

THE CHURCH THAT HAS BEEN
Rev. 2:1-7

The city of Ephesus, the capital of the Roman province known as Proconsular Asia, was situated several miles from the open sea on the main route from Rome to the East. It was a populous and magnificent city. Two architectural features adorned it. They were the magnificent Temple of Diana, which was accounted one of the "seven wonders of the world", and the Theatre. The general condition of life there was that of a wealthy, cultured, and corrupt community.

The church at Ephesus occupies a prominent place in the book of Acts by Luke, the Epistles of Paul, and the Revelation of John. So far as the history of the church is concerned, we have a most interesting account of its planting and progress in the Acts of the Apostles.

Devout Jews from Ephesus were present at Pentecost. They may have carried back with them the seeds of Christianity. Paul wanted to preach there in the early stages of his second journey but was divinely forbidden. At the close of that journey, on the trip from Corinth to Jerusalem, he made a short visit to Ephesus. As his custom was, he went into the synagogue, and spoke to the assembled people of the one theme ever on his heart. He evidently made a favorable impression, for he was urged to remain and, on leaving, promised to return.

Passing on his way, he left behind him that noble man and his wife, Aquila and Priscilla, his companions from Corinth. They set up housekeeping and lived for Jesus. The next event of note was the arrival of Apollos, that learned and mighty expounder of the scriptures. He taught accurately his incomplete knowledge of Jesus, with the result that about twelve were baptized with the baptism of John, and then Apollos crossed over to Corinth.

On the third missionary tour, Paul paid his promised visit to Ephesus. He began to teach in the synagogue, and it is a remarkable fact that they suffered him to do this for three months. He saw then that the time had arrived for the outward formation of a church. He gathered the disciples out of the synagogue, and securing the school of Tyrannus, he began preaching there. He did not expect to tarry, but events took an unexpected course and he remained longer than at any other place during his ministry, nearly three years in all. Opportunity and opposition determined the duration of his stay. During his stay there the church grew until it became a great center of missionary operations.

After Paul's departure from Ephesus, Timothy came and gave the prime of his days to the church there. Later Paul writes and sends this church an instructive and encouraging letter for their guidance both in doctrine and practice. The last lines from Paul were written to Timothy, the youthful pastor at Ephesus. John, the beloved spent his last years there and his body was buried on one of the neighboring hills. So it may be said that, "Apollos prepared the soil, Paul planted it, Timothy cultivated it, John watered it, and God gave the increase." This church became a very effective one in those early days because in it:----

1. The doctrine of repentance was preached and practiced
2. Faith in Christ was professed in the public and appointed way
3. The members were endued with the Holy Spirit
4. The right kind of preaching
5. (1) Bold (2) Faithful (3) Reasoning (4) Persuasive
5. Line of demarcation drawn between the church and the world
6. A missionary spirit
7. The reclaiming of backsliders
8. The salvation of sinners

As time passed away various changes were wrought in the church. About a generation, or thirty-five years, after Paul's departure Jesus Christ dictated a message to John and sent it to the angel, or the bishop, of the church at Ephesus. To this message

of Christ we now turn our attention. In dealing with this message of Christ to the church at Ephesus we shall notice three distinct matters:---

I. Christ's Commendation

It is indeed a great thing to have such commendation bestowed on any church or individual Christian as Christ bestowed on the church at Ephesus. Happy are they who deserve such commendation. The church at Ephesus is commended for:----

1. Their Works

"I know thy works". This has reference to actual service being rendered. These people were not idle and listless, but they were active, alert, and aggressive. This shows that Christ does not like to see a church standing still and doing nothing to lengthen its cords and strengthen its stakes.

2. Their Toil

"And thy toil" I know. They were working at the price of toil. Toil means hard work and vigorous action. It implies strong effort and the continuance of it. In other words, it is labor unto weariness.

3. Their Patience

"And thy patience". That is the attitude of persistence in the toil that produces the work. It is as if He had said, "I know your works, and that behind them there is toil that speaks of pain, and enveloping that there is the patient endurance that makes work perpetual". They were persistently long-suffering both in waiting for the germination of the seed which they had sown and in the need of endurance of fiery trials. They had toiled on even when their work had to be done under trying circumstances.

4. Their Repugnance to Wrong (Their Discipline)

"And how thou canst not bear them which are evil." They could not smile upon moral wrong. There was no impurity condoned within the borders of this church. It had no complicity with the evil things in Ephesus. Being jealous for the right they had guarded the fellowship of the saints against the unholy intrusion of impure men. They had not been lax in their discipline as to life.

5. Their Zeal For Truth

"And thou hast tried them which way they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them false." The church had been careful about its doctrines, careful about what it listened to, characterized by discernment and judgment of false teachers. Being judicious in the selection of their officials and teachers that had come to them. They had been hostile to error in all its forms.

6. Their Persistent Fidelity

"And thou hast patience (steadfastness) and didst bear for My name's sake, and hast not grown weary." Their persistent fidelity had not been in circumstances that were always easy. Persecution had raged around them, and yet they had maintained their works. All their achievements had been under the impulse of, and in the power of unswerving fidelity. They were unwearied in their service for Christ.

7. Their Hostility To Error

"But this thou hast, that thou hatest the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." Some doubt exists as to the peculiar views of the Nicolaitans. I think their heresy was that which declares that the conduct is immaterial if the faith is right. In other words, grace is sufficient for salvation, and it doesn't matter how one lives in this life. But these Ephesian Christians were intolerant of this evil teaching.

Since this church was at work, toiling in its efforts, patient in suffering, refusing to fellowship wicked men, rejecting false apostles, bearing its burdens uncomplainingly, and going on unwearied in its service, we are inclined to ask, Is there anything wrong with or lacking in this church? Surely if ever there was a church that seemed able to ask, without fear of an unfavorable reply, "What lack we yet?" this church was such a one: but, behold, we turn from Christ's commendation to :-----

II. Christ's Complaint

"But I have against thee, that thou didst leave thy first love." That is all. There is no other word of complaint. Seeing the church now in the light of this declaration of Christ, all the radiance of the former things is over-shadowed. Their first love was the love of espousal. Its elements were simplicity and purity. This first love was the abandonment of all for a love that had abandoned all. Christ says to this church in effect, There is much of excellency in you, but I miss the emotion and the enthusiasm and the energy of your first love. You used to be earnest, obedient, and happy in my ways and consequently did a lot of work for me but now you do so little because you have left your first love and have failed to walk close to Me. Loss of first love to Me has inevitably issued in loss of love for one another as brethren and for the unsaved about you.

Surely this complaint of Christ needs to be repeated to all our churches today. He would say, "Your work, your toil, and your patience are all evident. Never were you busier. Never were your organizations more complete, but where is your first love?" Many must admit that they have forsaken their first love. Concerning this fact we might as well ask:--

1. What was our first love?

- (1) It was a burning love of deep devotion
We loved God, His Word, His House, and His People
- (2) It was a happy love of open faith
We believed in God and people
- (3) It was a Bible -reading, praying love
Used to pray every day--now seldom
- (4) It was a working love
Wanted to devote life, influence and property to His cause.

2. Where have we lost it?

- (1) In the realm of business
So many cares and so much to think about
- (2) In company with worldly people
Can't run with worldly crowd and keep first love
- (3) In acts of thoughtlessness
Forgetful of what owe Christ
- (4) In neglecting communion with Christ
Cold, formal spirit in exercises of devotion

3. What ^{causes} ~~caused~~ our leaving our First Love?

- (1) It dishonor God
- (2) It distresses His church--it had relied upon us
- (3) It deprives us of happiness.

Having observed Christ's Complaint let us notice briefly and lastly:---

III. Christ's Counsel

"Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent." The following words will help us to bear in mind the terms of His counsel:--

1. Remember

By this one word He urges a thoughtful recall of the earlier conditions. He counsels a comparison and contrast of the present estate with the past estate.

2. Repent

Turn back to the old attitude of simplicity and purity. Abandon everything for your first love and again you will experience the same joy that you did immediately after your conversion.

3. Reproduce

"Do the first works". Actually reproduce the love and works of your former days. Look forward with pleasure to the meetings with your brethren for prayer and praise. It is our love first for our Master, then for each other, and then for the world that will shine in the dark places of sin and attract people to the Lord Jesus Christ, the "Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world."