

Ephesus; The Formal Church

Revelation 2:1-7

Introduction

They have a saying in Texas; “He’s all hat and no ranch”. That means the person has more style than substance. The same can be said about many churches. They have style but little substance; hat and no ranch. Formal—but no fire.

Most people have an opinion about the church. Most people have an opinion about the local church.

People will often call and ask me about a recommendation for a church in their area. I will ask, “What kind of a church are you looking for?”

A person called me looking for a church in a northern community of Colorado. “Have you tried the Calvary Chapel?” I said. “Yes, I hated it”.

The Church is too small, the church is too large, the church is too charismatic, the church is too fundamental, the church is too dry, the worship stinks, the teaching stinks, the youth ministry is no good, the singles ministry is too weird, it’s too dead, it’s too liberal, it’s too modern, it’s too old fashioned, ‘it’s too reformed, its too egalitarian, its too feminist, its and pick your poison. You know what I have never heard? The church was too friendly, too loving, too Christ-like.

What does the outsider think of your church? What does the insider feel about your church? In the end, there is only one opinion that matters. What does Jesus think about your church? In this section of Scripture we will look through Jesus’ eyes at each of these seven churches, lift out the key issues, piece them together and discover a pattern for the church in every age. The format is simple, in each section Jesus gives a word of approval, a word of accusation, and a word of admonition.

2 Timothy 3:16 (NKJV)

16 All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness,

In chapter 1 John received a vision of the risen Savior standing in the midst of seven lampstands, holding seven stars in his hand. Why seven cities?

After John was released from the island of Patmos, according to church tradition he headed for Ephesus, where he would be one of the teaching Pastors. It would appear that he took this letter and spoke in a circular tour the remaining six churches. John would travel the whole journey on foot. Each city was about two day’s walk from the previous city. The whole journey from Ephesus to Laodicea would be about 200 miles. The complete tour of the seven congregations beginning and concluding at Ephesus was just over 300 miles.

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Why seven churches? Why not ten churches? After all, there was Troas (Acts 20:5); Miletus (Acts 20:17); Colosse (Col.1:2); Hierapolis (Col.4:13).

We are not told. But we are given little clues along the way. Seven is an interesting number in Hebrew culture. Even a superficial look at Revelation will show that it must be used with some kind of symbolic or figurative meaning; there are seven churches (Rev. 1:4); but there are also seven stars (2:1); seven lampstands (2:1); seven seals (5:1); seven trumpets (8:2); seven angels with seven plagues (15:1); seven bowls of wrath (16:1); and a woman with seven heads (17:3); and seven beatitudes (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:19; 20:6; 22:7,14). In a very general sense seven stands for completion or perfection.

I think these seven churches in some ways represent all the congregations in every generation. This should not distract from the fact that there were seven real churches, historical churches, in the Roman province of Asia, and John was instructed to take a personal letter from Jesus to each of them.

You've Got Mail

But why these seven? Sir William Ramsey a famous Bible scholar and archeologist says that the Roman province of Asia was divided into seven main postal areas and the collection or distribution point in each area coincided with the seven cities in Revelation. The city of Ephesus was the distribution point for the Cayster valley and Smyrna the point for the whole of the coastal region and the lower part of the Hermus valley. Pergamum was the point of distribution for such cities as Troas and Adramyttium with Thyatira fulfilling that function in the north east of the province. Sardis looked after the middle of the Hermus valley, Philadelphia the whole of Lydia and Laodicea the Lycus Valley. If Sir William Ramsey is correct, important cities like Hierapolis and Collosae and not mentioned—because these are not the postal outposts.

Each letter has seven distinct parts; (1) the first part is a commission “to the angel of the church” wherever—write—(2)The second part is an identification of Christ—taken from chapter 1—every dimension of that vision of Jesus Christ has a pertinent application to one of the churches. Something about His Character relates to a problem or a difficulty affecting that particular church. (3) The third part of the letter contains a commendation—Jesus looks at the life of the church and points out where the church is on target. You have some good things happening, let me tell you about them. Right after that, (4) Jesus has a word of condemnation, where the church is off base. I've good news and bad news—the bad news is there is something that displeases me. Immediately after the condemnation (5) comes a word of correction. He gives the church instructions on how to get back on target. (6) Each letter contains a call, “He who has an ear, to hear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Jesus means—hear the message in such a way—that you respond. You are open to what the Holy Spirit says in the letter. You then must respond in obedience to the correction that Christ gives. (7) The final part of each of

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these messages is that Christ gives a challenge. In the challenge there is usually some kind of an exhortation to action, or a promise for the one who responds in obedience (Bob Beltz pp.29-20—How to Survive the End of the World).

Epheseo

Revelation 2:1 (NKJV)

1 “To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, ‘These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands:

Jesus Christ is the speaker. Note some important things; Jesus is the one who holds the ministers of the churches in His hand. What can we glean from that bit of information?

This means—that the minister of Jesus Christ is chosen and picked out of the world by the hand of the Lord. The minister is nourished and nurtured by the hand of the Lord. The minister of Jesus Christ is placed where he or she is—by the hand of the Lord.

We sometimes lose sight of the radical sovereignty and control of our Lord. Do you realize you are placed, cared for, secured, protected by the hand of the Lord. Being in the hand of the Lord—entitles you to a special intimacy and proximity to the Lord—you are in his hand! Because you are in the hand of the Lord, you are expected to be an extension of that hand—to a hurting world. You are responsible to the hand of the Lord, you are held accountable by the hand of the Lord.

There was a time when Ephesus was the most important coastal city in Asia Minor. I have visited the ruins of this great city and walked the streets, and seen its library. This was the headquarters of the Temple of Diana. She is depicted with a gross head and many breasts and focused on the sensual pleasures of the flesh. Pilgrims would come from all over the Empire to worship in her Temples of Prostitution and a great trade of silversmiths and goldsmiths did very well. Their artisanship was known throughout the world, Roman Emperor’s went to Ephesus to find craftsmen to portray their busts on Roman coinage. Coins with an Ephesus mint mark are rare and beautiful and some of the most expensive in the world.

Something amazing happened to Ephesus, it’s harbor silted up, and people went down to the shore for trade and commerce. Ephesus became a ghost town, and disappeared for over 1700 years, until it was excavated in the 19th century. Ephesus began to live on its past reputation, its past philosophical and artist achievements, the great city of Ephesus had a great disease, the disease of sensual unrighteousness, and the disease took its toll on the inhabitants of the city. The people, sensual and self-centered, lost their will to work. The lampstand of Ephesus went out, its light and testimony disappeared.

Approval (vv.2-3,6)

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Jesus expresses his approval, his commendation in at least five areas;

- (1) The Church worked or labored for the Lord Jesus Christ.
- (2) The Church patiently endured.
- (3) The Church refused to put up with those who were evil.
- (4) The Church tested all the preachers and teachers of the church and rejected those who were false!
- (5) The church bore up under all for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ.

1. “I know your works, your labor” In the original language; “work to the point of exhaustion”. There was no place for laziness or lethargy. We should be immediately surprised that Jesus is watching us, watching our work, and keeping track of our time.

This fabulous church had amazing programs. Paul sent “Tychicus, a beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord, will make all things known to you” (Eph.6:21). Can you imagine? Maybe he’s doing the announcements now at the early service. The ladies are having a burrito sale to raise money for the widows and orphans. We will have a special brunch for the brothers and sisters visiting from Corinth and Phillipi; we have a prayer meeting and Bible Study every day this week. We will be having a foundations class at the school of Tyrannus across the street. This evening our brother Alexander from Cyrene, who’s famous father Simone carried the cross of our Lord, will be speaking about picking up your cross in the evening service.”

Is it possible for a church to be busy but not blessed?

(2)

The Church patiently endured; the word means to persevere, to remain steadfast in serving the Lord and in standing against all trials and temptations. The church was steadfast in Bible study and in ministering to the needs of the most desperate. 1

Corinthians 15:58 (NKJV)

58 Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

3 The Church refused to put up with those who were evil. “and you cannot bear those who are evil” (2b)

What the church in Corinth did tolerate, the Ephesians refused to tolerate. Homosexuals would be welcome to hear the gospel but would not have participated in Communion,

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allowed to teach Sunday School let alone be ordained to the ministry. A person who was a cheater in business, involved in sexual immorality, a drunk, perpetually intoxicated, a wife beater, a person given over to fits of rage, convicted of lying, would have lasted long in the fellowship at Ephesus. Did those high standards and church discipline mean they rarely experienced explosive growth? Maybe. The believers at Ephesus simply would not tolerate evil from the people who went there, or the people who taught there.

2. “And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars.”

How do you know he was an apostle? See—here it is—right here on his cassette tape, “Apostle Paul Cain” so and so. Apostle R.W. Apostle Morris.

People would show up in Ephesus with all kinds of outrageous claims and new mystical revelations. Even the Apostle Paul would have needed letters of recommendation if he were going to preach in the pulpit at Ephesus! False Doctrine was definitely not welcome in Ephesus. If a teacher refused to confess that Jesus came in the flesh, taught some weird doctrine, refused to teach that you were saved by grace alone and faith alone, they were not allowed to teach.

Dr. Jay Adams writes; “Mysticism is a selfish as well as an arrogant approach to life because the mystic believes his special access to God is the most important thing in life, and while he wallows in it, the world can go hang! There is a self-centered absorption in one’s self that few other activities can approximate. Of course, the so-called ‘Christian mystic’ is no more in some special relation to God than the Muslim or the Indian mystic. All have an experience that is similar, but it is of their own manufacturing. They fabricate this experience which, they maintain, is so ethereal and blessed they cannot describe it.”

“At length the mystic, having entered into his esoteric experience, finds it difficult to think of himself as anything but in a class of his own. While he may speak of the experience as humbling, humility does not seem to be his outstanding characteristic. Rather, he is inclined to look upon those who have not entered inot such experience as spiritual peons. There is nothing about mysticism in the Bible. It is a movement in many religions that has (wrongly) been incorporated into Christianity. But it does not fit” (quoted from *The Confusing World of Benny Hinn* p.3; who quotes Adams *Christian Living in the World*; pp.43-44.).

Jesus gives us a meaningful picture of a true church, one that has surrendered to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a picture of a church that is loyal and devoted to the Lord, and is orthodox through and through. It is certainly a picture of what a church ought to be. But there is one thing lacking, one devastating and destructive thing that looms large over the life of the church.

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Accusation (v.4)

Revelation 2:4 (NKJV)

4 Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love.

What does Jesus mean? I see a furnace and no fire! I feel warmth but no passion. Paul had written the Ephesians and told them they were seated in the Heavens “who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ” (Eph.1:3).

Jesus says—you have fallen. One large debit—has consumed all their credit.

The church and its believers had lost their feelings for Christ. The Greek text construction goes something like this, “your love the first (love)”. The Believers had left their first love. The Lord Jesus was no longer first in their lives. They were putting themselves and their own affairs first, and they were putting church first—they were doing good things, excellent things, noble things, but church first—the programs, the services, the ministries, the fellowship, they had become more attached to the church than they were to the Lord of the Church.

They had lost their feelings of warmth and tenderness for the Lord.

There is an interesting story in the Old Testament. When Rehoboam took the throne in Israel, he acted like a fool. To humble him, God allowed the Egyptians to invade Judea to carry away as spoil, the golden shields of Solomon, that were provided for the Temple Guard. Rehoboam took the loss—no big deal—and made shields of brass. They looked like gold. They shined like gold (1 Kings 14:25-27). That is what happened at Ephesus and happens in many fundamental churches, the enemy comes in and steals the gold of our devotion and love and we replace it with a cheap substitute, that doesn't really cost very much. We sound like brass and tinkling cymbal.

Those to whom you minister may not always perfectly understand what you say, but they will soon know whether you love them or not. The secret of many a successful Christian worker is not that he is skilled, knowledgeable, and has endowments which are superior to others, but that those to whom he ministers know that he really cares about them, not in some abstract way, or from sense of duty, but wanting with all his heart the best that God wants for them.

-- Pulpit Helps. Leadership, Vol. 1, no. 4.

Admonition (vv.5-7)

Revelation 2:5-6 (NKJV)

5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will

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come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent.
6 But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

Jesus issues His warning.

My most painful experiences have been when I've had a problem and no one loved me enough to tell me about it.

-- Paul Cedar, pastor, Leadership, Vol. 5, no. 3.

“I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place unless you repent.”

What does it mean to remove the lampstand from its place? It means that the Lord Jesus Christ will remove the church, from being a true church. What does that mean? Can a church cease to be a church? Can a church lose its salvation?

“or else” (v.5). Or else what? This is the warning for the church that loses its love for Him.

Revelation 2:6 (NKJV)

6 But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

The Ephesians were doctrinally sound. Paul taught there for two years.

Who were the Nicolaitans? We are not sure. Some scholars have speculated that the Nicolaitans were a group who focused on either extreme license or liberty. In other words that Jesus Christ had done away with the Old Testament Law and instituted the Law of Christian Liberty. That the soul of a person and the spirit of a person were far more important than the body of a person. The results were catastrophic, if there is no law to govern us, then we can do what we like just so we profess to believe in Christ. And if the spirit is what really matters, then I can do what I like with my body just so I take care of my spirit.

We face the same danger. How many people do you know who attend church, support the church, but feel like they can do or be or live any way they want during the week.

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Think of how many people who have heard the gospel, have been baptized, who believe they are secure in Christ, yet continue to live in the most perverse ways, seeking the pleasures of this world, pursuing wealth and possessions, banking and hoarding, and neglecting the gospel and a world in need. Who have never even produced the most basic evidence of repentance and a changed and holy life—no evidence of self-denial-sacrifice.

The Church at Ephesus stood squarely in opposition to the error of the Nicolaitans, they refused to allow the stinking error into the church, they were doctrinally sound, Biblically balanced, committed to the truth of Jesus Christ and His Word, but they lacked one thing, the main thing, love for Jesus Christ.

Jesus issues a second warning, doctrinal purity is not enough to keep you in the right track as a church. This warning is going to be shattering to some when Christ returns. "Wait a minute! We believe the Apostles Creed. We have our statement of faith. We clearly fall in the camp of orthodoxy.

A very skillful bowman went to the mountains in search of game. All the beasts of the forest fled at his approach. The lion alone challenged him to combat. The bowman immediately let fly an arrow and said to the lion, "I send you my messenger, that from him you might learn what I myself will be when I assail you." The lion thus wounded rushed away in great fear, and when a fox exhorted him to be of good courage and not to run away at the first attack, he said, "You counsel me in vain, for if he sends so fearful a messenger, how shall I abide the attack of the man himself?"

If the warning admonitions of God's ministers fill the conscience with terror, what must it be to face the Lord himself? If one bolt of judgment brings a man into a cold sweat, what will it be to stand before an angry God in the last great day?

-- Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Quotable Spurgeon*, (Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers, Inc, 1990)

Revelation 2:7 (NKJV)

7 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God."

Jesus issues a promise to the overcomer.