

Christ's Message to the Seven Churches

Christ's Message to Ephesus

Revelation 2:1-7

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Scripture

We are currently in a series of messages titled, "Christ's Message to the Seven Churches," that is based on the first three chapters of the Book of Revelation.

In Revelation 1 the resurrected and glorified Christ revealed himself to his Apostle John, and told him to write letters to seven churches in Asia. Today, we shall examine the first of those letters, and learn about Christ's message to his church in Ephesus.

Let's read Christ's message to Ephesus in Revelation 2:1-7:

¹ "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.

² " 'I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. ³ I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. ⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. 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 lampstand from its place, unless you repent. ⁶ Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷ 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.' "
(Revelation 2:1-7)

Introduction

In his marvelous commentary on Christ's message to the

seven churches in Revelation, commentator John Stott asks the question, “So what does Christ think of his church?” And then he answers that question as follows, “[Revelation 2 and 3] contains seven letters, each addressed to a particular first-century Christian community in the Roman province of Asia. . . . Although their message is related to the specific situations of those churches, it expresses concerns which apply to all churches. By praise and censure, by warning and exhortation, Christ reveals what he wants his church to be like in all places and at all times.”¹

That is what makes Christ message to the seven churches so helpful for us today. What the resurrected and glorified Lord Jesus Christ said to the seven churches some two thousand years ago is like going to the doctor for an annual check-up. We are reminded of those areas in our lives that we need to pay attention to if we want to be healthy. Similarly, Christ pointed out areas in each church that needs attention if that church is to be healthy.

The first church that Christ addressed was the church in Ephesus. As we shall see, it was a great church with many admirable qualities, but it also had a problem that needed to be addressed.

Lesson

Christ’s message to Ephesus as set forth in Revelation 2:1-7 teaches us that a church may be sound but loveless.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. The Address (2:1a)
2. The Description (2:1b)
3. The Commendation (2:2-3, 6)
4. The Complaint (2:4)
5. The Command (2:5a)
6. The Warning (2:5b)

¹ Cited in Kendell H. Easley, *Revelation*, vol. 12, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 32.

7. The Appeal (2:7a)
8. The Promise (2:7b)

I. The Address (2:1a)

First, let's look at the address.

Christ said in verse 1a, **“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write. . . .”** The letter was addressed to **the angel**, which also means “messenger.” In context of the letters, I take it to mean that each letter was addressed to the pastor of the church.

Ephesus was the first city that Christ addressed. It was closest to Patmos, a port city at the mouth of the Cayster River. It was a prominent city, with a large population of more than a quarter million people. **Ephesus** was also a flourishing commercial city because it was strategically located on several trade routes. In addition, **Ephesus** boasted a magnificent temple, larger than a football field, known as the temple of Artemis, or Diana, and was considered to be one of the seven wonders of the world.

Toward the end of his second missionary journey, Paul stopped in **Ephesus** briefly (Acts 18:19-21). Meanwhile, Apollos went to Ephesus, and was instructed in the way of God by Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:24-26). Because he recognized the strategic location of **Ephesus**, Paul returned there on his third missionary journey and spent at least two-and-a-half years in the city. His ministry in **Ephesus** was so powerful that “all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:10).

However, as more and more people were converted, there was a massive drop in sales of the silver shrines of Artemis, and a riot broke out in the city, wonderfully described in Acts 19.

After Paul left **Ephesus**, he handed over the leadership of the church to Timothy (1 Timothy 1:3), and charged him to evangelize the lost, teach the gospel, and guard the truth of the gospel. Later, while in prison in Rome, Paul wrote a letter to the church

of Ephesus, and even later wrote two letters to Timothy, all of which are part of the New Testament canon.

According to tradition, the third pastor of the church of Ephesus was the Apostle John, before he was exiled to the island called Patmos.

So, the pastors of **the church in Ephesus** included Paul, Timothy, and John. Apollos had ministered there, and so did Priscilla and Aquila. This church had a glorious history. And it was to this church that Christ sent his first message.

II. The Description (2:1b)

Second, notice the description.

In verse 1b Christ said to the church in Ephesus, **“The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.”** We know from verse 20 that **the seven stars** refers to the pastors of the churches, and **the seven golden lampstands** refers to the seven churches. John Stott says,

The claim is even stronger now than the earlier one in the first chapter. He not only “has” the stars; he holds them. He not only stands in the midst of the lampstands; he walks among them. He is the divine overseer of the churches. Did he not say “where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:20)? Christ visits his people. He dwells with them. He walks among them. He inspects them. He knows them.²

III. The Commendation (2:2-3, 6)

Third, observe the commendation.

Christ commended the church in Ephesus in three ways.

² John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1-3* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 23.

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First, Christ commended the church in Ephesus for their service. He said in verse 2a, **“I know your works, your toil.”** The Ephesian church was active in ministry. Most likely their members were proclaiming God’s word through evangelism, celebrating God’s presence in worship, assimilating God’s family into their fellowship, developing God’s people through discipleship, and demonstrating God’s will through service. All their members were active in the life and ministry of the church in the city of Ephesus.

Second, Christ commended the church in Ephesus for their suffering. He said in verse 2b, **“I know. . . your patient endurance.”** He also said in verse 3, **“I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary.”** Ephesus was a city of many religions, including emperor worship. The temple of Artemis was a focal point of worship for the city. Nevertheless, opposition to Christianity had grown since the Apostle Paul had evangelized the city and planted a church there. No doubt church members found it increasingly difficult to conduct business, and they may have even been subject to physical violence. But, Christ said, they had **not grown weary**. They had endured their suffering patiently for Christ’s sake.

And third, Christ commended the church in Ephesus for their orthodoxy. He said in verse 2c, **“I know. . . how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false.”** In verse 6 Christ said, **“You hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.”** The church in Ephesus had been visited by false **apostles** who were called **Nicolaitans**. We don’t know exactly who the **Nicolaitans** were or exactly what it was that they taught. Nevertheless, whatever it was that they taught, the church members in Ephesus clearly opposed false teaching and stood for orthodoxy. The church in Ephesus was known for its orthodoxy for decades. By the early second century Bishop Ignatius of Antioch wrote to the church in Ephesus and said, “You all live according to truth,

and no heresy dwells among you; nay, you do not even listen to any unless he speak concerning Jesus Christ in truth.”³

In many ways, the church in Ephesus was a wonderful church. It had been served by well-known pastors. I mean who would not want Paul, Timothy, and John as pastors? The church was a bright light in a dark city. John Stott said, “It appeared to be a model church in every way. Its members were busy in service, patient in their sufferings, and orthodox in their belief.”⁴

So, if this was such a sound church, what problem could there be? Well, Christ gently presented his complaint to them.

IV. The Complaint (2:4)

Fourth, look at the complaint.

Christ said in verse 4, **“But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.”** The Christians in the church in Ephesus had a great love for God and for one another when they got converted. But over time their love for God and one another started to wane. Oh, to be sure, they were commended for their service, suffering, and orthodoxy. But, they had **abandoned the love they had at first.**

The Christians in the church at Ephesus had stopped loving God for who he is. Tim Keller uses the following scenario to illustrate how we can sometimes love God just for the good stuff he’s “supposed” to give us (based on our terms, of course), rather than loving God for God’s sake. Keller writes:

Imagine being in a situation where you were dating somebody and you seemed to be falling in love. As part of getting to know one another, you let it be known that when you got married you were coming into a significant trust fund. The person who

³ Pope Clement I et al., *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Pope Clement I et al., vol. 1, The Loeb Classical Library (London; New York: Heinemann; Macmillan, 1912–1913), 181.

⁴ John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1-3*, 26.

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you're falling in love with said, "Oh, really? Well, it doesn't make any difference to me whether you're rich or poor. I love you for who you are."

Suppose, just before the wedding you learned that you weren't going to get that trust fund? When you relayed that to your spouse-to-be, he or she got so disappointed that they called off the wedding. How would you feel? What would that tell you about this person's love for you? What would you say? You would start to say, "You never loved me for me. You were using me. You loved me because I was going to get you somewhere or get you something. You didn't love me. You were using me."⁵

The Christians in Ephesus had lost their love for God. Perhaps they were using him for what he provided them: justification, sanctification, adoption, and glorification. Of course, these are blessings to be enjoyed, but it is possible to lose love for God for who he is and replace it with a love for the things he provides.

John Stott writes, "The Divine Lover still sorrows when his love is unrequited, and pines for our continuing, deepening, maturing adoration. Love, then, is the first mark of a true and living church. Indeed, it is not a living church at all unless it is a loving church."⁶

V. The Command (2:5a)

Fifth, notice the command.

There were three commands that Christ gave to the church.

First, Christ commanded the church in Ephesus to remember. He said in verse 5a, **"Remember therefore from where you have fallen."** Sometimes looking back can be harmful, even sinful, such as when Lot's wife looked back longingly at Sodom and Gomorrah. But sometimes looking back can be beneficial, even godly, such as when the Apostle Paul recounted God's mercy to him. The

⁵ <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2015/october/5100515.html>.

⁶ John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1-3*, 28.

church in Ephesus was to remember their initial salvation, and how they had loved God and also loved one another.

Second, Christ commanded the church in Ephesus to repent. He said in verse 5a, “. . . **repent.**” Christ wanted the church in Ephesus to change direction. They were to turn their back on their sin of not loving God and not loving one another. They were not told to wait until they felt remorse or contrition, but they were to acknowledge Christ’s assessment of their sorry condition, and they were to repent of their sin.

And third, Christ commanded the church in Ephesus to resume. He said in verse 5a, “. . . **and do the works you did at first.**” Christ wanted his church to resume their love for God and for one another. There was no timetable for the commencement of their action. They were to do it immediately. John Stott says,

The work will be the same as it was during the intervening period of lovelessness, or similar. But there will be a new vigor in the doing of it, a new singleness of mind and purity of motive, a new secret of joyful perseverance in the face of many trials, and a new care even for those whose false words and evil deeds the Ephesians would continue rightly to hate. Love will cause a transformation scene on the stage of Ephesus.⁷

VI. The Warning (2:5b)

Sixth, observe the warning.

Christ said in verse 5b, “**If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.**” Christ’s warning was very stern. He warned the church that if they did not repent, he would **remove their lampstand from its place.** That is, he would exterminate the church’s existence. No church is guaranteed a permanent existence, and that is especially true if it does not demonstrate the marks of a true church.

⁷ John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1-3*, 31.

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Bishop Ignatius of Antioch wrote glowingly of the church in Ephesus in the early second century. Sadly, however, the church in Ephesus backslid again, and by the Middle Ages Christ had indeed extinguished the church. A traveler visiting Ephesus “found only three Christians there,” wrote Archbishop Trench, “and these were sunken in such ignorance and apathy as scarcely to have heard the names of St. Paul or St. John.”⁸

Christ’s warning to the church in Ephesus is a warning to our church today. If we do not love God or one another, Christ will extinguish our light in this community. John Stott says,

The church has no light without love. Only when its love burns can its light shine. Many churches today have ceased truly to exist. Their buildings may remain intact, their ministers minister and their congregations congregate, but their lampstand has been removed. The church is plunged into darkness. No glimmer of light radiates from it. It has no light, because it has no love. Let us heed this warning before it is too late.⁹

VII. The Appeal (2:7a)

Seventh, look at the appeal.

Christ said in verse 7a, **“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”** Christ appeals to believers to pay attention to what he has said to them through the Spirit.

VIII. The Promise (2:7b)

And eighth, notice the promise.

Christ said in verse 7b, **“To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”** Each of the seven letters ends with a promise to the one

⁸ John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1-3*, 32.

⁹ John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1-3*, 32.

who conquers, that is, to the one who remembers, repents, and resumes doing what God has called him or her to do. The promise to the church in Ephesus offers free access **to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.** After Adam and Eve sinned, the fruit **of the tree of life** was forbidden to fallen human beings. But to those who turn to God in repentance will be granted eternal life, and **eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.**

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed Christ's message to Ephesus as set forth in Revelation 2:1-7, we should recommit ourselves to the Great Commandment of loving God and one another.

Interestingly, the Apostle John does not tell us in the Book of Revelation how to love God and one another. But he did write about that in his first letter. He said in 1 John 4:19, "We love because he first loved us." God demonstrated his love for us by sending his Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross in order to pay the penalty for our sin. John said in 1 John 3:16, "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers." The cross is the instrument of sacrifice. That is where Christ sacrificed himself because of his love for us. And it is because of the cross of Christ that we sacrifice our self-interest to love God for who he is and others for who they are.

We love God by obeying his commandments. That is not just some of his commandments. We obey *all* of his commandments.

And we love one another by serving each other, even to the point of being willing to lay down our lives for one another. We encourage one another, teach one another, help one another, forgive one another, and so on.

May God help each one of us to love him and one another. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAYER:

Our Father, thank you for Christ's message to the church in Ephesus.

The church in Ephesus was a remarkable church. They had well-known pastors, and they shone brightly for many years. Christ commended them for their service, suffering, and orthodoxy. And yet, the church in Ephesus had also abandoned the love they had at first. Christ commanded them to remember, repent, and resume the works they did at first.

O God, help us to individuals and as a church to recommit ourselves to the Great Commandment of loving God and one another.

And for all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!