

The Future of Evangelicalism, Part 2

Selected Scriptures

The church at Ephesus was founded at the very earliest around AD 52. This letter from Christ comes in the last decade of the First Century, around AD 96 or thereabout. That means that within 45 years of its founding, this highly privileged church was in a serious enough state of decline to warrant a stinging rebuke from Christ.

It's kind of shocking, isn't it? But the truth is that's more common than you might think. Even for a church as highly esteemed and influential as the church at Ephesus. I could literally point out any number of churches today that started well, but totally apostatized within 50 years' time. That always happens whenever something other than love for Christ captivates a congregation.

Revelation 2, listen to the letter Jesus sent to this church at Ephesus, verses 1 through 7. Christ is dictating this to the Apostle John. He says, "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. I know your works, your toil, and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but you've tested those who call themselves apostles and are not and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.

"'But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at the first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place unless you repent. Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.'"

Now let's break this down. All of Christ's seven letters to the churches are addressed to the angel of the church. That's how it's translated in, I think, just about every major English translation. The Greek text actually does use the word from which our word, angel, is derived. But the literal meaning of the word is simply messenger. The messenger of the church, that would be, I think, the person who does the preaching, the pastor, their senior pastor and that makes perfect sense. His task is to preach the Word and Christ is giving him an inspired text tailored directly to the needs of that church.

And it's clear, by the way, that the content of these letters are meant for everyone in the church and that's clear from the letter itself. Because at the end of all seven letters, he, you have the same statement you see in verse 7. "He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." And the fact that these letters are included in the canon means there's truth in them for you and me. And we should read them in that light. They are profitable to us for teaching and reproof and correction and so on.

Now there was much in this church that was commendable. And Christ gives them a list of their strong points. They were hard working. They persevered. They couldn't stomach evil people or false teachers, verse 3. They didn't grow weary in well-doing when other people might have. And skipping to verse 6, they literally hated this licentious heresy of the Nicolaitans that was apparently both pervasive and popular throughout their region because he mentions it in other letters to other churches.

And if that's all you knew about the church at Ephesus at the end of the First Century, you might think this is the model of Christian faithfulness. They, they seem to have heeded Paul's warning about fierce wolves that would come in not sparing the flock. I guess that those who called themselves apostles and were not were the same men who had risen from within their own presbytery, speaking twisted things that draw the disciples away after them.

They had received excellent counsel not only from the Apostle Paul, but also from the Apostle John about what they should do when false teachers came with doctrines foreign to

what they had received. I think I read John's admonition last night where the Apostle John says in his second epistle, "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching," and he's talking about the same teaching that they had heard from the Apostle Paul and Timothy and the Apostle John himself. If someone comes to you with a different teaching, John says, "Do not receive such a person into your house or give him any greeting."

And the Ephesians seemed to have heeded those warnings. Unlike most of the other churches that Jesus is writing to, the Ephesians had zero tolerance for false teachings. This was a discerning church. You'd think, again, this is a good church. In fact, when I read that list of commendable features in the church at Ephesus, my first thought was, "You know, very much like our church. Very much like your church."

Exactly the kind of church so many discernment-minded people on the Internet say they're looking for. And everybody complains that it's hard to find churches like that. You know, where heresy isn't tolerated, and self-appointed apostles and other evildoers are routinely excommunicated. And, and people

serve without complaint. And they endure persecution patiently. Who wouldn't want to be a part of church like that? Surely, that's a healthy church, right?

They serve, they sacrificed, they were steadfast, they were separated, and they suffered for Christ's sake. So their virtues are even alliterated. This is a great church and furthermore, this a true church according to every classic reformed definition. They, they met and excelled in every one of the what, what reformed people generally consider as the three marks of a true church: the Word, their sacraments, and discipline.

What's wrong? Because this is not a healthy church. Out of all seven letters from Christ, five of them containing rebukes of one kind or another, verse 4 is, I believe, the most troubling and heartbreaking words Jesus spoke to any of them. When he says to this church with all these virtues, "But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at the first."

He tells the church at Laodicea that they're lukewarmness makes them want to vomit. He tells the congregation in Sardis that they're already dead whether they realize it or not. He rebukes some of the people in Thyatira for their tolerance of an evil woman whom he calls Jezebel. He couldn't do that today, could he, in the climate, call any woman Jezebel. She called herself a prophetess and led people into acts of sexual immorality. They tolerated it anyway.

To the church at Pergamum, he said if they didn't repent, he would come and wage war against them. The only threat he makes to Ephesus is verse 5, that he will come and "remove their lampstand from its place." But still, his lament about their failure in verse 4 is perhaps the most heart rending sentence in these two chapters. "You've abandoned the love that you had at the first." It's as if he's saying to them, "You don't love me the way you should."

It's not like with Peter where he asked them to affirm their love. He told them because he knew what was in their hearts. They had abandoned the love they had for him. And because what he's talking about here is their love for Christ

himself, this otherwise orthodox and seemingly stable fine-looking church is not a healthy church. They have no real love for Christ. They were going through the motions of piety and praxis.

Their religion at the end of the day was reminiscent of the religion of the Pharisees. You know, gleaming white and spotless on the outside. As far as all appearances were concerned, they looked good, but they were dead on the inside. And you might not have even observed that if you visited their church. But Christ knew because he knows our hearts. And that is repeatedly stressed in his message to this church.

Verse 2, "I know your works." Verse 3, "I know you are enduring patiently." He sees everything so he could see their works. He knows everything including the secrets of our hearts. As it says in John 2:24, "He knows all people and doesn't need anyone to bear witness about man for he himself knows what is in man." So no one needed to tell him about the patient, unwavering tenacity in the hearts of these people. But he also knew that they didn't really love him the way they did at first.

Though they were tenacious when it came to enduring persecution, bearing up for his name's sake, he says. They weren't so purposeful in their love for him and, and they had somehow let their hearts grow cold. Perhaps it was the routine of all that toil. Or the tedium of remaining steadfast in the faith. Or the vexation of having to deal with those who call themselves apostles and are not. All of that stuff, while relentlessly summoning this strength to bear up under the strength of persecution, they hated the works of the Nicolaitans.

And Jesus himself says that's good but if we're not careful, even a legitimate holy indignation like that can eclipse the love we need to cultivate. Whatever it was that had derailed the Ephesian church, their shrinking love for Christ was a serious spiritual setback enough to nullify all the good things Christ commended them for.

And I want you to notice the severity of his threat. Verse 5, unless you repent, "I will come to you and remove your

lampstand from its place.” That is not an idle threat and it’s not a small thing. In other words, he’s saying to them they will no longer be regarded by him as a true church at all. He will in effect excommunicate the entire congregation. And that, by the way, is not, again, all that uncommon. And, and it often happens within 50 years’ time or less.

Churches apostatize all the time. There are, I would guess, fewer than 100 churches in the world today that have maintained their love for Christ, their commitment to the authority of Scripture, their zeal for the Gospel and their faithfulness to sound doctrine for more than three centuries. There are a few. Spurgeon’s tabernacle in London is one of those. It’s been a faithful church for more than 350 years.

On the other hand, I could take you on a tour of the neighborhood of our church within in a half mile radius of Grace Community Church in California. I could show you dozens of churches that are less than 75 years old where the candlestick has been removed. The Gospel is no longer preached. The ministers are not qualified, and they’ve become social centers, rather than churches. All of the good things Jesus said about

this church at Ephesus didn't nullify the gross evil that underlied their dwindling love for him.

It, it was the worst evil of all because without love, Paul says, every other virtue has no value whatsoever. That's the whole point of 1 Corinthians 13. "If you have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge," and, "and have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love," Paul says you're nothing. And without true love for Christ whatever profession of faith you make is meaningless.

Love for Chris is the very essence of true saving faith and I want you to know I didn't make that up. That's the word of God, John 8 verse 42, "If God were your Father, you would love me," Jesus says. 1 Corinthians 16:22, "If anyone has no love for the Lord Jesus, let him be accursed." Matthew 10:37, Jesus said, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me."

When Peter denied Christ three times, that's the very way Christ reached out to restore him. He didn't ask Peter to make

promises or take an oath or perform some work of penance. He simply asked him three times, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" And here's a fact that I find astonishing. When Paul closed his epistle that he wrote to this very church at Ephesus, he ended his letter with a one sentence benediction. It's the last verse in the book of Ephesians.

Ephesians 6:24, "Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible." That's a synonym for believers, Christians, those who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible. Now think about this, if the Ephesian church's love for Christ was incorruptible, how could it be slackening or diminishing? How could they lose it or leave it behind? And the answer for true believers in their fellowship is that they could never actually lose or abandon their love for Christ. It would clean contrary to the nature of saving faith.

They'd have to abandon the faith completely and if they did that, it would be proof that they never had faith to being with. 1 John 2:19, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us." If you have true love for Christ, you're not going to lose that

love. But the warmth of our love for Christ can diminish. The intensity of a believer's love can decline or be eclipsed by other things.

And in this case, it may be that a passion for orthodoxy actually took precedence over their affection for Christ on a gradual way. And when that happens, what you are left with is a lifeless orthodoxy that can quickly turn into a kind of hateful unorthodoxy. And there are hundreds of spiritually dead and, and abandoned, empty fundamentalist churches in America that bear testimony to that.

One generation passed from the time Paul wrote that to the Ephesians until Christ wrote them this letter. So it may be that by the time Christ writes to them, it's the next generation that's beginning to dominate to the leadership of that church. And they didn't love Christ the way their parents did. It's a reminder that we need to be diligent in the spiritual aspects of our parenting.

We also have to ask, is there a remedy when a church's love for Christ has decline? And the answer is, yes there is, and it's simple, and it's clear. You can sum it up in three words. Verse 5, remember, repent, and return. "Remember from where you have fallen," Jesus says. "Repent and return to doing the things you did at first." Remind yourself of where you began with Christ. Rekindle that unbridled zeal that is so common to new believers. A true devotion to Christ. A deep gratitude for our salvation. An eagerness to serve the Savior, not to earn merit, but out of sheer gratitude, thankfulness for the sacrifice he made.

Remember that and remember what you felt and how you thought when you first saw the truth of the Gospel and when it was fresh and new to you. And when you came to know Christ for the first time in all his glory and rekindle that love. Remind yourself of the love he showed for you when he himself bore our sins on the tree, in his body on the tree. So that by his wounds you could be healed. And if you truly fill your heart with those truths and keep those truths in mind the way you did at the first, you'll rekindle that love that was starting to wane.

But there's more, verse 5, "Repent." Because we have to remember, it's a sin not to love Christ the way we should. And actually the, it's, that's the core problem in all of our sins. That's the first thing most of us need to repent of, like Peter in John 21:17, we think, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." But also like Peter, we are rightly ashamed because we know that our love for Christ is not what it ought to be. That's a sin that we should ponder and repent of daily.

And third, verse 5, "Return and do the works you did at first." What are those first works? What's he talking about there? Well, if you were truly and soundly converted, then, like the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 1 verse 9, "You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven." So do that again. Purge your life of idols. Serve God. And live with the expectation that Christ could come again at any moment. Just fix your heart and mind on him.

And the chill that has hindered your love for Christ is going to be re, reversed by a new warmth. Now if you know me at all, you know I strongly believe pastors need to cultivate

theological depth in themselves and in their flocks. I think biblical understanding is vitally important. Wise discernment is sadly lacking in the church and we need that as much as we need anything. And a willingness to defend the truth is in short supply today. We've been talking about that as one of the problems of the evangelical movement.

But the Ephesian church had all of those things. It was their love for Christ that was being eclipsed. That's the number one thing even today's evangelicals need. We need to concentrate on developing that one virtue to foster and fortify our love for Christ because if you have true love for the true Christ, the fact is all those other things are going to fall into place. You're going to love his truth and want to study it. You're going to be discerning. You're going to hate evil. All those things are true if you love him. Jesus said that himself, John 14:15, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

So how do you identify a church that loves Christ? Well, they preach Christ, not Hollywood. They worship Christ, not raw emotion, and not doctrinal orthodoxy. Christ is the central subject of their songs and their sermons and their conversations

and their testimonies. Because love for Christ will show if it's real. It's obvious. It's impossible to hide. Indeed, if you have it, you won't try to hide it.

Now let me give this closing word of encouragement to all of you and especially to those of you who are in positions of church leadership. If you shepherd a flock or a part of a flock of people who genuinely love the true Christ, you are shepherding a great congregation regardless of how many there are. I think virtually all of us would say, though, as individuals, we're not there yet. We live in a world that is teeming with idols and constantly assaulting us with countless distractions. And if you think it's hard for you, it's far worse for members of the flock who live and work in the secular world. Don't lose focus on this one issue.

Our love for Christ constantly needs the fuel and the oxygen that pastors are charged with giving us when the flock comes together. Preach the Word in season, out of season. That's the number one thing we can do. Encourage our pastors to preach the Word. Be hungry for the Word. Cultivate a hunger for the

truth of God. And as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:23, "Above all we preach Christ and preach Christ crucified."

And if you hear that message constantly, you cannot help loving him. Keep him always at the center of the message you, you want to hear. Forget the movie reviews and the analyses of popular culture. Forget about the gimmickry and topical nonsense that all the church growth gurus are saying we need in order to revive the evangelical movement. "If anyone has no love for the Lord Jesus Christ let him be *anathema*." The Lord is coming.

And our job as pastors, as church leaders, as members of the congregation is to set ourselves for the proclamation of the Word of God. And to let that be what we feed on, what we hunger for so that our love for him never grows cold. That's how a church keeps its lampstand in place. That's how we guard against cold and mechanical orthodoxy. That's how a church maintains its own health. And that's what we need to do if we want to hear the Lord say, "Well done."

PILLAR OF
—TRUTH— 

Let's pray. Father, we confess our love for Christ isn't what it ought to be. Rekindle that flame and may it stay burning with a profuse heat and a perpetual light. And may we be faithful not only to the truth that you've given us, but also above all to the Lord whom we are committed to follow and to love. And in all that we do, whatever your will for us, may Christ be the focus of our lives and our testimonies and the words we speak. We pray in his name, amen.