

The Future of Evangelicalism, part 1

Selected Scriptures

I'm not a prophet or son of a prophet. I've never even managed to make a profit on any investment or business venture that I've ever made. But people ask me all the time, "What do you think the next big challenge to the Gospel will be?" And I have learned to decline to make any kind of predictions like that because my stock answer is, I, I don't know. I just know that it will be worse. It will be more subtle and more heretical than any of the previous assaults on Gospel truth because that's the way it goes. Prior to 2015 or so, I did not predict that the issue of social justice would take over and change the whole emphasis of an organization like Together for the Gospel.

I also didn't foresee that something totally non-theological, something that's not even a point of religion, like the Covid crisis, would divide and destroy as many churches as it has. I didn't have a clue that either of those things might happen. And they have been enormously destructive to the

ministry and the unity of evangelical churches just over the past three or four years.

So I'm not going to stand up here and pretend that I can predict what the future of evangelicalism will be. Other than to say that the horizon looks pretty dark to me at the moment. And yet, I always say this, I'm not a pessimist. That doesn't discourage me that the horizon is dark, that things look bleak in the future. You read biblical prophecy and understand it correctly, and I think that's the way it's going. That's the way this world is going.

"When the Son of man returns, will he even find faith on the earth?" Scripture says. Ah, but I'm not a pessimist, I'm a Calvinist and that means I know that in the end, the truth will win out and I can't wait to see how the Lord does that. But what I want to do in this hour is take you to Scripture again and look at a passage that talks about what the future of evangelicalism ought to be. Because I'm convinced that all of the current problems in the evangelical movement stem from a lack of conviction among leaders and lay people alike.

And I've said repeatedly, evangelicals are too concerned with what's stylish and too eager to win the world's affection. Not concerned enough with the one thing most needful, namely, our love for Christ. And specifically, such a deep and abiding love of Christ that it overwhelms and conquers all the other things that compete for our affection. A love for Christ that governs every desire that we have. Love for Christ that vanquishes every unrighteous craving and every unholy appetite, those things that still cause us to struggle in the flesh.

Love for Christ is the first and most essential element of Christian piety and practice. And I'll go even further. Love for Christ is the one true mark of a healthy church. If you have a church that is distinguished by genuine love for the true Christ, then you have a great church regardless of the size of your congregation. And I want to take you to a passage where Christ himself makes that very point. Revelation chapter 2. Revelation 2.

Revelation 2 and 3, of course consist of seven short letters from Christ dictated by him to be sent to a circuit of churches in Asia Minor at the end of the First Century. And only two of those seven churches were healthy faithful churches. There was the persecuted church at Smyrna and the persevering church in Philadelphia. And for those two churches, Christ had nothing but words of approval and praise.

But the rest of this entire section of Scripture and his messages to the, the other five churches in this section were harsh, really. Notes of harshness all through it because those churches were in various stages of decline and defection. Some marked by apathy or compromise or corruption or worldliness or a lack of correct biblical discipline. One church, Sardis, was totally dead. And another, Laodicea, was just a lukewarm corpse of what it had once had been.

And then the remaining three churches in this list were on the downgrade and all of them sinking fast. Let me point something out to you about these seven churches. If you would trace those churches out on a map, maybe you have a map in your Bible you could look at this. But you will see that they are in

geographic order the way Christ addresses them. They go like this: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and then Laodicea in that order.

And if you notice the first church on that list is Ephesus, which is a port city and it was, at the time, a colossal town, the largest in the area. It was the chief port city. And in fact, the first three of these cities, Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum, are all coastal towns. They're all port cities. Ephesus was the biggest and most important. Smyrna was the next port as you travel north on the coast. And then Pergamum was further north than Smyrna.

All of them on, right on that same coast. And presumably, all of these churches in this list of seven were the fruits of the Apostle Paul's missionary work. Because we know that he founded the church at Ephesus. We have the record of that in the book of Acts. Acts 20. Immediately after he leaves Ephesus, he goes to Troas, which is the next major port, the fourth port city along that coast after Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum.

After the letter to Pergamum, he basically turns inland and moves south again and his third message is to the messenger of the church in Thyatira, which is not a coastal city, it's further inland. And from there, still inland, he moves southeast to get to Sardis and then Philadelphia and then Laodicea. Laodicea is at the same latitude as Ephesus. It's just further east. It's about 100 miles east.

So in other words, if you trace these cities on a map, it takes you in a circle. This was an ancient mail route. If a courier was to deliver messages to the town in the same order that they're given by Christ here. That's the order he would go in in order to deliver those messages. Same order that they were organized in Revelation 2 and 3.

And for that reason, I'm convinced that the Lord's own intention was that all of these messages were meant to be read in all of the churches, not just the specific church to Sardis be read there and vice versa. All seven of them were to be read in all of the churches. They were not intended to be private communications to the churches. The words of praise are purposely public commendations. And the words of rebuke are also

purposely public reprimands, and warnings, and denunciations, that Christ means for everyone in all those churches to hear.

And furthermore, I think the seven churches combined make a kind of microcosm of 21st Century evangelicalism. You could point out literally any number of churches today, famous churches, some of the best known churches in the evangelical movement that share the same characteristics as any one of these First Century churches. Most churches fit into one or more of these categories. Even the, the diversity, the stark variants that you see here from church to church is similar to the broad diversity among today's evangelical churches.

So we can all learn from these letters. And most of all, I think we should be both appalled and stricken with a healthy sense of spiritual fear to realize how prone to apostasy Christians in general are. Not only you and I as individuals Christians, but even as whole congregations. Whole congregations of churches are susceptible to apostasy. And if, as I've suggested, these churches were founded by the Apostle Paul, they could not have been, not one of these churches could've been more than 50 or so years old when Jesus wrote these letters.

So you have to ask, how could churches in the Apostolic era within the lifetime of the Apostle John go so bad so quickly? How could so many of these churches become so apostate? Because the prospect of apostasy is present in every church in every era. That's the answer why. And if that doesn't stir your deepest concerns about doctrinal accuracy and faithfulness to Scripture and the need to be on guard against error, then you need to examine yourself and get your heart right.

And I wish we had time to study all of the messages, both the rebukes and the commendations in all of these letters. But obviously, we can't do that. So the one I want to highlight for you is the first one, Christ's letter to the church at Ephesus. And I chose this passage because this is what I think Jesus might say to the best of today's evangelicals. His, his message to the evangelical movement as a whole might sound more like his words to the Laodiceans, you know. You make me sick. You make me want to vomit.

But this message to the mother church, a doctrinally sound and, and seemingly commendable church at Ephesus clearly applies to all of us. These words are shocking because Christ chides them in verse 4 with an admonition that I think is, if perhaps one of the most troubling rebukes Jesus ever gave to anyone other than Judas. These are words that are addressed to entire congregation. But they do contain a principle that's applicable to each one of us.

And this is also perhaps the one biblical message that the 21st Century evangelical movement most needs to hear and to heed. If you want to know the future of our movement, this is what it should be. Jesus says, "I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love that you had at the first." Now understand the magnitude of this. Jesus is speaking to a celebrated church of renown. And a church that had far reaching influence, arguably across the board, this was the best and most important church in all of the New Testament record.

This is the primary church of the Apostolic era. But Christ rebukes them because he says they've relinquished their love for him. And verse 5, "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 lamp stick from its place, unless you repent." In other words, he's saying if they don't repent and recover their first love, he's gonna unchurch them. He's going to remove their lampstand, is what he means.

In other words, they would no longer be considered a true church. So that despite all of the things they're doing right, and they were doing a lot of things right, he was prepared to disfellowship them. So a congregation can have all the standard marks of a true church. You know, sound doctrine and a squeaky clean reputation to boot, and still be rejected by Christ if they don't love him with a fervent love.

And that's why I've argued for years that love for Christ is the singular mark of a true and healthy church. And by the way, there's no question what he means when he speaks of "the love that they had at first." He's talking about love for Christ himself. That is the only thing that this expression could possibly mean because love for Christ is implicit, for example, in the first and great commandment. This is the starting point

of all true religion that you should love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

So again, love for Christ is the essence of saving faith. That's the love that the Ephesians had when they were first converted. It was a profound love for him. So keep that verse in your mind. It's the key verse in our study. And I want to take a more expansive look at these first seven verses in chapter 2. But first, in order to consider the larger context with you, I want to talk about the church at Ephesus in general.

You know, aside from Christ's words in these two chapters, Scripture says very little about most of these seven churches. But the one church with lots of history, whose history is pretty thoroughly covered in the New Testament is the church at Ephesus. And it's the first one Christ writes to. Because this was one of the most important churches in the New Testament with a rich history, and, and with an amazing legacy.

The church at Ephesus was the fruit of Paul's missionary labors. And Timothy had pastored there after Paul moved on. The

Apostle John himself also served a celebrated stint at their pastor in his advanced years just before he was sent into exile at Pas, Patmos. So this is a church that had enjoyed every conceivable advantage of Apostolic influence and good teaching and prosperous growth.

And great pastors! Paul and Timothy and John. And, and this was perhaps the most privileged church in the whole Apostolic era. Now, Paul's association with Ephesus is an interesting New Testament theme. Paul's first visit to Ephesus was very short. It was literally the last stop on his second missionary journey on his way home. That second church-planting expedition of Paul's took him as far west as Corinth, where Paul, you know, planted a church, and remained there as their founding pastor in Corinth for 18 months.

And when he left Corinth, he was headed back to Jerusalem, but on the way from Corinth to Jerusalem, his ship made port very briefly in Ephesus, just long enough for Paul to go and visit the synagogue there and start laying the foundation for Gospel ministry in that city in Ephesus. In fact, let's look at it. A, Acts 18 is where we have the description of this. Acts

18. Paul is on his way home from Corinth sailing to Caesarea, which is the port city closest to Jerusalem.

Acts 18 verse 19, "And they came to Ephesus, and" Paul, "left them," that is, it's Priscilla and Aquilla he's talking about. "He left them there, but he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews." So he's in Ephesus and apparently it's the Sabbath because the Jews are gathered in the synagogue. And, and as is, Paul's custom, he visits the synagogue in order to take the message to the Jews first.

And he meets with an uncharacteristically receptive audience, verse 20, "They asked him to stay for a longer period." But notice Paul's response that is also uncharacteristic and a little bit surprising. He declined. "But on taking leave of them, he said, 'I will return to you if God wills,' and he set sail from Ephesus."

So he's only there for at most a day, maybe even just a few hours. And it's not like Paul at all to walk away from an open door like that. But the facts we glean from the subtext are

fascinating and kind of explain what he's doing here. Look at the end of verse 18. It says, "At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow." So Paul had apparently taken a Nazarite vow, possibly as a, as a way of expressing his gratitude for his success in Corinth.

Cenchreae is the port city east of Corinth. And while he's in Cenchreae, he's waiting to board the ship that he's sailing on. While he's there the time frame of his vow is complete, so he cuts his hair.

From the time he cuts his hair in Cenchreae, he has just 30 days to get to Jerusalem. And that means he can't wait at Ephesus. He can't linger there. But Ephesus represented a wide open door for the Gospel. And so Paul leaves Aquilla and Priscilla to stay there in that city. Now their ministry seems to have been on a small scale with individuals. Every time we see them, they're, they're teaching on an individual level. They didn't stand in front of audiences and preach. And obviously, Priscilla's a woman so she can't do that anyway.

So they stayed in Ephesus and just did personal evangelism. And they probably founded and hosted the Ephesian church in its embryonic form, as a kind of home Bible study. So it's just a small church meeting in their home, but it seems the church in Ephesus began slowly like that. And the church in Ephesus didn't really seem to thrive until Paul returned on his third missionary journey.

And the interval between his second and third journeys is apparently very brief because Luke covers it in the book of Acts in just two verses, Acts 18:22 and 23. "When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church." That would be the church at Jerusalem. That's why Luke says, "he went up." It's always up to Jerusalem. And then from Jerusalem, a, presumably after the ceremony where he put his, his consecrated hair on the fire.

After the ceremony to complete his oath, it says, "He went down to Antioch," verse 23, and then it says, "He departed and went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples." So in other words, he is going back through Asia minor, the Turkish

peninsula there, strengthening and following up on churches that he had already planted. But Paul is eager to get back to Ephesus. And in order to fulfill the promise he made in Acts 18:21, when he says, "I will return to you if God wills."

Acts 19 describes what happened. Acts 19:1 and notice Apollos had already moved on to Corinth and he was now ministering in the church there in Corinth. And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. And it says, "There he found some disciples." Now, doesn't it sound to you like believers in Ephesus are still pretty rare? And these guys that Paul found, it turns out, were disciples of John the Baptist. Scripture says about 12 men in all. And they immediately embraced a fuller understanding of the Gospel and were baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit.

And then Paul revisited that synagogue in Ephesus, same one mentioned in chapter 18 verse 19, where you remember the people seemed so open they wanted him to stay. Acts 19 verse 8, "And for three months," he, "spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. But when some became stubborn and

continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.”

So he has a famous ministry teaching there. And there’s an outpouring of miracles associated with Paul’s visit this second time in Ephesus. Verse 11, “God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul.” And apparently that stint in Ephesus lasted about two years. But these were a couple of tough years for Paul. His experience in Ephesus started with this outpouring of miracles. And it was punctuated by hardship and opposition and it ended with a riot. But the church there grew and flourished under Paul’s leadership. And by the time Paul moved on from Ephesus, the church there had elders. It was fully established. The church at Ephesus would then continue to thrive under the care of those elders, true pastors.

And then Paul’s final face-to-face contact with the Ephesian church occurs at the end of his third missionary journey and he tells these elders in Acts 20:25, “Behold, I know

that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again.” So he believes this is the last time he’ll ever see them. And also because of his prophetic gifting, Paul knew that hard times lay ahead for this church in Ephesus.

And so his farewell speech to them includes a pretty strong warning. Acts 20:29, he says, and you know this passage, “I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert.” And so Paul says some of the Ephesian elders themselves were going to pose a threat to the soundness and health of that church.

That’s the backstory on the church at Ephesus. It 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 highly 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.