

EPHESUS: FORSAKING CHRIST
Revelation 2:1-7
June 1, 2008 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

We begin a series this morning on the letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation 2-3. Before we look together at the first of these letters to the church at Ephesus, it would be helpful to introduce what these letters have in common and address some of the details in particular. Each of these letters has a particular pattern with little variance: 1) they are addressed to the angel of the church; 2) they reiterate some characteristic of Christ found in chapter 1 particularly needed for that church; 3) Christ's assessment of that church designated by the words "**I know**," containing words of commendation or condemnation or both; 4) an exhortation from Christ to motivate these churches to obey Him; 5) promises attached to the exhortation in the form of blessing for obedience and cursing for disobedience; 6) a call to hear and heed what Christ has said to them.

Disagreement exists among scholars as to the nature of the churches. A few emphasize the *number*, claiming that seven, designating *completeness* or *wholeness*, is more significant than the churches themselves. Some would say that these churches represent seven periods of *church history*: Ephesus representing the first century church, Smyrna the period of persecution, Pergamum the age of Constantine, Thyatira the Middle Ages, Sardis the Reformation era, Philadelphia the time of the modern missionary movement, and Laodicea the apostasy of the last days.¹ Among these, some believe the letters were real letters to real churches and some believe the letters to be only symbolic of these periods in history and, being part of a vision, not real letters at all. However, as we work our way through these letters, it will become apparent that I am of the view that these were real letters to real churches written specifically to those individual churches but representing any church in any period of history. The marks of these churches, both in commendation and condemnation from Christ, are found in the church today. The letters, with both their promises and warnings, are meant to represent the church as a whole. Therefore, the letters were meant to be pastoral with application for the entire church of Christ throughout the ages.

Disagreement is also found concerning the identity of the angels. Just prior to these letters we read in Revelation 1:20, "As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches." Here Christ defines the "lampstands" as the seven churches and the "stars" as the angels of the seven churches but He does not give the identity of the angels. Scholars debate whether these are literal angels, or whether they represent the "messenger" or pastor in each church, or whether the angel speaks of the heavenly reality of the church viewed from Christ's perspective,² a type of personification of the church. The arguments for and against all of these views are all somewhat convincing and therefore the identity of the angels will remain a point of debate.

For our purposes it is important to recognize that the central point of these letters is not on the angels, to whom the letters were written, nor on the churches, to which they were addressed, though they are certainly prominent, but on the nature and character of Christ and His words concerning these churches. The theme of the book of Revelation is the worship of Jesus Christ

¹ Leon Morris, *TNTC: Revelation*, 57.

² Phil Newton, http://www.southwoodsbc.org/sermons/revelation_01.09-20.html.

as Lord of all. These churches had differing elements that robbed Christ of the worship and the glory due Him alone. Things had crept into the life of the body that could, or had, cripple the life of the body. Therefore, the letters were given to remind the churches to *keep Christ central in all things at all times*. That will be our goal as we work our way through these letters and ask the question, “What does Christ think of the Church?”

I. His Authority (2:1)

In Revelation 1:12-20 that we read earlier in our Scripture reading, John is granted a vision of the risen and glorified Christ. As we noted earlier, each of the seven letters begins with a description of our Lord taken from that remarkable vision, descriptions uniquely appropriate to the situation of that particular church and applicable to all churches. The letter to the church at Ephesus opens, **“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this.”** There are two phrases that emphasize the authority of Christ found in this description.

1. Holding (2:1a)

Regardless of the identity of **“the angel of the church in Ephesus,”** whether it be a guardian angel, a “messenger” or pastor of the church, or heavenly representation of the church, Christ’s authority is demonstrated in that He **“holds the seven stars in His right hand,”** a description of Christ from 1:16. The **“right hand”** is a place of authority. The only way to have a place at the right hand of Christ was for it to be granted. Further, Christ held them in His right hand, demonstrating His complete grip, His control, His protection over them.

2. Walking (2:1b)

Christ is then seen by John as **“the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands”** as seen in 1:13. **“The One who walks”** is a present participle showing the continuous presence of Christ. **“Among”** is better translated “in the middle of” as some translations have it. So what John described was the Christ who is continually in the midst of His Church. Nothing escapes the gaze of the all-seeing and all-knowing Christ. Sam Storms captures the truth of Christ’s sovereignty seen in Christ’s walking:

He “walks” among the lampstands. He is present in and among his people. He guards and protects and preserves the church. He is never, ever absent! No service is conducted at which he fails to show up. No meal is served for which he does not sit down. No sermon is preached that he does not evaluate. No sin is committed of which he is unaware. No individual enters an auditorium of whom he fails to take notice. No tear is shed that escapes his eye. No pain is felt that his heart does not share. No decision is made that he does not judge. No song is sung that he does not hear.³

So we see first Christ emphasizing His person and work in the midst of the church at Ephesus, His authority and sovereign rule over them.

II. His Knowledge (2:2-4, 6)

With Christ in the midst, He knows all things. Each of the letters sets forth what Christ knows concerning each church, His assessment of the life of the body. All of the churches are

³ Sam Storms, <http://www.enjoyinggodministries.com/article/3-christ-in-and-over-his-church-21>.

commended where they can be commended; five of them are condemned. Ephesus received both commendation and condemnation from the all-seeing, all-knowing Christ.

1. Commendation (vv. 2-3, 6)

Jesus proclaimed, **“I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them *to be* false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary.”** There are two things that stand out in this commendation of the church at Ephesus.

a. It was a *laboring* church (v. 2a, 3)

To appreciate the church at Ephesus it would be a good idea to learn something about the city. Ephesus was one of the five greatest cities in the ancient Roman Empire. It was a great commercial and religious center in the first century. The Temple of Diana, or Artemis, was considered one of the wonders of the world. That temple was four times the size of the great Parthenon at Athens. The population of Ephesus has been estimated to be over 300,000 people. There was a magnificent road that was 70 feet wide and lined with columns that ran from the main harbor to the great theater. The great Ephesian theater had a seating capacity of between 25,000+. This historic theater serves as a background for one of the great episodes of the early church, as recorded in Acts 19. Here, there was a showdown between the silversmiths who made statues of the goddess Diana, and the apostle Paul and some of the Christians in the city. Paul had said publicly that man-made gods were no gods at all. The silversmiths and artisans who made the idols of Diana became furious and afraid at this teaching, because they thought that if the people listened to Paul, they would lose their livelihood. So at a guild meeting in this great theater, they started a huge riot that came close to being an all-out war.

This was the cultural and religious milieu when Paul established the church in Ephesus. During his second missionary journey, Paul visited this city on his way from Corinth to Jerusalem, where he left the husband and wife team of Priscilla and Aquila in charge of the church. While Paul was on his third missionary journey he spent over two years in Ephesus and had a successful ministry. In the book of Acts, we are told that “God did extraordinary miracles through Paul ...” (Acts 19:11) and “the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power” (v. 20). In fact, at least 12 other churches were started in Asia Minor, from the influence and ministry of this church in Ephesus.

Therefore, Christ saw the labors of this church in the midst of perversity. As He was the Light among the lampstands, they fulfilled their role as being light in a dark culture. He knew the pressure they faced, the opposition from those who did not know Christ. And yet, they worked. **“Toil”** designates working to the point of exhaustion; **“perseverance”** shows that Christ noticed their patience in these trying circumstances. These were diligent workers for Christ, evangelizing the lost, discipling the believers, and providing for temporal needs.

b. It was a *discriminating* church (v. 2b, 6)

“I know... that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false.” Right doctrine was essential to this church. While persecution was expected from without, these at Ephesus knew that there would be those who would try to infiltrate the church and destroy it from within.

Therefore, Christ commends them for their caution, for their taking great care to guard the flock from wolves dressed in sheep cloth. Paul had given this church a heads up before he left them, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock... I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:28-30). Apparently, some 30 years later, the wolves had arrived in a particular group called the Nicolaitans in v. 6, where Christ commends the church for their hatred, yes, hatred of the works of these Nicolaitans because He also hated their works. We will comment more on this group or cult in a couple of weeks when we look at the church at Pergamum.

Here Christ commended the church for their discrimination, for their care for what constituted the church. Phil Newton comments, “They were intolerant when it came to being church members—intolerant in a good sense. They would not bear having those within their church fellowship living ungodly lives. Being part of the church meant something to them. Christians must show the character of Christians.”⁴

So we see that this church discriminated, in a positive sense, against anyone who did not cherish the truth of God’s Word and understand the gospel He set forth in His Word. And they did all of this for the sake of Christ. Their motive was to glorify Him and they never wearied in their toil and perseverance. In a word, Christ commended them for their faithfulness. However, despite the positive highlights, Christ spotted a fatal flaw.

2. Condemnation (v. 4)

“But I have *this* against you, that you have left your first love.” We know when we see the word “**but**” that the tone has changed. Though Christ commended them for their doctrinal purity and their loyal service, the flaw was that their service had become mechanical. They were merely going through the motions. Their affection for Christ had cooled. The second generation had now risen in this early church. While they maintained the teaching and the discipline, they had left its “**first love.**” Simply put, they were not demonstrating that they “love the Lord with all their heart and mind and soul and strength, and their neighbor as themselves.” Their spiritual love had diminished. Consequently, their doctrine became a source of pride and their spiritual service routine at best and perhaps even hypocritical.

How does this happen in a church? How does the church lose its passion and love for Christ?

- People who used to be convicted by the sermons that were preached, no longer pay attention.
- People coming to know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and being baptized, ceases to excite the church membership.
- People who viewed themselves as links in a chain to introduce someone to Jesus Christ stop intentional activity for God in their circles of influence.
- People who used to pray stop praying.
- People who used to give sacrificially stop giving.

These actions occur quite subtly in the life of a church. Edmund Burke has a famous quote:

Very seldom does a man take one giant step from a life of virtue and goodness into a life of vice and corruption. Usually, he begins his journey into evil by taking little steps into the shaded areas, areas tinted and colored just a bit, almost unnoticed by those around

⁴ Phil Newton, http://www.southwoodsbc.org/sermons/revelation_02.01-07.html

him. Until one day, hardly aware that he had made the journey, he finds himself firmly entangled in a life of vice and corruption.⁵

What “little steps” may have cooled your love for the Savior? What has replaced the time you used to spend with the Lord? Television, browsing the web, listening to music? Your job? Your family? Recreation? Church? Yes, as we learn from this church that even church can become a substitute for a thriving love for Christ. Jesus warned of diminishing love in Matthew 24:12, “Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold.”

That’s the way sin works. It doesn’t take giant steps from virtue to corruption, just little steps. And as wickedness increases, this once wonderful, warm, unselfish, vibrant love in your life begins to grow cold like an ember that is all alone, no longer a part of the fire. And soon it will die.

III. His Exhortation (2:5, 7)

I like the way John MacArthur introduces this section, “The Great Physician issued a prescription to the Ephesians that would cure their spiritual malaise.”⁶ This prescription, in the form of an exhortation, is couched in prophetic language of warning and promise.

1. Warning (v. 5)

“Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent.”

a. Remember

The first thing is to think back to what it was like when you first entered into a relationship with God, or remember a time when you re-committed your life to following Him as the forgiver of your sin and the leader of your life. Remember the joy, the excitement, the enthusiasm you had for the things of God. Remember how you saw God's hand in every circumstance. Remember how you felt the presence of God in you. Remember the thankfulness you felt for your redemption. And ask Him to give you those feelings again. He will!

b. Repent

c. Return

2. Promise (v.7)

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.”

a. Hear

b. Endure

⁵ Edmund Burke,

⁶ John MacArthur, *Because the Time Is Near*, 51.

Conclusion

1. Right doctrine should lead to right practice. The church at Ephesus was commended for their doctrine and the practice that initially flowed from their understanding. However, they lost the balance. Gradually, their knowledge began to puff up and they lost their way in “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15; 1 Cor. 13:1). Leonard Ravenhill noted, “Your doctrine can be as straight as a gun barrel-and just as empty!” “You can have all of your doctrines right, yet still not have the presence of God.”⁷

2. Endure hardship for the sake of Christ.

3. Understand the need for church discipline.

4. What does Christ think of Grace Covenant? If you have cooled, then remember, repent, and renew your priorities. That is why we come together at the Lord’s Table this morning. Christ instituted the Supper as a time of remembrance, repentance, and renewal.

⁷ Leonard Ravenhill, from email correspondence with church member.