

“THE CHURCH IN EPHESUS.”

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Scripture Texts: Revelation 2:1-7

Introduction

Can you imagine how humbling it would be if Jesus wrote a letter to the First CRC church of Lynden and put it in the Bible for everyone to read, the good with the bad?

Jesus tells John to write seven letters to seven churches in Asia Minor (western Turkey). It's an interesting little bit of trivia that Paul also wrote letters to seven churches: Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, and Thessalonica.

That there are seven churches suggests completeness, which suggests that there is a universal application of these letters to all churches in all times and in all places. They stand for us. Their triumphs, failures and struggles are ours.

The repetition between all seven letters is meant to highlight what is most important. To say something twice is to intensify it. To say it seven times, well let him who has ears to hear, hear.

No church is perfect and no two churches are equally healthy. There is an invitation here to evaluate our own church and respond faithfully.

These seven letters to seven churches each have seven parts:

The salutation or address, to the angel of the church in ...

Christ's self-designation, the words of him who ...

Christ's commendation, I know ...

Christ's condemnation, But this I have against you ...

Christ's warning and threat, Remember ...

Christ's exhortation, He who has ears to hear ...

Christ's promise, to him who overcomes, I will ...

Only Laodicea has nothing commendable.

Only Smyrna and Philadelphia have nothing condemned.

Revelation 2:1-7, The Letter to the Church in Ephesus.

Ephesus: The City of Change

Ephesus was an ancient city, dating at least back to 1100 BC. It grew to be the wealthy and prosperous commercial center of Asia Minor. It was the largest city in the Roman province of Asia, a thriving metropolis of between three and six hundred thousand people.

It was the most prominent of the seven cities mentioned, but its great influence was starting to wane as it struggled to stay economically viable as its port and harbor moved. Ephesus was on the Aegean Sea at the mouth of the Cayster River. As the river silted up over the years the city slowly lost importance as it became less and less accessible.

Imagine if silt coming down the Nooksack filled in all of Bellingham Bay to beyond Lummi Island. Imagine how big a change that would bring to the character and nature of Bellingham. Today the ruins of Ephesus are nearly six miles from the sea.

Ephesus was prominent because of all the cultic worship there. There were at least six temples for the worship of six different emperors.

But it was most famous for her temple to the great Greek goddess Artemis (Diana). She was the national deity of the city, the mother goddess even of all of Asia. The huge temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world built around 550 BC. It was built with 127 60 foot tall marble columns and covered nearly 100,000 square feet.

The citizens of Ephesus were fanatical about their worship of this goddess. In Acts 19 we read about Paul's first visit there and his encounter with the magic arts practiced there and about the riot that started because Paul interfered with this cultic worship.

Acts 19:23-27, 35 About that time there arose no little disturbance concerning the Way. 24 For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen. 25 These he gathered together, with the workmen in similar trades, and said, "Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth. 26 And you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost all of Asia this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods. 27 And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that *the temple of the great goddess Artemis* may be counted as nothing, and that she may even be deposed from her magnificence, *she whom all Asia and the world worship.*"

35 And when the town clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, "Men of Ephesus, who is there who does not know that *the city of the Ephesians is temple keeper of the great Artemis*, and of the sacred stone that fell from the sky?"

The Letter to the church in Ephesus.

Paul first visited here on his second missionary journey and labored there, more than any other church. He left Priscilla and Aquila there and later Apollos. On his third missionary journey Paul ministered with tears day and night for three years, probably the longest he spent at one church. Paul later sent a letter of his own there from a Roman prison around 61 AD.

The church Paul established there was strong and was the mother church in Asia Minor. The first Christians there were very strong, they had to be in the face of such strong opposition. They followed Jesus at great personal sacrifice (Acts 19:19).

Paul later left Timothy in charge of this church. At the time of John's writing the church in Ephesus is over 40 years old. It's believed John served this church as a pastor and bishop for a time and wrote his Gospel of John from here.

This was the church early on characterized by love and zeal. But things have changed since the first generation of believers. The original passion and zeal had waned, perhaps complacency, perhaps the form of godliness without the power. Her once godly example and influence was silting over by a lack of love.

Christ's Character Identified with the Church.

Christ addressed each one of the churches specifically, each letter has references specific to that city and that church.

Christ's self-designation for Ephesus is that he holds the seven stars in His right hand and He is the one who walks among the seven golden lampstands. The Son of Man, exalted in glory, rules over His churches and knows all that happens in them. He knows about the false apostles and pastors and about the hearts of all in the church.

This seems fitting with Ephesus as the leading city of the seven, at the center of the lampstands. As the capital it stands for the whole. Ephesus stood for Asia and Asia stood for Ephesus.

However great the former rise or the present fall, Christ is the one who holds the church and provides for and protects the church. He is the watchman and the preserver.

Christ's Commendation and Condemnation.

Christ knows what Ephesus has done, He knows every detail.

Christ commends the church in Ephesus for her zeal, enthusiasm, hard work and patient endurance. She has managed to maintain despite many external pressures in a very pagan environment. And He especially commends her for her sound doctrine.

Since Ephesus lay at the head of the great inland highway, many itinerate preachers traveled through there. Especially those going to and from Rome. There were many after Christ's apostles who tried to claim apostolic authority.

The Ephesian church was like the Bereans, testing what the teachers said.

Acts 17:11 Now these [Berean] Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.

Ephesus is commended for being intolerant of false doctrine and false teaching, intolerant of wolves in sheep's clothing, and especially of the Nicolaitans. They were a heretical group who held to the teachings of Balaam (see 2:14) and Jezebel (see 2:20) luring God's people into sexual immorality and idolatrous feasts (vv. 14–15).

They lowered moral standards and encouraged others to do the same. Their presence was toxic, their practices were unholy, contrary to all the teaching of God's Word. False doctrine and evil practices threaten the eternal souls of people. Is it not true that loose doctrines and loose morals go together?

It would appear that the church was still heeding well the warnings that Paul gave many years before about false shepherds and recorded in Acts 20.

Acts 20:28-31 Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. 29 I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. 31 Therefore be alert.

Ephesians 5:6 Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.

She was loyal to the true doctrine of Christ.

False doctrine abounds, it is all around us. New teachings are constantly arising. Joel Olsteen; people visiting heaven and coming back; cults knocking on our doors; new calves are rising out of the fires of our culture; new bestselling books prompt ancient paganism; new age is now the new environmentalism and gaia or earth worship; home brewed Christianity, make it up as you go religion; do it yourself, build your own religion.

The church of Jesus Christ must never tolerate false doctrine or immoral practices. She must never grow weary in exposing and opposing what is contrary to orthodoxy or orthopraxy.

But ...

There is a but coming. All churches have problems, all churches have flaws, all churches exhibit the sins of her members.

All the churches John wrote to were less than fifty years old and all but one (Smyrna) were showing the signs of sin, of forgetting what they once learned. In other words all churches are

in need of spiritual correction and admonishment if they have ears to hear. All churches are like families, they get messy, they are dysfunctional.

Christ says, "But I have this against you. One fatal flaw. You have abandoned your first love."

They looked good on the outside, they had the externals down. Anyone else looking at them would think they were a pretty good church. But they had a hidden fatal disease of the soul.

Do you know you can have a large and growing church, a church with many good programs and lots of good people, zealous for the truth, faithfully proclaiming Jesus, you can have all that and Jesus still not be impressed and in fact have something against you?

Their orthodoxy was a dead, lifeless orthodoxy. Their orthodoxy had lost its doxology, its earnest expression of love and praise and worship.

The tree was still green, but the roots and trunk were dying. In her zeal and hard work, Ephesus has forgotten her first love; in her passion for doctrine she has forgotten her devotion to Christ.

Maintaining one's initial zeal and love is hard. It is a constant danger.

We all know how this can happen in a marriage. The husband or wife may be faithful and loyal, and dutifully fulfill all their responsibilities but the flame may have gone out, the spark is gone. It is just a reasonably peaceful co-existence.

A church member can be faithful and loyal, there every Sunday, tithe generously, serve in many ways but have no particular love for Jesus or His Word. The form of godliness without the power or affection.

"If the price paid by the Ephesians for the preservation of true Christianity was the loss of love, the price was too high, for Christianity without love is a perverted faith" (Beasley-Murray).

We must pay special attention to this warning. Don't we have right doctrine, well supported by the Bible affirming historically tested creeds and confessions and catechisms, don't we have a well ordered life here with good government, staff and elders and deacons? Are we not faithful in our attending and giving and volunteering?

But are we growing in our love for God and each other. Do we pray prayers desiring greater holiness for ourselves and our families and church families? Do we yearn for more heart felt and heart engaged worship? Do we hate our sin more and we love our Savior more? Do we pray the prayers of the Psalmist with a sincere longing?

Psalm 42:1-4 As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God.
2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

Psalm 63:1-4 O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you;

my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

Christ's Challenge, Threats and Promises

Remember from whence you have come, remember the former days and former things. Remember your first love, remember your zeal, your affection. Remember the past grace and divine mercies.

Repent! Change. Be a city and a church of change again. As you changed for the worse, so you can change for the better. Move toward Christ before He moves away from you. Look to the cross, look to Jesus. Confess, take hold of the gospel, waste no time.

Do your former works and worship.

Repent before the fire goes out altogether. Turn to Him who walks among the lampstands, behold the one who fills their oil and trims their wick and tends to the fire. Seek Him who is personally present with you.

Christ **threatens** to move her lampstand from its former location unless they repent. This is a threat to her very existence. Ephesus will lose its first place among the churches.

Christ **promises** that to him who overcomes and to all faithful saints the abundant eternal life of the Tree of Life in the New Jerusalem. Heaven will be the great reversal of the curse of sin, and the open invitation to eat of the tree of life and enjoy life eternal free from the curse and stain and pollution of sin.

There is not church in Ephesus today, that first lampstand was removed, it has vanished. All that remains are ruins. Let the loveless church beware. Without love, everything else is vain.

This was the church to which John gave frequent admonishment, "Little children, love one another" (I John 3:18; 4:7).

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Application and conclusion.

Are we like Ephesus?

This letter may be the closest one to our situation. Churches that uphold sound doctrine are often the ones that grow cold. We can be ambassadors of the truth and forget to love the one who gave us the truth.

We can become like Ephesians if we pit grace and truth against each other.

We can become like the Ephesians if we have our doctrine down so well that we stop listen to the Holy Spirit. We need to always be teachable, willing for the Spirit to show us new things. Christianity isn't just a theology book, it's a relationship, personal, alive.

We can become like the Ephesians if we stop loving people. Is easy to become annoyed with people, with hypocrisy, with how people don't live according to what they say they believe. We can become annoyed with Lynden people or Bellingham people or Canadians or pick a group.

There are things people do that we don't have to like, but we are called to love them. We are to replace our contempt with compassion. God loves me even though I am very annoying to Him and He sees my hypocrisy much clearer than anyone else and yet He loves me.

To love the way God loves is a demonstration of the Gospel in us and through us.

We can become like the Ephesians when we see how others should repent, but we don't see our own need to repent. We see others sins more quickly and more clearly than our own.

We need to repent of our lack of compassion, of our judgmentalism, of our self-righteousness, of our thinking ourselves better than those other people.

We can become like the Ephesians when Jesus is more of an idea or a concept or a truth than He is a person. He is more of a historical figure or a moral example than our living Lord. It's time to spend some time with Him, reading, meditating, praying, talking, worshiping, just loving Him and praising and thanking Him. Rekindle the fire, fan the flames, restore the love and joy.

Let us rekindle the fire of our first love. Let's remind ourselves and urge the next generation to stay faithful and loving, to speak the truth in love and so fulfill the Gospel of Christ.

Let him who has ears to hear, hear.