

A CHURCH THAT HAS BEEN

Revelation 2:1-7

In the opening chapters of Revelation we have a marvelous appearance of the glorified Christ to the Apostle John, who was in exile. This vision overwhelmed John, but the Lord strengthened him with comforting words. He then commanded him to "Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter" (Revelation 1:19).

Christ revealed Himself as walking in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks and as holding the seven stars in His right hand. The candlesticks represent the churches and the stars represent their pastors (Revelation 1:20). Christ's walk in the midst of His churches teaches us the fact of His abiding presence with them and His intimate knowledge of what is going on within them. Nothing is concealed from Him when He walks in their midst.

Ministers of the gospel here are compared to stars because God has made them, has fixed them in their proper places and keeps them there for His glory. As stars receive their light from the sun, so the Lord's messengers receive their light from Christ. It is their task to reflect the light to others, to direct to Christ, to point out the way of salvation and to have oversight of the churches. Christ holds them in His hand, which proves that they are highly valued by Him. They are His, they are in His possession, they are at His disposal, and they are used by Him as instruments to do His work. He protects, upholds and sustains them. It is wonderful to be held in the hand of the Lord. There is a special security for them in His hand.

"Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write." "Angel" means "messenger." The appointed messenger of God in a church is the pastor. Thus, our Lord addressed His communication to the "messenger," or pastor, to be passed on by him to his congregation. Christ is depicted as the One holding the seven stars (or pastors) in His right hand. In a very real way, the pastor of the church is in the hand of Christ, and is directly responsible to Him for the shepherding of His flock.

The work of the candlestick is to make it possible for surrounding objects to be illuminated. The task of the church is to present Christ to the view of a lost world.

In Christ's letter to the church at Ephesus He not only described the conditions which prevailed in the church in that wicked city, but through it He has a message of reproof, encouragement, warning and counsel to all other churches and all Christians whose circumstances resemble theirs. In His message we note three things:

I. Christ's Commendation.

There were some things in the church at Ephesus that deserved commendation, and our Lord did not hesitate to give it. Christ always praises the praiseworthy. He always commends what and where and when He can. Happy indeed are those who deserve such commendation as came from the lips of our Lord. He commended them for seven things:

1. Enthusiasm toward achievement. Verse 2a.

"I know thy works." Christ is not a far-away Saviour who is taking note from heaven of what His churches are doing, but He walks in the midst of them. Nothing is concealed from Him. Nothing escapes His notice, neither the good nor the bad. "Works" refers to actual service. They were active, alert and aggressive. Their church was operating on the regions of depravity, darkness and degradation. Our Lord does not like to see one of His churches standing still. Christ did not

commend their desires or purposes, but their achievements. Every Christian ought to be a worker in the vineyard of the Lord. A true Christian wants to do something for Christ. It is as natural for the Christian to work as it is for the sun to shine. Our Lord cannot commend a lot of professing Christians today, as He did those in Ephesus in the long ago, because they do not have any works that are worthy of commendation. Ephesus was a working church.

2. Steadfastness in service. Verse 2b.

"I know thy toil." Toil is a stronger word than work. It indicates hard work, vigorous action and exhausting labor; strong effort and the continuance of it. It means to labor unto the point of weariness. Thank God for Christians who are willing to work long and hard for the cause of Christ. How we wish there were more of that variety today! Let us learn to work for Christ with all our might.

3. Patience in trial. Verse 2c.

"And thy patience." This means power to endure and not to faint. They did not cease to labor in the face of discouragement, but they patiently continued their service. They toiled on under trying circumstances. They had the patience to endure fiery trials. This grace of patience in trial is always needed.

4. Intolerance of evil. Verse 2d.

"And how thou canst not bear them which are evil." The members of the church at Ephesus did not give any place to evil or accept any apology for it. They could not smile upon moral wrong nor condone impurity. They constantly guarded against the intrusion of the unholy and the impure. Evil is apologized for in our day. Some say that times have changed. That is true, but God hasn't changed, nor the standard of right hasn't changed, nor the attitude of the true Christian toward evil hasn't changed.

5. Zeal for truth. Verse 2e.

"And thou hast tried them who say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them false." Even in that early day false teachers had arisen. They claimed to be followers of Christ, but they were emissaries of Satan. Before the church at Ephesus accepted any man as a messenger of Christ, his teaching was examined to see if it agreed with God's Word. If it did not, the church rejected both the teacher and his teaching. Zeal for the truth caused the members of that church to reject false teachings. Zeal for the truth is greatly needed in these days of apostasy.

6. Faithfulness to duty. Verse 3.

"And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted." Their fidelity had not been under easy circumstances. Persecution raged, but they maintained their works. They transformed duty into privilege. Their works were achieved under the impulse of an unswerving fidelity to duty. Christ commended them because they did things from the right motive, namely, for His sake. Loyalty to Christ is our great need.

7. Hostility to error. Verse 6.

"But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." It is not actually known as to whom the Nicolaitans were. A great Hebrew scholar said that the word is derived from the Hebrew "Nicolah," meaning "to eat," and that the term Nicolaitan is, therefore, a mere name of reproach, bestowed upon those wretched sensualists, who make their appetite their god, and consume their lives in making "provision for the lusts of the flesh." Clemens of Alexandria, as quoted by Eusebius, spoke of them as a people who practiced a community of wives, living in fornication and adultery.

Others think they were the Antinomians of the Asiatic Church — "persons who taught that the conduct is immaterial if the faith be right." This belief made the way easy to the most beastly living.

Is there anything wrong with this church? Her members were enthusiastic for achievement, steadfast in service, patient in trial, intolerant of evil, zealous for the truth, faithful to duty, and hostile to error. But there was something wrong. We turn now to:

II. Christ's Complaint.

What was wrong with this church? Only the penetrating eyes of Christ could detect the weakness behind all the zeal and service of these church members. What He had against them was not something that was easily discernible by unspiritual eyes. Of this one thing which merited the complaint of Christ the church members might have been unaware. It required a spiritual expert to see just exactly what was wrong. It really was not an outward condition of life, but rather a condition of their hearts. It was something that only the Divine Specialist could recognize and diagnose. But when the Lord says, "There is something wrong with you," it is time for Christians to take stock of themselves.

After they had been in love with Christ, they had fallen out of love with Him. So, He said, "I have it against thee, that thou didst leave thy first love." Weymouth translated it, "Yet I have this against you, that you no longer love me as you did at first."

Their "first love" was that earnest, warm and active spirit of love which they had demonstrated toward their new-found Saviour. In effect Christ said, "There is much of excellency in you, but I miss the emotion, the enthusiasm and the energy of your first love. I am hurt that you do not love Me as you did formerly."

It is so easy for Christians to become occupied with past accomplishments, present works and future plans instead of Christ. That is what happened with the Ephesians; service displaced the Son. Fondness for things had taken the place of the love which rightly belonged to the Lord. Nothing hurts Christ as much as when Christians allow things instead of Him to engage their thoughts, words and deeds. The first thing that Christ rightly expects of every Christian is supreme love for Him. If this is lacking, then the work which one does is not acceptable to Him. What would be left nowadays if we eliminated from our church work all that is not the expression of our love for Christ? Why are you doing what you are in church? Is it because somebody has to do it, or because you think you ought to do it, or because your love for Christ compels you to do it?

There is a reckless enthusiasm about first love. It is never cold and calculating. A young lover has no hesitation in buying gifts for his sweetheart which he cannot afford. When you were first brought out of darkness into God's marvelous light, you were keenly conscious that Christ had saved you and a burning love for the Saviour filled your heart. You simply could not do enough for the Lord because you loved Him for what He had done for you. Do you love Him like that today?

Mary of Bethany did not count the cost of that high-priced perfume with which she anointed Christ. Only Judas grumbled about it and that was because he did not love Christ. There are church Scrooges who are always afraid they will overdo it, so they never contribute a dollar without wanting to sing, "When we asunder part it gives us inward pain." They complain that they cannot figure out their tithe, but if it was coming their way they would not have any trouble at all in figuring it. First love and true love are never stingy. When you have real love for Christ nobody will ever have to beg you to serve Him. What our Lord wants most is our love.

A declension in love is always followed by a degeneracy in good works. So serious was this thing in Ephesus that it threatened the very existence of the church. If that trouble was not corrected, Christ told the members that He would remove their candlestick.

How can we tell that a Christian has left his first love? He has less concern about his personal sins, has less serious views of sin, gives less attention to private devotions and to public worship, has less interest in spiritual things and lacks interest in the salvation of others. When one leaves his first love he dishonors God, distresses other Christians who had faith in him and deprives himself of happiness.

III. Christ's Counsel.

1. Remember.

This word urges a recall of our earlier condition; a comparison and a contrast of our past and present estates.

Memory plays a large part in the affairs of the heart. It is a good thing to go back to the place and days of our first love and feed on them again. "Be mindful, therefore, of the heights from which you have fallen." Have you forgotten how happy you once were when first you were saved? Have you forgotten how you found pleasure in the Lord, pleasure in the Bible, pleasure in prayer, pleasure in the church? The heights of love are heights of joy, usefulness, and strength. It is love that makes churches useful, powerful, and to be desired.

2. Repent.

To repent is to feel sorry for sin and to flee from it. Let us not lay the blame on others, saying that if it were not for them we would be better Christians than we are. Christ says, "Repent!" He means for you to turn back to your attitude of simplicity and purity, and to abandon everything for your first love.

3. Reproduce.

"Do the first works." Reproduce the love and works of your former days as of yore, and look forward with pleasure to meetings for prayer and praise. Our love for Him, for each other, and for the lost should shine in the dark places of sin, and attract others to Him.