

The Church at Its Best

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Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write: These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden lampstands. I know thy works, and thy labor, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them who are evil; and thou hast tried them who say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars; and hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast labored, and hast not fainted. Nevertheless, I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember, therefore, from where thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works, or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy lampstand out of its place, except thou repent.
(Revelation 2:1-5)

In the New Testament there are two epistles to the Ephesians. Paul wrote one of them. (In the better manuscripts the inscription *en Epheso*, that is, “in Ephesus” is not there. It was penciled in, apparently, because it was a circular epistle, intended to make the rounds of the churches there in the province of Asia.) The second epistle to the Ephesians is definitely directed to the church at Ephesus. It is the first of seven letters to seven churches which our Lord sent through John. They are love letters from Him. These churches were in the province of Asia, a proconsular province – not the continent of Asia or Asia Minor, but a section that took in at least one third of Asia Minor.

The interpretation of these seven letters in the Book of Revelation has been rather controversial. The “contemporary” interpretation is that these letters are merely historical documents. They were addressed to the seven churches and had meaning and application for them alone, with no message for us today. The “composite” interpretation is that in these seven letters are messages to all churches of all ages. The “chronological” interpretation is that we have in these seven letters the complete history of the church given in prophetic form, beginning with Ephesus, representing the New Testament church, and concluding with Laodicea, representing the present-day modern church.

Any way you interpret these seven letters – and I think there is an element of truth in all these views – the church at Ephesus represents the New Testament church. If you believe it was meant for only the church of that day or if you hold the chronological view, we are in agreement that this letter is a picture of the New Testament church.

These seven churches were, I think, representative of the New Testament churches of that day. They were outstanding churches. However, there were other great churches, as this area was probably the most important part of the Roman Empire during the first, second, and even the third centuries. By 2000 B.C. there was a civilization along this west coast of Turkey – a very beautiful area that reminds me of Southern California, without smog, of course. Some of the richest land is there. This was the heart of the great Hittite nation in ancient times. Ephesus was inhabited by 2000 B.C., as was Smyrna, then Thyatira and the others later.

Kipling said, “East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,” but he was wrong, because in Ephesus East and West met and mingled. The Anatolian civilization and the Greek civilization came together there and erected their works

The church at Ephesus was the church at its best. And it was located in the city of Ephesus where you see religion at its worst. Ephesus was the center of heathen idolatry. Pagan practices there were more degraded than in any other place. Ephesus has been called the Vanity Fair of Asia. Pliny, that great pagan, said it was the light of Asia. It was both a commercial and religious center and capital of that entire area.

In the city of Ephesus was the temple of Artemis or, as we know it from mythology and the Scriptures, the temple of Diana – “Great is Diana of the Ephesians” (Acts 19:28). Her temple in Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The largest Greek temple ever constructed, four times larger than the Parthenon, it was built over a marsh on an artificial foundation of skins and charcoal to protect it from earthquakes. It was built of marble with more than one hundred external columns. If you ever go to Istanbul, go to Hagia Sophia and see those beautiful green columns which were taken out of the temple of Diana by Justinian. The doors were of hand-carved cypress wood. The staircase was carved out of one vine from Cyprus. It was an art gallery. The masterpieces of Praxiteles, Phidias, and Scopas were there. Apelles’ famous painting of Alexander hung in that temple. It was the bank of Asia in which all the nations and cities of that day deposited their wealth.

In the temple the most sacred idol of heathenism stood behind purple curtains. Diana was an Oriental goddess “rude as an African fetich”¹ – not the Greek Diana which is more familiar to us. As the goddess of fertility, she had many breasts. She held in one hand a trident and in the other hand a club. She was worshiped not only in Ephesus, but her images were sent throughout the Empire of that day. Her worshipers indulged in the basest religious rites of sensuality. It was vicious and vile.

When Paul was on his second missionary journey, he wanted to go to Ephesus, but the Holy Spirit of God restrained him. Years later into this sinful city came the brilliant apostle to the Gentiles on his third missionary journey. When Paul landed at the harbor there was that great harbor boulevard of white marble (it is there today), and on each side were all sorts of lovely buildings, temples, and shops. There was a great market on the right as he went up, then ahead of him on the side of the mountain was the great theater that seated 20,000 people, and way off to the left was the amphitheater that seated over 100,000 people. At times probably as many as a million or two million people gathered in Ephesus. Paul spent three years in this city, two years in the school of Tyrannus. Dr. Luke says that from here sounded out the gospel throughout all Asia. Paul had his greatest ministry in the city of Ephesus. He wrote to the Corinthians that “a great door, and effectual, is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries” (1 Corinthians 16:9). That the gospel made a great impact in this area is evident even today, as at the entrance of the harbor there were erected four great pillars (only one stands today and it has the cross on it). One pillar was to Matthew, one to Mark, one to Luke, and one to John.

After Paul’s death, John, the apostle of love, became pastor to the Ephesian church. But he was not only an apostle of love, he was one of the sons of thunder, and Rome exiled him. However, this church had the privilege of being under the ministry of two of the greatest apostles, Paul and John.

Now the Lord Jesus Christ speaks to this church in the midst of crass materialism, degraded animalism, base paganism, and dark heathenism. It is out of such a background that this lovely message comes.

The church at Ephesus is a typical New Testament church. This is the church at its best.

Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write: These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden lampstands. (Revelation 2:1)

¹ John Eadie, *Paul the Preacher* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1859) 292.

In that first glorious vision of Christ (chapter 1), we see the Lord standing in the midst of these lampstands. Here He is walking up and down, for in the New Testament church He had freedom. He is welcome in that church. As He is walking to and fro inspecting the lampstands, He stops before the lampstand marked *Ephesus*. Notice what He says:

I know...

That is what He says to each of the seven churches as He addresses them – “I know”... “I know”... “I know”... “I know”... “I know”... “I know.” My friend, He knows your church, and He knows mine. He is interested in the church, He is concerned about the church, and He *knows* the church.

We find here the procedure and format used in these messages. Our Lord gives first a word of *commendation*, then a word of *condemnation*. That is the order He follows in all but three of the churches (in Smyrna and Philadelphia He found nothing to condemn; in Laodicea He found nothing to commend). In all the others He first had words of commendation, then of condemnation.

Notice how His word of commendation of the Ephesian church. Seven good and outstanding features that mark the New Testament church are given to us here.

I know thy works.... (Revelation 2:2)

He says this to all seven churches, “I know thy *works*.” Here it is good works. When we read the messages to Laodicea, we see that the works were bad works. But at the Ephesian church the works were good.

Note that the Lord Jesus Christ is speaking only to His church. He is speaking only to believers. He is not speaking to unbelievers about good deeds! The Lord has the world shut up to His cross, and He is not asking any lost man to do anything. Paul writing to the Romans says:

But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. (Romans 4:5)

We all were ungodly. You and I stand before a holy God as ungodly sinners unless we are in Christ. “To him that worketh not....” God is not asking an ungodly sinner to do anything. He says to *believe*. “To him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for *righteousness*.” God saves you because you trust Jesus Christ and Him only.

The Lord Jesus Christ mentions works only to those who already have trusted Him, those who are *saved* sinners. And He is talking to them about one thing and one thing only: works – *good* works. This is His theme in the seven letters, “I know thy works.” This is what He is looking for today in His church – *works*.

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God – not of works, lest any man should boast. (Ephesians 2:8, 9)

Paul wrote those words to the Ephesian believers, but he didn’t stop there. Listen to him:

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:10)

“Workmanship” is *poiema* – we are His poem. You see, Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus and said, “Although He saved you by faith, without works – it is by His grace, not by your works – He saved you *unto* good works.” Listen to him as he speaks to a young preacher by the name of Titus:

[It is] not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us....This is a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they who have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable unto men. (Titus 3:5, 8)

God saves us by faith, but after we are saved He talks to us about good works. Paul even began to measure those who professed to be Christians by that standard. He wrote to another young preacher, Timothy:

Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began. (2 Timothy 1:9)

So we are told here we are saved in order that there might be good works.

And when our Lord wrote to the church in Ephesus, He said that He knew their good works. The New Testament church had good works, which means they were not works of the flesh. It means that these works they were producing were fruits of the Holy Spirit. Listen to the writer to the Hebrews:

How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? (Hebrews 9:14)

“Dead works” are works of the flesh. But the Holy Spirit was producing in the Ephesian believers a fruit of the Spirit, which is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, etc. (Galatians 5:22).

Again and again Paul says we are to adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things, that we are to be ready for every good work. As someone has said, a Christian should be like a good watch: all gold, open-faced, well-regulated, dependable, and filled with good works. The Lord Jesus said, “I know thy works.”

The second thing He mentions to the Ephesian church is:

I know...thy labor.... (Revelation 2:2)

“Labor” is not another word for “works.” It does not have anything to do with service. It has to do with the person, not with his works. The word really has two meanings. It has the meaning of weariness. “I know thy labor, thy weariness.” Remember it says in John’s Gospel, “Jesus, therefore, being wearied with his journey, sat by the well...” (John 4:6). Our Lord had been so busy meeting the physical needs of the multitudes, and now He has gone to Samaria. It is a hot

day. He sits down by the well because, we are told, He was weary with the journey. He Himself experienced weariness! And He understood the weariness of the Ephesian believers.

Do *you* know what it is to really work for God? Some of us think that working for God means to put on our Sunday clothes, go to church, sit down, and have a good time – generally stick our feet under the table for somebody’s banquet. That is not Christian service! That is not what the church in Ephesus did. They labored to the point of exhaustion. The Lord Jesus said, “I know how weary you get. I know how tired you are.”

There is another prong to this word. It means suffering. Although our Lord’s message to the martyr church appears later in this chapter, it does not make any difference whether or not you are in the period of the martyr church, “...all that will live godly in Christ Jesus *shall* suffer persecution” (2 Timothy 3:12). The New Testament church knew what it was to suffer persecution. Our Lord took note of this.

There was a third thing for which He commended them:

...And thy patience...

Patience, or long-suffering, is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. God gives certain fruits of the Spirit (if we are filled by the Spirit) to us directly. Others He *works* in us. And patience comes through suffering – always. He never yet has made a believer patient arbitrarily. A man said, “I prayed for patience, and God sent me trouble.” Well, God was going to make him patient. He was hearing and answering his prayer. You will notice that both Peter and James mention that one of these graces develops another grace.

And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, patience; and to patience, godliness. (2 Peter 1:5, 6)

My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into various trials, knowing this, that the testing of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, lacking nothing. (James 1:2-4)

Our Lord mentions a fourth thing:

...And how thou canst not bear them who are evil.... (Revelation 2:2)

The Ephesian believers could not bear evil men. The word “bear” is the same word John used when he wrote of Jesus: “And he, bearing his cross, went forth into a place called The place of a skull” (John 19:17). The Ephesian church would bear a cross, but it would not bear evil men. It had no patience with evil men. It is interesting that our Lord said, “I know your patience, but I also know you are not patient with evil men.”

Today we think we manifest a marvelous Christian virtue if, when we see someone sinning, we shut our eyes to it because we want to be broadminded. However, the Ephesian church had spiritual discernment, and it could tell when evil men came into their midst. The church today lacks this discernment. You see, Ananias and Sapphira could not live in the early church because the church was so holy. But today they get by rather well. A young preacher said to me, “I have a New Testament church.”

So I asked him, “Has anybody dropped dead recently?”

“No. What do you mean?”

“Well,” I said, “if you have a New Testament church, somebody is going to drop dead because the New Testament church had no patience with evil men.”

Have you ever noticed what the Scriptures say about this sort of thing? They have a great deal to say about evil men.

Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. (Romans 16:17)

In this last section of his letter to the Romans, where Paul is greeting everybody he knew, one might get the impression that Christianity is just some sort of saccharine sweetness between a bunch of sob-sisters. No, my friend, believers are to have wonderful fellowship, but when folk come into your midst causing division, you are to withdraw from them. This is very clearly stated in the Word of God. Paul said to the Thessalonian church:

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly and not after the tradition which he received of us. (2 Thessalonians 3:6)

My beloved, a man who is not loyal to Jesus Christ and not loyal to His church should never be put into an office in the church. He is a traitor to Christ, and he is to be avoided. Oh, today the church does not exercise that kind of discernment, does not withdraw, as they are commanded, from those who gossip and cause divisions in the church. But the New Testament church would not bear with evil men.

The fifth thing that our Lord commended was this:

...Thou hast tried them who say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars. (Revelation 2:2)

There were men moving about in that day who were false teachers. They wanted the honor that came to apostles. And this church loved the apostles – the Apostle Paul had been their founder, and the Apostle John had been their pastor. But again, this church had keen spiritual discernment. It was continuing in the apostles’ doctrine, which was one of the marks of the New Testament church. When there came into their midst false apostles, they knew them. When a preacher came to them – though he knew the Shibboleths, had a tear in his voice, a pleasing personality, and a great big basso voice – they didn’t take him in if he denied the virgin birth, or if he said Christ was not God, or if he did not believe the Bible was the Word of God, or if he did not teach that Jesus was coming back personally. The believers in Ephesus were not deceived, and Ephesus represents the New Testament church.

Our Lord notes a sixth thing:

And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name’s sake hast labored...
(Revelation 2:3)

“Hast borne...and for my name’s sake” – bearing the cross, *their* cross. They preached Christ, they preached His virgin birth, they preached that men were saved by His blood, they preached that heaven was a reality, they preached there was a heaven to gain, and they bore for His name’s sake.

There is a seventh and last word of commendation:

...*And hast not fainted.* (Revelation 2:3)

They had not grown weary. I love this, actually, best of all. This means that here is a church that was filled with spiritual vigor, vitality, and virility. Here is a church that was *alive* to God. They were always looking to Him. They never had a Sunday school teacher come in and say, “I’m through teaching. Nobody around here appreciates me.” They did not grow weary.

Our Lord had noted their weariness in labor, but now He commends them for not growing weary. What is the difference? Well, they did get tired, but as Dwight L. Moody said, they grew weary *in* the work but not *of* the work. They wanted to keep going.

A young preacher came to talk to me. He said, “I don’t like to preach. It is so hard!” I said, “Get out of the ministry, boy! Get out of the ministry.” Oh, when the ministry becomes that kind of a burden to you, *leave it*. And don’t do church work like that, friend. Our Lord notices it: “Hast not fainted.” Oh, they had all the spiritual vitamins there in Ephesus!

These have been the seven words of commendation our Lord had for the early church.

He has one word of condemnation for the church at Ephesus. Listen to it:

Nevertheless, I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.

(Revelation 2:4)

Now, honestly, that doesn’t make much of an impression on us, does it? Does that impress you very much? Oh my, I thought he was going to point out something bigger than that! It seems so slight a triviality. Is our Lord being petty and picayunish? Is He taking a peccadillo and finding fault?

No, my friend. It may seem slight to us, but it is very important to our Lord. This is where all the trouble began. At this point the church went off the track – not in doctrine, but in the personal relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ. “I have this against thee that thou hast left – not permanently – but thou *didst leave* thy first love.” The “first” love is rather the *best* love. The same word is used in the parable our Lord told in Luke 15. When that prodigal boy came home, the father put on him the *best* robe. The word is the same. The Ephesian church had left its best love.

What does this mean? It means, friend, that the most vital, wonderful thing in our relationship to God is love. That is the very heart of Christianity. Christianity is not a business transaction. This is the reason I wrote the little book, *Ruth: Romance of Redemption*. I attended a seminary that was orthodox, but it was so cold! It seemed that Christ put on the barrelhead His blood for my redemption. And that is true, but you have not *begun* to tell the story when you say that! What is the reason He did it? He *loved* me and gave Himself for me. John said, “We love him, because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

The church in Ephesus had an intense, enthusiastic devotion to the person of Christ, which only the Holy Spirit can bring to pass in believers. It was so intimate. It was so wonderful. It was glorious. The church today, our “Laodicean” church, knows little about it.

The martyrs knew about it. Today it is hard to understand those martyrs who, while the fire was being kindled around them, would say, as old Polycarp said, “I wish I had a hundred lives to give for Him. He gave so much for me!” I confess I do not understand love like that.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.²

Samuel Rutherford loved like that. His wife tells of missing him during the night and getting up and finding him in his study kneeling at a rocking chair – talking to God. She would bring his great big overcoat and put it around him, as he was totally unaware of how cold he was. Oh, how he loved Him!

David Brainard, a missionary to the Indians, knew that kind of love. If you have never read his story, you ought to read it. Though he was dying of tuberculosis, he would mount his horse, ride out through the woods to another Indian village, and while riding would grow so weak he would just fall off and lie there unconscious (sometimes even in the snow). Finally he would regain consciousness, again crawl back up on his horse and continue on. Then he would go to payer and ask Christ to forgive him for failing Him! I don’t think we today know much about love like that. Do we? A little rain will keep a lot of us at home.

Christianity is a love affair.

It was up in New England, years ago, that a girl stopped working at her job at the textile mill because she’d gotten married. It was then that she started working harder than she ever had worked before. At the mill she worked only eight hours. But after her marriage she started at 6:00 in the morning, cooking her husband’s breakfast. Then she worked all day long and far into the night. No labor union would permit that! In the morning when her husband went to work, she held him in a fond embrace and said, “I’ll miss you all day.” And everything she did during the day – cleaning, washing, mending, ironing, cooking – she did for him. As she prepared the evening meal, she kept looking down the road. In a little while he would come, and she’d run down to meet him.

There came a day, however, when as he started to work he called to her, “I’m going to work.” A voice from way upstairs said, “Goodbye.” That night when he came in, she wasn’t out looking for him. He opened the door and said, “I’m home.” Again that voice from upstairs said, “Is that you?” My friend, the honeymoon is over when the voice from upstairs says, “Is that you?” The first love is gone. That best love has been left. Although she still cooks his meals, irons his shirts, and is faithful to him, it isn’t the same after the first love is gone.

The church in Ephesus was in danger of letting the honeymoon be over. Although the Lord Jesus commended them for many things, He said, “I notice that you do not love Me as you did at first.” That was the vital thing to Him.

My friend, that is the real test. It is not if you are a member of a church. It is not how many committees you are on or, actually, how much work you do for Him. The vital question today is: *Do you love Him?* This is the important thing to Him. “I have this against thee that thou hast left thy first love.”

What is the remedy? Well, the remedy is easy.

² Isaac Watts, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.”

Remember, therefore, from where thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works, or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy lampstand out of its place, except thou repent. (Revelation 2:5)

“Remember.” Go back to those early days, if you were really converted. Do you remember your love for Him when you were first converted? I was not reared in a Christian home. I never even saw a Bible in my home. I never shall forget the first time I went to a Bible study. I couldn’t wait to get there. Oh, the thrill it was to study His Word! Let me confess: I ask Him again and again to restore that thrill. I have to keep asking Him because I find that Bible study sometimes becomes perfunctory. We need to look back in our lives. We need to remember.

The second thing we need to do is repent. Repent means to turn and go back to Him. He is waiting for you. Why don’t you break the shell of self-sufficiency and that crust of conceit and that shield of sophistication that you wear? Discard that veneer of vanity, that false face and false front. Go to Him and say, “Oh, I am so empty on the inside. I need reality, Lord Jesus. I cast myself on You.” He will put His arms around you.

He said to His church:

...I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy lampstand out of its place, except thou repent.

To know how bad it is to leave the first love, we need to look again at the site where Ephesus stood on the Western coast of Turkey. Ephesus is *gone*. There is nothing there but shapeless ruins. That’s all. Nearby there is a Mohammedan village, and the people living there are in squalor and misery. There is not a believer who lives within miles of that site. Just a stagnant, malaria-infested marsh and swamp – that’s Ephesus today. And out of the oblivion of those shapeless ruins, I hear the echo, “I have this against thee, that thou hast left thy first love....Remember...repent...or I’ll come and remove your lampstand.” He removed it when they left the first love.

May God have mercy today on us, His people! You and I cannot measure how far we are today from the church in Ephesus, the church that had so much and seemed to lack so little. But their lack was so important!

If you have not yet trusted Christ as your Savior, there are only two things I want to say to you. One is that He is not asking you to do anything but simply believe in Him. Trust in Him – that is all. Secondly, He wants you to know that He loves you. That’s the whole story.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)