

“APOCALYPSE SOON”

“Ephesus: The Church That Lost Its Love” (Revelation 2:1-7)

The Seven Churches of Revelation also known as *The Seven Churches of Asia Minor* were seven churches of significance in the early church. All seven churches were situated in what is modern-day Turkey. Sadly, none today has significant Christian populations. They are mentioned in Revelation chapter 2 and 3. There were other churches, some even more famous, that could have been chosen but *why* these ones? It seems they were selected to be representative of all churches both in John’s day and at any time in the history of the church. In many of the letters there is a relationship between the problems they faced and the particular circumstances and character of the environment in which they lived.

Notably each of the letters end in a personal exhortation beginning with the phrase “*He that hath an ear, let him hear.*” Therefore, the messages are pertinent to us today on a personal and a corporate level, as we face differing conditions and trials. Until the end of the age every church can find itself reflected in one or more of these seven churches. We in our local church are also recipients of this important letter.

All of the seven churches faced crisis – only two of them had problems solely from without, whereas the greatest challenge to others was from within. Sin always causes problems to any church no matter how God has used it in the past. At least five out of seven of them were a mixture of evil and good. This is still true of most churches today. Most of the letters contain words of warning as well as promise to those who hear and respond. These should be carefully noted and heeded by us also.

EXAMINER OF THE CHURCH

Trying to evaluate a church can be problematic. Most of us can be led astray by judging a church by the wrong standards. This is especially true if we are members of that local church. The seemingly poor church can be actually rich (Revelation 2:9) and the seemingly rich church can be in fact poor (Revelation 3:17). Here in Revelation chapters two and three, we are given a true insight into the spiritual character of seven churches as seen from God’s perspective. The Head of the Church, Jesus Christ holds every church in His hand (Revelation 1:16). He walks up and down constantly observing their needs, their service, their motives, and their actions (Revelation 1:13). This fact is comforting but also is a note of warning. It is the Lord Jesus Christ alone that founds, provides, protects, and builds a local church. He sees deeper than the superficial things such as mere congregational numbers, financial wealth, and spectacular buildings. Jesus Christ sees both the internal and external conditions of each local church (Revelation 2:23b). Nothing escapes His knowledge.

Every local church has been planted by Jesus Christ to be “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” (Matt. 5:13-14). The Apostle Paul calls it “*the pillar and ground of the truth*” (1 Tim. 3:15). As we read these seven letters from Jesus Christ we should remember that they are not written simply to increase our historical knowledge. We are to learn from the strengths as well as the weaknesses of each church. These spiritual “X-rays” are also to warn us that Christ is interested and takes careful note of the spiritual condition of our local churches today. This same Jesus is walking in the midst of our church and subjecting it to the same inerrant and objective

examination. A Church can fool the Christian world around it (and even itself) that it has God's approval, but these letters warn that this assumption should not be so quickly taken for granted.

BACKGROUND TO THE CHURCH AT EPHEBUS

Ephesus was a major port city on the western coast of Asia Minor. It was known as "the metropolis of Asia," as it was the fourth largest city in the Empire, and boasted a population of perhaps 300,000 people. A famous landmark was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the temple of Diana or Artemis. This temple was 425 feet long, 220 feet wide, and 60 feet high, with 127 marble pillars, many of them covered with gold. This cult worship dominated the religious life and was associated with gross immorality. It was a stronghold of the devil.

The Ephesian Church is unique in the treatment it receives in the New Testament as three inspired writers record God's evaluation of the work there. Luke wrote of its formation, Acts 18, 19, then of its foundation, Acts 20. Paul sent a wonderfully deep epistle to the Ephesians, which implied its spiritual depth. John finally was inspired to send a letter to it in Revelation 2:1-7. The Church at Ephesus also holds a unique and privileged position in Biblical history having had for sustained periods the Apostle Paul and Timothy as pastors. A strong Church tradition is that John the Apostle also pastored there after Paul's death. The Apostle Paul founded the church there and remained longer at Ephesus than he did at any other one place, preaching the gospel. There is no Bible-believing church there today. Certainly, it proves that gifted and godly pastors are no guarantee of spiritual progress for the future.

The apostle Paul paid his first visit to Ephesus on his second missionary journey (Acts 18:19-21), but it was very short. On his third journey he returned and remained two years and three months. There he spent "*three months disputing and persuading the things concerning the kingdom of God*" with the Jews at the local synagogue. After Paul had seen that further disputing with the synagogue Jews was pointless, he separated his disciples from them and utilized the school (or lecture hall) of a teacher Tyrannus to preach and teach the gospel for the next two years (Acts 19:8-9). Throughout this time God moved in a remarkable way and "*all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks.*" (Acts 19:10b) Paul was also able to perform "special miracles" there and many of those who practised pagan magic burned their occult books (Acts 19:11, 19).

It would appear that Paul set himself deliberately to work to establish a congregation there, as this was the principal seat of idolatry in the world at that time and was a place of great importance in the civil affairs of the Roman Empire. This may also explain why John later made it his permanent home. Paul's labours there were very assiduous, for he visited "*from house to house*", and "*ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears*" (Acts 20:20, 31). The opposition he met with was correspondingly great and he recounts to the Corinthians that he had "*fought with beasts at Ephesus*". Ephesus became a beachhead for evangelising the whole region. Acts 20 reveals Paul's affection for them was deep and personal.

EXAMINATION OF THE CHURCH (v1)

The first thing the Lord makes clear in verse one to this church at Ephesus was that He is the Lord of all the churches and observes them from within their midst. Jesus Christ has examined this church. He makes clear "*I know*" what is going on there. This is not an educated guess but the infallible and inerrant truth about them (cf. 1 Cor. 3:12; 2 Cor. 5:9-10; Psa. 139:1-12). Good

news and bad news will form the content of the first letter. In graciousness the Lord begins with words of commendation but then He also unerringly points out in words of condemnation their failures. This condemnation is to encourage them to correct their deviations from what Christ demands.

(1) COMMENDATION OF THIS CHURCH (v2-3, 6)

We see a number of things that this church is commended for:

(a) **SERVICE** – They were a church that did “*works*.” This was not a lazy church full of couch potatoes, where the members simply came to be entertained as “spiritual consumers” each week. They were willing to minister to others both inside and outside the local church. Doubtless, this church had a full schedule of activities each week. The Apostle instructed them in his epistle to the Ephesians “*For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.*” This Ephesian Church took these words seriously and was continually serving. Our Lord commends them for that. Jesus Christ carefully observes and records every ministry of every local church e.g. ushers, Sunday School teachers, audio workers etc. No act of service is too small to escape His attention (2 Cor. 5:9-10; Heb. 6:10-12).

(b) **SACRIFICE** – This was a sacrificial church. This Greek word translated “*labours*” means to “toil to the point of exhaustion.” It emphasises the depth and degree of their labour for the Lord. Despite much hardship and suffering, these people did not just talk Christianity but they took their faith seriously and put it to work. They put their heart and soul into their ministry. We know from the book of Acts that the gospel had a profound impact in that city and even went out from there to all of Asia Minor (Acts 19:10, 25-27). Their motive was even right “*for My Name’s sake hast laboured.*” They laboured not for self but for the honour and glory of Jesus Christ. Sadly too many today serve with the wrong motives in many churches. A faithful church should be serving the Lord sacrificially if it is to be used as an instrument of God to reach the world around. As one commentator put it, “To come to Christ costs nothing, to follow Christ costs something, but to serve Christ costs everything.” The Ephesians gave everything for Christ’s sake.

(c) **STEADFASTNESS** – This church did not wilt under pressure. They are commended for their “*patience*” a word meaning “endurance under trials.” Also, they are praised for the fact that they “*hast not fainted*” in their labours. This is a consistent church where there are no fair-weather followers or John Mark/Demas type Christians at Ephesus. They stuck with the work through all kinds of difficulties and discouragements.

(d) **SEPARATISM** – Despite the immoral and idolatrous environment of proud and wealthy Ephesus, this was a church that maintained continually high moral and theological standards. They were not blown away by the latest theological wind of error, but were willing to make difficult choices and suffer any resulting consequences. They had not yielded to the pressures to conform to the idolatrous and immoral world around them. As a church, they did not place unity over truth, but earnestly contended for the faith. Clearly, they knew and revered God’s Word, Apostolic doctrines and practices intimately to make such effective judgments. The Apostle Paul had warned them more than thirty years previously in Acts 20:28-30 of the dangers of evil men

teaching “*perverse things*” seeking to infiltrate them from within and without. He also warned them when he wrote his letter in Ephesians 4:27, “*Neither give place to the devil.*”

The Ephesians Christians could discern between a phoney and the real thing. They actively guarded their pulpit from false teachers; they tested them biblically (1 John 4:1); and they refused to fellowship with them. In v6 we are told they hated what Christ hated as, “*thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitanes, which I also hate.*” They separated from false doctrine and false deeds! This church was undoubtedly a “*bastion of truth*” and a “*fortress of the faith.*” Christ commends them here for fully following Paul’s commands. He certainly does not charge them for being “*unloving*” or “*judgmental*” by protecting the purity of the Gospel truth. The church that Christ commends hates all immorality and theological error, and does not allow it in the church. Intolerance of moral evil and doctrinal deviation within the church is not unchristian, unloving, or unkind! (Psa. 119:128; Amos 5:15)

Clearly, there was much to praise at Ephesus. It was orthodox in theology, practice, motive, and service. In this sense, the church was rock-solid! Moffatt pertinently observed that it was “*Tired in loyalty, not of it.*” The Ephesian church can bear anything except the presence of impostors in her membership.” As we read this commendation, we may be tempted to conclude that this is an exemplary church. Even the Lord Jesus Christ effectively graded it A+ for its service, sacrifice, steadfastness, and separatism. Very few churches today are serving sacrificially, are steadfast, and even fewer are willing to practice biblical separation from moral evil, false doctrine, and deviant preachers. Indeed, some may conclude that the church at Ephesus was probably better than any church in Singapore today. What could possibly be wrong with a church like this? Most of us would likely conclude that there couldn’t be anything wrong with this church. Probably few, if indeed any, could see a major failure, except God. The One whose eyes are as “*a flame of fire*” will look into every part both inwardly and outwardly.

The Church at Ephesus had many things to commend it. It was graded highly for its service, sacrifice, steadfastness, and separatism. However, if we simply looked at v1-3 and ignored v4-6 we would get an unbalanced view of this church. There is a “*nevertheless*” in v4 that needs to be faithfully pointed out. The Bible never encourages us to simply look for the good points in a church and ignore the failures. Nor, it should be noted, does it encourage us to simply seek to point out the failures in a church and ignore its commendatory points. Too often believers swing to one of these extremes in assessing churches, fellow believers, and even family members. Some seem to revel in criticizing and faultfinding whereas others go the other end of the spectrum and ignore any failure or sin. An honest yet balanced approach is the way of our Master and this is something every parent and every church leader should note.

There is a “*nevertheless*” that needs to be faithfully pointed out. This “*nevertheless*” is not the sin of the church around the corner but the sins of our church and in our lives. Too many preachers seem to revel in pointing out the faults in other churches (which need to be pointed out), but fail to deal with the sins of those in front of them. Don’t just listen to what a preacher says, but listen to what he leaves out! The Apostle Paul draws attention that he preached, “*all the counsel of God*” at Ephesus (Acts 20:27).

(2) CONDEMNATION OF THIS CHURCH (v4-5)

To the outside observer, things look rosy, but Christ sees much deeper than the external. Hebrews 4:13 warns us, “*Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in His sight: but all things are*

naked and opened unto the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.” Many people like to criticize our church that we can shrug off but when God speaks against us then our church should take careful note. The tone of this letter suddenly changes abruptly at this juncture. Jesus Christ hones in on a glaring failure that maybe no one else saw but that He sees in this church, *“Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.”* (v4). It is a seemingly small condemnation compared to their lengthy commendation. This love here is that *agape* love, that selfless sacrificial love that chooses to love without any demand for reciprocation. They were guilty of an inward sin that is sometimes hard to detect. But it is not hidden to the laser eyes of the Master who penetrates every external façade.

In Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians he told them they were *“raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus”* (Eph. 2:6). Now, the same Christ tells them *“thou art fallen”* (v5a). This verb *“art fallen”* is in the perfect tense in the Greek indicating a state that was completed in the past that the results continue into the present. After such words of praise in v1-3, this must have been like a thunderbolt to the congregation at Ephesus as it was read out. Despite their faithful and zealous ministries and defence of the faith, they have critical *“heart trouble.”* Their labours and defence of the faith was from a heart that was no longer motivated by love for Christ. They were still fundamentalist but sadly were now also merely formalistic. Their doctrine and practice had not changed but there was a change inwardly. This decline may seem insignificant to us but it was not to God. Sound doctrine is vital, as a church that stands for nothing will fall for anything. However, sound doctrine is not enough.

We need to note it is not just *what* we do for the Lord that is important ***but how we do it is equally significant.*** Their overall motive was right *“for My Name’s sake hast laboured.”* (v3) So what is amazing and frightening here is that a church can do the right thing with the right motive, yet fail because they do it not from a heart blazing with love for Christ. It is interesting to note that the Apostle Paul in his epistle to the Ephesians mentions on at least 20 occasions refers to this word *“love.”* He prayed for the saints there that *“That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love”* (Eph. 3:17). He also urged them to *“walk in love”* (Eph. 5:2) and to be *“speaking the truth in love”* (Eph. 4:15). Too many today win an argument but lose a friend. It is not just *what* you say that is critical but also *how* you say it.

WHAT IS FIRST LOVE?

First love is the *“honeymoon love”* of a young couple. It is hard to exactly define but it is fervent, selfless, instinctive, and openly displayed. In Christian terms, it is the love for Christ that characterizes a new believer. He or she is consumed with the beauty and the glory and the majesty of Christ. It is that pure or chaste love that Paul wrote to the Corinthians, *“For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ”* (2 Cor. 11:2-3)

This is evidenced when the Bible seems a wonder to you; prayer is a continual joy; you loved to sing about Jesus; and the fellowship of the saints was so precious to you. It is a period when *“He is precious”* (1 Peter 2:7) and a believer is living in a state that Peter described *“Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory”* (1 Peter 1:8). Jeremiah also refers to it, *“Moreover the word of the LORD came to me, saying, Go and cry in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, Thus saith the LORD; I remember thee, the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals, when thou wentest after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown.”* (Jer. 2:1-2)

Jesus Christ instructed that the foundation of Christianity was laid on a love for Him more than you love anybody else, *“He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me”*. (Matt. 10:37)

However, now the Ephesian believer’s labour gradually came to be *merely mechanical*. There is always a danger that our love grows cold. Just like Martha, we can place service for Christ over the better place of fellowship with Him (Luke 10:38-42). Jesus Christ explicitly predicted that, *“the love of many shall wax cold”* (Matt. 24:12). We must all be careful of this danger that our service for Christ does not become dead orthodoxy i.e. we become dead from the neck downwards! The word *“left”* is a Greek word that means, “to leave, forsake, depart.” It pictures a gradual departure. Probably few noticed the departure. This was not something that simply occurred in 24 hrs. As they laboured fervently there came a point where their love began to wane. Instead of the love for Christ maturing and deepening as the years progressed, the Ephesian Christians began to lose the excitement and joy of that first love that dawned on their souls. Other things had replaced it such as a love for money, possessions, position, entertainment, learning, family etc. These became the idols in their hearts competing with their love for the Master.

Doubtless, this decline in their love for Christ also manifested in a diminished love for each other, a reduced love for the lost, which was characteristic of the church when it was originally founded. In Acts 19 it was so glorious when *“mightily grew the word of God and prevailed”* (Acts 19:20). Christ recognizes that the emotion and the enthusiasm have dwindled. The Master sees and is concerned about the inward backsliding. The *“somenwhat”* that Christ has against this church is not insignificant but it is a critical issue! Some think that the lack of any emotion and enthusiasm in a church is a good thing. They believe that the longer your face the more spiritual you are! This passage shows what a foolish and unbiblical idea that is. However, it is true that mere emotionalism and enthusiasm without doctrinal substance is equally foolish. The Ephesians had the latter and were commended, but they were condemned for the absence of the former. One cannot be substituted in God’s eyes for the other. Paul warned the Corinthians of this, *“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.”* (1 Cor. 13:1-2)

The ministry schedule was full, the tithes were being paid, the membership roll was large, but sadly the honeymoon is now over at Ephesus! John MacArthur makes a poignant comment on how they went about their service,

“Oh, they were doing what they always did, because that’s what you do. That’s what’s expected. That’s what’s planned. That’s the way the program’s laid out. That’s the way people are gonna evaluate you and respect you and honor you, and they did it, and the theology was in place. But the honeymoon was over. It was like a marriage can be. Everything was there. Faithfulness was there, and duty was there, and responsibility was there. But the passion was gone. No great scandal. No great organization blunder. No loss of resources financial or human. But the heart was cold. The thrill was gone. The enthusiasm was drying out.”

The Ephesians had now doctrine without devotion, labour without love, activity without affection, and purity without true passion. All of these things must be present for a Church to please Christ - anything less than that, stirs Christ’s displeasure. We so often forget that the great commandment is to *“love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind”*

(Matt. 22:37). The simple test of our spiritual standing is to what degree do we love Jesus Christ? MacArthur warns, “Evangelical Christianity has all but lost this perspective on the Christian life. Most people have the idea that the Christian life is about how much God loves me and wants to fulfill my dreams and my desires and my ambitions and my goals and my objectives. And what he wants to do is make something wonderful out of me, and lift me up, and elevate me, and fulfill all the hopes of my heart. It’s more about God loving me so much that he wants to do all of this than it is about me loving him.”

(3) COUNSEL TO THIS CHURCH (v5)

Our Lord does not simply point out the faults in this church and leave it to respond. In grace and longsuffering the Great Physician prescribes the remedy for their spiritual heart disease. Christ is the Authority over their lives, but He also is the Answer for their problem. The pattern of our Lord is worth remembering here. His words of condemnation are preceded with loving words of commendation and then His words of condemnation lead to a window of hope. Jesus Christ gives an impassioned plea of “3 R’s” in order to deal with their failure: **(i) REMEMBER (ii) REPENT, (iii) RETURN** However, He also solemnly warns that if they do not follow His spiritual prescription to deal with their disease, He will have to **REMOVE**. So the choice Jesus Christ lays before this church, and indeed any church, that is flagging in its devotion for Him is **REMOVAL** or **REVIVAL**. There is no third option offered!

The church at Thessalonica offered them a pattern of what they should be in deeds, motive, and method by a church in its first love. The Apostle Paul gives thanks for a church, “*remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father*” (1 Thess. 1:3). Their labour was rooted in love. Ephesus had just the outward forms of religion without the love of the heart that should have channeled them. Christ counsels that the first love can be restored to the Church at Ephesus if they do the following three things:

(i) REMEMBER – the idea here is that they should cast their minds back to the time when they served Christ not as a mechanical duty but because their hearts were ablaze with love for Him. The verb form is literally “keep on remembering” on a continuous basis. No doubt, such a process will lead them to recognise their current loveless state of service. They needed to remember the spiritual darkness of immorality and idolatry they were saved from and the peace and joy they obtained. They also needed to remember how Christ did a work of revival in the city of Ephesus.

The Bible is full of instances of when God calls us to remember what He has done in our lives in the past. All of us need to spiritually audit our love for Christ each day. We need to check whether our Christian service lost some of its excitement and joy. Is it somewhat boring and routine? Do you love Christ more now than you have in the past? As one preacher questioned, “Do you remember when your passion was to know him and the power of his resurrection? Remember when there was absolutely nothing that would prevent you from coming to church? And yet now the slightest little thing will keep you away. Remember when even the smallest commandment would prick your heart and you would be broken before the Lord and you would gladly repent and begin to obey? But now it is as if nothing really moves you. Remember when you had that joyful countenance on your face and your heart was overflowing with praise and you longed to sing the wonderful songs of redemption? But now

you have kind of grown cold and a bit sour and sullen and you complain and, frankly, you are kind of apathetic about those things. Remember when, once upon a time, wild horses couldn't keep you away from coming and praying together with the saints? But now you have just got more pressing priorities. It is amazing, isn't it, how somehow imperceptibly our love can grow cold, how subtly our worship can become dead and perfunctory, just a duty, just something that we go through in terms of motions without really any passion or love. Christian - look back on the past and what Christ has done for you.

(ii) REPENT – the Greek word translated “*repen*” means to literally “have a change of mind.” It will involve recognising that our previous actions were sinful and sorrowfully turning away from such a path. Failure to love Christ is not some insignificant thing to God. It is a sin not to love Christ with all of your heart. Confession of this sin is required (1 John 1:9) as this is not a minor failure, “*If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema Maranatha*” (1 Cor. 16:22). They were to recognise their sin, confess it, and then have a change of mind about loving and serving Christ.

(iii) RETURN – they are also called to return or to repeat the “*first works*.” A true love for Christ always manifests in works of love and service. This word translated “*first*” means “first in time, place, or rank.” Christ is calling the Ephesian believers to return to the works they did when they first served with fervent sacrificial love. He is calling them also to return to do the works they prized above every other. Doubtless, this period in their lives was when they served according to the command of Christ, “*But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you*” (Matt. 6:33).

ALTERNATIVE – REMOVAL (v5b) - Jesus Christ is longsuffering and merciful to this church. All was not well but all was not lost yet. The displeased Saviour extends this window of opportunity to remember, repent, and return. But this day of grace should not be presumed upon. He warns, “*or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.*” This “or else” is not some idle threat or mere suggestion but carries with it the authority of the Triune God. Christ will “unchurch” such a church!

A loveless Christian and a loveless Church grieves the Holy Spirit and quenches the Holy Spirit. What Christ is warning here is that He will come and personally remove the light-bearing capacity of this church. This is not the judgment of the second coming but a special judgment upon a local church. Despite all these privileges the church was in danger of losing them all. Eventually it did! Today the city of Ephesus lies in ruins and there is no Bible-believing witness there. The candlestick has been gone for centuries! Similarly, there are many churches today that have a great history with famous godly pastors but today they are just an empty shell of religious activity. Yes, the ministries still go ahead but the light of Christ is not present.

CONCLUSION

This church at Ephesus had a really incredible beginning with the best possible leadership, but tragically a terrible ending. For a church like ours, we are probably not in immediate danger of succumbing to doctrinal heresy or an obvious change in the level of service. The greatest threat to our future is from within the hearts of our members. We may be faithful in our service, our sacrifice, and our separation, but these do not in themselves necessarily reflect a true love for

God. Our heads may be doctrinally right while our hearts be going the wrong direction. Loveless orthodoxy and service will be like a silent killer disease that will poison us from within. A church becomes like the one at Ephesus when its people diminish in love for Christ. Accurate self-appraisal is always difficult but are we guilty of waning in our love for Christ? Has a cold fog descended on you today? Do you love the service more than you love the Saviour? The Risen Lord has one question for us today, *“Lovest thou Me?”* Are you able to truthfully reply, *“Lord, Thou knowest all things; Thou knowest that I love Thee.”* (John 21:17) Do not think that we will be an exception to these warnings as Christ applied it to us also, *“He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.”* (v7)