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Seven Churches, Seven Lenses Part 1

The Church in Ephesus

Text: Revelation 2:1-7

This title “Angel” is very popular in some churches now. When a guest preacher gets up at a conference, he or she will say, “Let’s give praise to God for the angel of this house, Pastor XYZ”. That language is taken directly from these letters to the seven churches in Asia (v. 11).

The book of Acts, chapters 19-20, gives us helpful background information about this church. Ephesus was a seaport city, situated at the mouth of the Cayster River, and a commercial center. Strabo, the Greek geographer and historian, called Ephesus, “The market of Asia”.

The risen Jesus speaking to the church. John sees Jesus and Jesus dictates several revelations to John. Note the self-description of Jesus in 1:17-2:1.

* The First and the Last
* Was dead, now alive
* Has the keys of Hades and of Death
* Holds the seven stars in His hand
* Walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands

Jesus tells John to tell the Church at Ephesus:

1. I know your works, your labor (2:2a)
2. I know your patience and your impatience (2:2a)
3. I know you have theological filters and you use them (2:2B). You have tested those who *say* they are apostles. You hate what I hate (v. 6, 15); the deeds of the Nicolaitans (followers of Nicholas of Antioch). Cf. 2 John 7-11. In his farewell sermon to this church, Paul had warned them that false teachers would come in an infiltrate the assembly (Acts 20:28-31). To their credit, these Ephesian were able to sniff these heretics out.
4. I know you have perseverance. You are patient and you work in ministry and you don’t quit.
5. But.... This is the word that separates the *commendation* from the *condemnation*. Jesus commends the church in Ephesus. Then, Jesus tells the church what He sees and does not like. This is an important balance for us to see in the Church in 2019. We do please the Lord of the church many times and in many ways. We want to hear God say to us, “Well done, good and faithful servants”. However, God is also displeased with the church from time to time and we need to hear that as well.

* You have left your first love (v.4) cf. Jeremiah 2:2. It is possible to become cold and mechanical in our discipleship, in our following of the Christ. We go through the motions. I want to see this text through the lens of spiritual fervor. May our faith be vibrant and fiery!! The Greek for *first* here is *protos*. Protos refers to that which is foremost is time or place or importance. Listen to the condemnation. The text is not clear as to the object of this love. It is safe to say that it is either the love they had for each other or the love they had for their Lord.. Whatever the case, it has declined. Ideally, we ought to be looking at both loves. Do I love my sisters and brothers, and do I love my Lord? These believers are experiencing a declining love. It causes concern in their God and it *ought* *to* cause concern in the church at Ephesus!!!! Ironically, 35 years earlier, Paul had commended the saints in Ephesus regarding the way they loved each other Ephesians 1:15-16:

Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, **16**do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers...

That love may now be in serious decline.

* You have developed spiritual amnesia (v.5)

Action: Repent and return to the first works. Repentance is the assignment given to five of the seven churches (2:5; 2:16; 2:21-22; 3:3; 3:19).

There are consequences in store for those who fail to do what the Lord of the church commands. The consequences are couched in the language of “or else”

(v.5). The consequence is **removal, loss of status, exclusion**. In a sense this has happened. The city of Ephesus as it was known here, is no more. When we visit Greece and Turkey next year, Lord willing, we’ll see the ruins of Ephesus, which has not been inhabited since about the 14th century. Their lampstand (1:20; 2:5) has been removed from its place.

Verse 6 contains another commendation. Each of these seven letters ends with an admonition to hear and a promise to the ones who overcome, the ones who persevere and work this complex faith out. To the ones who do what Christ says and walk in obedience and take on the evil one, there are promises. The church in Ephesus hears this promise from Jesus, via John:

“When you are an overcomer, you’ll eat better (v. 7b). You’ll eat from the tree of life”. What an image-rich promise. I remember another tree in the middle of a paradise. That incident didn't turn out so well. However, this tree holds promise for those who overcome.

The church in both the first century *and* the twenty-first have a few things in common:

1. Both churches have a living Lord.
2. Both churches must work out their faith counter-culturally. That is, both churches must live out their faith amidst persecution and tribulation and hostility.
3. Both churches exist in a setting of religious pluralism.

Cf. Acts 17:16-23; 19:24-28.

The temple of Artemis (or Diana) was in Ephesus. It was one of the seven wonders of the world. There is evidence that other Greco-Roman deities would have been acknowledged in Ephesus even though Artemis was its patron goddess. Cybele (‘sibeli) and Athena and Aphrodite would have been at least mentioned in Ephesus.

I want to see this church at Ephesus through the lens of both particularity and universality. That is, some of what is addressed here is for this particular group of people- the Christ-followers in Ephesus. However, let us also see this as a warning for every congregation that names Christ as Lord in 2019. See this text through the lens of our sometimes declining, decaying faith. Do we love Christ and each other as we did at first?

Do we need to **remember** that state, and return to it, from which we have fallen?

Do we need to **repent**?

Do we need to **return** to our first love?

Let us do what must be done that we may be in right standing with the Lord of the Church.

**Illus**.

Dale A. Hays, in Leadership, Vol. X, No. 3 (Summer, 1989), p. 35. writes,

*On a recent trip to Haiti, I heard a Haitian pastor illustrate to his congregation the need for total commitment to Christ. His parable: A certain man wanted to sell his house for $2,000. Another man wanted very badly to buy it, but because he was poor, he couldn't afford the full price. After much bargaining, the owner agreed to sell the house for half the original price with just one stipulation: He would retain ownership of one small nail protruding from just over the door.*

*After several years, the original owner wanted the house back, but the new owner was unwilling to sell. So, the first owner went out, found the carcass of a dead dog, and hung it from the single nail he still owned. Soon the house became unlivable, and the family was forced to sell the house to the owner of the nail.*

*The Haitian pastor's conclusion: "If we leave the Devil with even one small peg in our life, he will return to hang his rotting garbage on it, making it unfit for Christ's habitation."*

Let us return to our first love, that we may be fit habitations for the Risen Christ.

Amen