

The Church of Ephesus
“They left their first love”
Revelation 2:1-7

A night club, a recording studio, an apartment complex, a taekwondo facility. No, these are not answers to the questions from the winner’s circle of the \$25,000 Pyramid gameshow. This is the reality for many church buildings in America. Places that once boasted the gathering of worshipers for Jesus Christ, are now lamented as monuments to “empires” of the past. Some were edifices built not for the King, but for a king (small k) who sought to build his own empire on the backs of his followers! Buildings that were meant to be for worship, instruction and edification of believers and a place where the next generation could grow and learn are now fashionably repurposed like an antique bathtub or wood from an old barn.

Charles Spurgeon, in an article published in *Sword and Trowel*, in December 1889, said, “to compromise on leadership is the most suicidal act a church can commit.” When it comes to church life, there are countless congregations who would, according to Spurgeon, qualify for suicide watch. However, because most congregations and organizations are autonomous, there is not much that can be forcefully done from the outside. If something is going to begin to change with a church or an organization, it must change on the inside.

In some cases, the churches still have attendees, but given the process of death, it is only a matter of time before they too succumb to the demise of others before them. As the authors of the book, *Rubicons of Revitalization* state, “Dying churches tend to anesthetize the pain of death with an abundance of activity.” Sadly, in some situations, a lone pastor is benefitting financially from the assets of the building while singing softly to himself, “Hold the fort, for I am coming.” The question that remains is, how did a once vibrant, active place become a canvas for an adaptive reuse architect? There are, perhaps, several reasons for the death of a particular organization or congregation, but none so glaring as we see from the text this morning in Revelation.

I. The Background

A. Seven churches

The passage here in Revelation 2 is part of the greater context which is the seven churches of Revelation. These seven churches were real churches, yet

they stand as relevant examples for churches and even organizations today. So, these preach, not necessarily as the imperatives of the epistles, but maybe more like narratives from the Old Testament. There are truths and principles that definitely apply to churches and organizations today. They stand as testaments of what can, and often does go wrong with churches and organizations today.

B. Ephesus

1. The city

Ephesus was the most important city in Asia Minor. It was for all practical purposes the hub of immorality in Asia Minor

Temple of Artemis (Diana to the Romans) could seat 24,000 people (Acts 19:27) And it was home to thousands of temple priestesses which were nothing more than prostitutes waiting to fulfill any person's desire who came to the port city.

The temple was 450 feet long, 225 feet wide and 60 feet tall. Think of something on the scale of a Walmart supercenter. It was considered by some to be one of the wonders of the world. The temple and all that it represented was certainly thought to be something that should be defended at all cost. See **Acts 19:21-34**

Jan. 21, 2017, 500,000 women showed up in Washington, D.C. elsewhere, another almost 4 million women came out around the world to protest. It was the inaugural Women's March. What was it that they demanded? They demanded the right to continue to kill their own children.

2. The church

The church is 40 years old when John wrote Revelation

The church was started by Priscilla and Aquilla (Acts 18) and Apollos also preached there as well (Acts 18)

The church was bolstered by a massive evangelistic effort in the city (Acts 19:18-19)

The church was commended by Paul in Ephesians 6:24

²⁴ Grace be with **all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible.**

II. The Commendation

A. Their labor

Kopos – Wearisome effort

The church of Ephesus was giving it their all when it came to working and serving. They left nothing on the field so to speak. No one worked harder than they did. They worked hard, physically, mentally, and emotionally

B. Their patience

Hupomone – to remain under

The church of Ephesus was faithful to remain patient under difficult circumstances. The surrounding culture, the pressure to change and tolerate, the difficulty of ministering in a city like Ephesus. Amidst all of these challenges, the church remained faithful to God and faithful to Christ.

C. Their intolerance of evil

In the midst of the immorality of Ephesus, the church remained undeterred by their culture and not just undeterred, they refused to tolerate any form of evil. They had obviously taken Paul's word to heart when he stated in **Ephesians 4:17-24** that they not live as the Gentiles do who live in every kind of impurity. The church at Ephesus was a model church for living in a wicked, sinful world.

Included in this was their hatred of the Nicolaitans

"Who were the Nicolaitans? The few references to this heresy in the writings of the church fathers link it to Nicolas, one of the seven men appointed to

oversee the distribution of food in Acts 6. Some argued that Nicolas was a false believer who became an apostate but retained influence in the church because of his credentials. Nicolaitanism led people into immorality and wickedness. The **deeds of the Nicolaitans** thus involved sensual temptations leading to sexual immorality and eating things sacrificed to idols (2:14) without regard for the offense of such behavior (cf. Rom. 14:1–15:3)—all in the name of Christian liberty.”¹

D. Their examination of leaders

In **Acts 20:17-38**, Paul specifically addressed the elders at the church of Ephesus. He told them in vv. 28 and following to be on the lookout for fierce wolves who would come from within who would seek to destroy the church through false teaching.

Clearly, the Ephesian elders took Paul’s admonition to heart, and they were vigilant against those who would seek to destroy the church. They showed wisdom, discernment, and care for the flock by protecting the church from false teachers from within and without.

III. The Condemnation

A. They stopped loving God

B. They stopped loving others

Amidst everything they did right, they worked hard, they remained faithful under difficult circumstances, they did not tolerate evil, and they were diligent to examine false teachers. Yet, God condemns them for not loving Him and others. After all, this was the greatest commandment according to **Matthew 22:34-40**

³⁴ But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. ³⁵ And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” ³⁷ And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

¹ John F. MacArthur Jr., [Revelation 1–11](#), MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 61.

So, what can we conclude from this? They were guilty of checking boxes. The church of Ephesus was simply going through the motions. The church of Ephesus was guilty of violating the pre-eminence of Christ. Yes, they were working hard, yes, they were being faithful, yes, they refused to go along with evil in an evil society, yes, they properly examined would be leaders and teachers, but after all of that, God cared more that they didn't love Him than what they were doing.

IV. The Consecration

A. Remember where you have been

Peptokas - to change for the worse, with emphasis upon extent and suddenness.

The church of Ephesus would have been one of those churches that you would say, how did they get here? How did they go from what looked like an amazing church to a church that is in danger of shutting down potentially (having their lampstand removed). The fact of the matter is there a number of churches and organizations that look fat, full and happy from the outside, but inside, they have lost their love and relationships with Christ and are simply going through the motions.

B. Repent of what you are doing wrong

The church of Ephesus needed to come to a place where they recognized their sin. Yes, they had a wonderful ministry and wonderful programs, and everything looked good from the outside, but they had grieved God by leaving their love for Him. Now, they needed to repent. They needed to acknowledge what they had done, why it was wrong and ask forgiveness from God. This would be a test of their humility.

Humble churches and organizations will always seek to repent when they place traditions, programs, externals, and anything else over and above their love for God.

C. Return to your original practice

God's desire for the church of Ephesus was that they would go back to what they did at the beginning. Go back to simply loving God for who He is and worshipping God for who He is. Ministries and programs and functions of the church are important and necessary, but they are not the priority. God desires that you maintain your love and passion for Him and He desires that churches and ministry organizations maintain their passion and love for Him. We must never lose sight of who we started out as, a small gathering of people who were passionate in our love for Christ.

V. The Consequences

A. God will remove their lampstand

Lampstand is the witness, the casting of light into the world. Therefore, when God threatens to remove a church or ministry organization's lampstand, he is threatening to close their doors!

Nothing should be more sobering than the threat and even realization that God could shut the doors of a church because they have lost their passion for Christ.

It seems difficult to process that with all the wonderful things that the church of Ephesus was doing and what they were known for, that God was threatening to shut them down because they didn't love Him like they should.

This shows however, that God cares more about your love for Him than He cares what you do for Him. God is more concerned with the relationship PBC has with Him than He is that PBC exists!

B. This is here for those who would be upset that we had an A and not a B

God doesn't want you as some indentured slave who mindlessly works and labors while dutifully checking off an eternal to do list. God wants you! He wants a relationship with you! And, He wants you to want Him and have a vibrant love and passion for Him that focuses on the relationship not the rules or requirements

VI. The Contextualization

- A. We must ensure that Christ remains pre-eminent within our church or organization
- B. We must ensure that each generation loves Christ as passionately as possible
- C. We must ensure that we are advancing the cause of Christ and not our own cause.
- D. We must embrace the mercy and grace of Christ when people fail to love God and others as they should