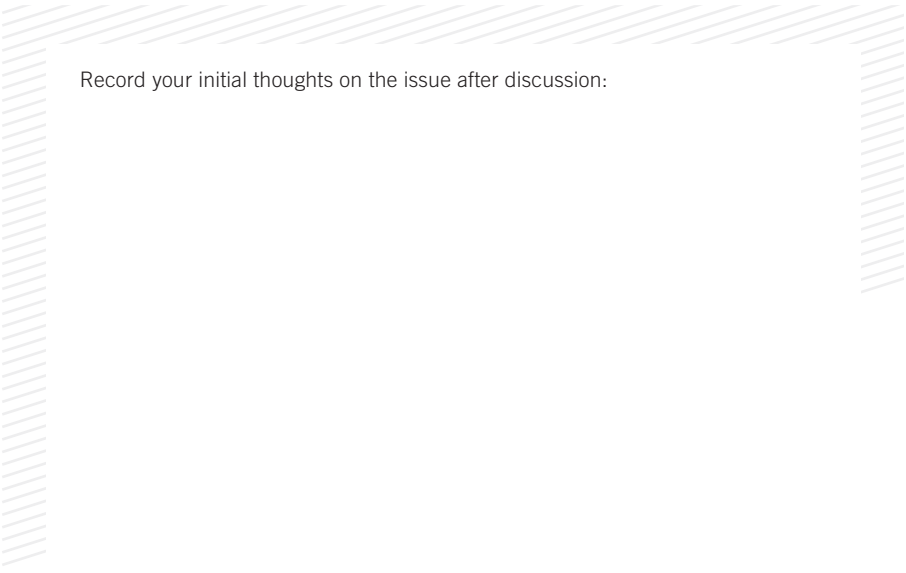
Think Through the Issue Before Discussion:

1. Why do you think the Church is so powerless today? What has led to the widespread belief that churches are not really central to missions and leadership development in the 21st century?
2. What would it take to develop a mature, strategic church? How long do you think it would take today?
3. What would it take for us to change our priorities in ministry to develop these sorts of churches? What battles might we have to face?
4. What might a mature, strategic church accomplish in your movement of churches? in your city? in your country?



Record your initial thoughts on the issue before discussion:

Discuss the issue in your small group.



Record your initial thoughts on the issue after discussion:



Apply the Principles

It is now time to respond to what you have studied and discussed. Take your time on this section.

Think Back Through the First Three Steps.

Design an Application for Your Life.

Think through your understanding of the strategic nature of the Church in the plan and purposes of God. Do you fully grasp that the Church is the center of God's purposes for this age? Ask God to enlighten you through your study of this letter to the churches in Ephesus in a way that consumes your life with Christ and His bride, the Church.

Write a brief prayer, based upon Paul's prayers for the churches in Ephesus, asking God to help you fully grasp the magnitude of His plan for this age through Christ and His bride, the Church. Then evaluate your own thoughts about the how strategic churches are in this plan.



— continued