

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Seven Churches in Revelation	Pastor/Teacher
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EPHESUS: THE CHURCH FIRST IN DOCTRINE BUT NOT IN LOVE (Part 1)

When the Postman of Patmos dispatched the letters to the seven churches, “the messenger would naturally land at Ephesus and make his round through the seven representative churches as they are enumerated by the writer. The route was clearly marked out, and the messenger could hardly avoid it. He would go north along the great road through Smyrna to Pergamum (the earliest Roman road built in the Province about 133-130 B.C., as soon as Asia was organized). Thence he would follow the imperial Post Road to Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea, so back to Ephesus, or on to the East, as duty called him, using in either case the great Central Route of the Empire. At each point, like the other messenger, he would trust to the local organization to complete the work of divulgation.”¹ His first stop would be Ephesus, “the metropolis of Asia,” the capital of the Roman Province; more importantly, the home of one of Christ’s churches.

- I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND.** It is of great importance in interpreting the letters to the seven churches to try and ascertain as much historical material as possible. The churches were addressed in very definite and peculiar historical settings. Any attempt to understand the letters must of necessity begin with the history of each particular church and its environment.
- A. The Founding of the Church.** In the case of the church at Ephesus, we have a great deal of Scriptural background. In Acts 18-20 we learn that the Apostle Paul arrived in the city on his second missionary journey (approximately A.D. 52). He came to Ephesus with Aquila and Priscilla and left them there after a short stay (18:18,19). He returned on his third missionary journey and remained in the city for over two years (19:8-10). His efforts produced dramatic results, so much so that it affected the city in many ways (19:13-40). It was from Ephesus that Paul took up his Corinthian correspondence (cf. 1 Corinthians 16:8). When the Apostle departed, he left behind an established church and his young assistant Timothy (1 Timothy 1:3). On his journey to Jerusalem (approximately A.D. 61) he was able to meet briefly with the elders from the church in Ephesus at Miletus (Acts 20:13-38). Towards the end of his life (approximately A.D. 64) he dispatched Tychicus to relieve Timothy at his post in Ephesus. Some time after this, we learn from ancient tradition that the Apostle John devoted the remainder of his life to the Church in Ephesus.² Truly, if any church was blessed with effective and able teachers, it was Ephesus: Paul, Timothy, Tychicus and the Apostle John -- you couldn't ask for better.
- B. The City of Ephesus.** Ephesus was at this time, the most important city in the Roman province of Asia Minor. The region itself was the wealthiest of the whole Roman Empire.³ The population of the city was approximately 300,000. At one time it was a port city with a busy harbor. Because of the city's great prominence, commercial, as well as religious, the Roman emperor cult flourished in Ephesus. Temples were erected to Claudius, Hadrian and Severus. But the city's great attraction was the Temple of Diana, Artemis of the Ephesians. The goddess in classical mythology was the daughter of Jupiter and Latona and the twin

sister of Apollo. She was often portrayed as the goddess of the moon and as a huntress. Her temple at Ephesus was regarded as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. “The scale on which the Temple was erected was magnificently extensive. It was 425 feet in length and 220 in breadth, and the columns were 60 feet high. The number of columns was 127, each of them the gift of a king; and 36 of them were enriched with ornament and colour. The folding doors were of cypress-wood; the part which was not open to the sky was roofed over with cedar; and the staircase was formed of the wood of one single vine from the island of Cyprus. The value and fame of the Temple were enhanced by its being the treasury, where a large portion of the wealth of Western Asia was stored up. It is probable that there was no religious building in the world in which was concentrated a greater amount of admiration, enthusiasm, and superstition.”⁴ The goddess who was enshrined at this temple was not so magnificent and beautiful. The image of Diana was ugly and grotesque. She bore closer resemblance to the pagan idols of the far East than to the classical art depicted in most Greek statues. Her image is that of a many-breasted virgin goddess often associated with the various pagan fertility cults. Thus she was regarded as a deity of fountains and abundant resources. All in all the city was a beehive of pagan cults, magic arts and sensual idolatry (cf. Acts. 19:19-20).

II. CHRIST'S DESCRIPTION. The glorified Lord of the Church is declared to be the One “who holds the seven stars in his right hand;” compare with 1:16. The word translated “held” in 1:16 is *echōn*, literally *having*. In 2:1 the word is *kratōn*, a much stronger word, literally *to hold with authority*, to grip firmly (cf. Matthew 26:4; Acts 2:24). The idea is of retaining; thus in all circumstances, Christ retains His hold on that which is His. Notice also that in 1:12,13 Christ is standing among the lampstands; here He is “walking among” (*peripatōn en mesō*, literally *walking in the midst of*). “The words denote constant and vigilant presence; cf. Leviticus 26:12.”⁵) His churches. He is among His churches and He “knows” all there is to be known about the churches (cf. Matthew 18:20).

III. CHRIST'S COMMENDATION AND CITATION. Nothing escapes His knowledge, “I know your deeds.” Three specific areas are commended.

A. Their Labor – “Your hard work,” literally your toil (*kopon*, same word used of elders in 1 Timothy 5:17); “works” are used here and throughout the seven letters not merely of outward deeds, but in the sense of life and overall general conduct (comp. John 6:29). They were involved in “diligent labour unto weariness. . . strenuous and exhausting labor,”⁶ and so the meaning of “toil.”

B. Their Endurance – “Your perseverance,” *hupomonēn*, literally steadfast endurance, to bear up under a load; this is mentioned again in 2:3. We can gather from the early history of the church that intense opposition to the Gospel existed in the city (Acts 19:23-40). They were willing to endure for the sake of the name of Christ, despite the cost.

C. Their Orthodoxy – They would not tolerate false teachers. They had put the self-proclaimed apostles to the test and had rejected them. They had endured hardship for Christ's name and had not grown weary in doing so. Paul had warned the Ephesian elders some 35 years earlier that false teachers would come, and they came (Acts 20:29, 30). The church did not forget (compare 1 Thessalonians 5:20ff and 1 John 4:1). In verse 6, the commendation continues: “You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.” This may well be a designation of some of the false teachers mentioned in verse 3.

NOTE: Who were the Nicolaitans? They are mentioned or alluded to a number of times in these letters (cf. esp. 2:15). We have very little actual information on them. Some of the early church fathers (Irenaeus and Hippolytus) held that they were founded by Nicolaus the proselyte of the Antioch

mentioned in Acts 6:5, but this is mere speculation based upon the similar spelling of the names. The term “Nicolaitans” is made up on the words *nikaō*, to conquer or destroy, and *laos*, people; thus “destroyer or conqueror of the people.” G. Campbell-Morgan is fairly representative of the most commonly accepted opinion of this sect. “My personal conviction is that the Nicolaitans were persons who excused certain forms of impurity, and made the grace of God a cloak for lasciviousness. I believe the heresy was that known in latter days as Antinomianism, which declares that grace is sufficient for salvation, and that life is of little moment.”⁷ As Alford writes of the Lord’s hatred of their practice, “This strong expression in the mouth of our Lord unquestionably points at deeds of abomination and impurity: cf. Isaiah 61:8; Jeremiah 44:4; Amos 5:21; Zechariah 8:17.”⁸

The Church at Ephesus could bear trials and hardships for the name of Christ, but they could not bear false teachers and their wickedness.⁹ This church stands strong in the faith, laboring in the faith and zealous in contending for the faith – what more would you want in a church? What more could you expect from a church that listed Paul and John in its noble history?

IV. CHRIST’S COMPLAINT AND REBUKE. “Yet I hold this against you,” – surely the first time this was read in the church there was a pause and quick beat of the heart in all those who heard those words, “What is it that our Lord holds against us?” Then came the stunning words, “You have forsaken your first love.” The expression *tēn agapēn sou tēnprōtēn* (literally the love of you, the first) carries with it, as Swete points out, this force, “The adjective in this position limits and corrects: *Thou hast left thy love, at least the love of the first days*, i.e., the days of St. Paul’s ministry at Ephesus; how fervent it appears from Acts 19:20; 20:37, cf. Ephesians 1:3ff.”¹⁰ Paul had concluded his epistle to the Ephesians with these words, “Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus with an undying love” (6:24).

A. The Manifestation of Love – How had the church forsaken its first love? Paul had written of the relationship of Christ and the church under the illustration of husband and wife (Ephesians 5:22-23). He had elsewhere described the first love of espousal in 2 Corinthians 11:2. First love has to do with the complete abandonment of everything for the sake of the one who has likewise abandoned all. But love to Christ is demonstrated not in feelings but in commitment. It is an act of the will. Furthermore, it is evidenced in actions and attitudes towards other Christians. “The Lord had taught that mutual love was to be the hallmark of Christian fellowship (John 13:35). The Ephesian converts had known such a love in their early years; but their struggle with false teachers and their hatred of heretical teaching had apparently engendered hard feelings and harsh attitudes towards one another to such an extent that it amounted to a forsaking of the supreme Christian virtue of love.”¹¹

B. The Necessity of Love – Paul had written to the Colossians, “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you, and over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity” (Colossians 3:12-14). Love to the Lord Jesus is seen in obedience (John 14:15, 21, 23) and in sacrificial love for the brethren (1 John 3:17, 18; 4:20, 21). It is more than mere affection, it is self-giving in meeting the needs of others, and this was missing in the church at Ephesus.

The church father Irenaeus and the church historian Eusebius claim that the apostle John spent his last five years in Ephesus and during this time wrote the five books of the New Testament ascribed to him. The churches singled out for comment in John’s book of the Revelation are within easy communication range of Ephesus.¹²

ENDNOTES

- ¹ W.M. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches* (rpt. James Family, 1978), p. 186.
- ² cf. T. Murphy, chapter "Home of the Holy Theologian," *The Messages to the Seven Churches* (Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1895), pp. 171-198. The present-day location of Ephesus in modern day Turkey is called Ayasoluk, a corruption of *hagios theologos*.
- ³ W. M. Ramsay, p. 114.
- ⁴ W. J. Conybeare and J.S. Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1974), p. 423.
- ⁵ I.T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (rpt. Baker Book House, 1979), p. 449.
- ⁶ R. C. Trench, *The Letters to the Seven Churches* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1975), p. 78.
- ⁷ G. Campbell-Morgan, *A First Century Message to Twentieth Century Christians* (Revell, 1902), p. 39.
- ⁸ H. Alford, *The Greek Testament* (rpt. Moody, 1958, vol. IV), p. 563. H. B. Smithy, *A Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Herald Press, 1961), p. 64, identifies the group as "laity-conquerors" and sees them as being the first to impose the clergy system upon the church which later developed into the Roman Catholic hierarchy.
- ⁹ "Observe also how resistance to false teachers and to immoral practices go together. Loose doctrines and loose morals are intimately connected. A spurious charity for teachers of error is not seldom equally indulgent to laxity of morals. A low estimate of truth is inseparable from a low estimate of practical holiness. The conscience that is not tender enough to be wounded with false doctrine is not tender enough to be hurt much with unholy practices. Christ's authority as King will be but little revered, if His authority as teacher be lightly regarded." J. B. Ramsey (rpt. *Revelation: An Exposition of the First 11 Chapters* (Banner of Truth, 1977), p. 27.
- ¹⁰ H. B. Swete, *Commentary on Revelation* (Rpt. Kregel, 1977), p. 27.
- ¹¹ G. E. Ladd, *A Commentary On the Revelation of John* (Eerdmans, 1972), p. 39.
- ¹² J. S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of The New Testament: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (IVP, 1999), p. 268.