

The revelation of Jesus Christ

Lesson # 6 The Church at Ephesus

Revelation 2:1-7

Sunday, Sept. 6, 2009

Ephesus

John has already introduced these letters to the 7 churches by introducing the idea of 7 “stars” or messengers in Rev. 1:19-20. This is the first of those 7 letters and it goes to Ephesus, which is the church out of which the other 6 have likely come. Each letter follows a pattern, identified in the notes of our last lesson, and the messages are carried to the churches by moral representatives from those churches who were not necessarily pastors of those churches.

Paul had established the Ephesian church 40 + years prior to this epistle – about AD 52 - and had spent 3 years there. When Paul wrote Ephesians he had been gone from there for about 5 years. John had spent more time in Ephesus and near it – possibly for most of the years since Paul had written Ephesians – until he had been banished to Patmos, yet God directs John to write to the messenger of Ephesus, not the church personally.

By the end of the first century, Ephesus was a great commercial center – the largest city in the Roman province of Asia. Although it had been a seaport, silt had blocked much of the harbour and only certain channels allowed passage.ⁱ It had solid road connections to most other important cities in the province. It was considered a “free city” by Rome & no Roman garrison was stationed there, but governors occasionally visited to hold court sessions and there were annual regional athletic games held at Ephesus which drew large crowds.

①

The population was diverse – there were some original natives whose ancestors predated the Greeks, some from Athens and other Greek cities along with a substantial Jewish population. The religion most prevalent in Ephesus was the worship of the Greek goddess “Artemis” (Roman goddess Diana), and the temple of Diana was one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world. It was 220 ft. wide by 425 ft. long supported by 120 massive columns. Although one might think of Diana or Artemis as objects of great beauty because they were fanatically worshipped, this “god” or idol was a squat, grotesque, many-breasted figure which had supposedly fallen from heavenⁱⁱ (cf. Acts 19:27,35). The city was also a center of crime and provided asylum for criminals and there were of course, hundreds of temple prostitutes associated with the worship of Diana / Artemis.

Ephesus plays a large role in the NT. Paul arrived there to establish a church at the end of his 2nd missionary journey in about AD 52 (Acts 18:19-21) in this city of between 250,000 to 500,000 population. He left Priscilla & Aquila there when he left & they were able to affect the ministry of Apollos (Acts 18:25-26). Paul returned there on his 3rd missionary journey and spent 3 years there (Acts 20:31), establishing a strong church. Paul spent more time at Ephesus than at any other church and left Timothy in charge of it when he left (I Tim. 1:3). John arrived at Ephesus in about AD 66 and began to minister there.ⁱⁱⁱ Ephesus is thought to be the recipient church of at least 8 NT letters – Ephesians, I & II Timothy, I, II, III John, The Gospel of John & Revelation.

Today, Ephesus is in ruins. The silt finally closed the port & it is now over 6 miles from the sea.

I. The Speaker

v. 1

Each letter to the churches begins with the formula, “the words of...”, which is a phrase used only 8 times in the NT. It is found 7 times here in Revelation and once in Acts 21:11. Here it refers to the words of Christ, and in Acts the words of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus identifies Himself here as “Him who holds the 7 stars in My right hand who walks among the 7 golden lampstands.” These are of course descriptions John has shared with us in Rev. 1. There is a slight change of wording in the Greek which says He is walking among the lampstands and has a firm hold on the 7 stars – an expression of total control or sovereignty.

His constant movement among the lampstands is referring to His watching over them and controlling them. Certainly, this involves His perfect knowledge of every situation and for Ephesus, v. 5 expresses the risk of Him removing their lampstand. His vigil over the churches (lampstands) is tied to whether they will shine or not, which is a parallel to the role of OT priests who tended the lamps in the Tabernacle & Temple – trimming wicks, refilling oil, etc.

II. The Commendation

vv. 2-3

“I know your works.” This is referring to spiritual achievements and includes the other things He mentions – toil, patient endurance, cannot bear evil, have tested some to find them to be false apostles, enduring patiently and bearing up for Jesus’ namesake, and not having grown weary. The Greek word used here & throughout Revelation when it refers to Jesus’ knowledge differs from another word meaning to know, in that the word here is not referring to progressive knowledge or learning, but rather full or complete knowledge – ie.) Greek “*oida*”, not “*ginosko*”. ②

The church at Ephesus had a number of things Jesus commended them for, and it is obvious that they worked out their salvation to the point of exhaustion and identified, then separated from those who were evil. They were intolerant of evil people, and especially false teachers & false apostles. Verse 6 indicates that one problem group was the Nicolaitans, whom we will look at when we get to v. 6. (Note also MT. 7:15 – beware false prophets; II JN 7 - many deceivers and antichrists are out there, 10 – don’t greet or receive false teachers; II Cor. 11:13-15 – false teachers come disguised as angels of light.)

There were certainly a widespread number of false teachers throughout the NT era, even as the church was just getting started and by AD 95 there would have been all manner of false teachers, misunderstandings of the Bible, alongside bold-faced lies by some in order to gain influence, power and money. The fact that some were claiming apostleship shows that many boldly stole the identity of some of the 11 or those who had traveled with them (Barnabus, Silas, Luke, etc.). This may be the reason that Paul certifies his own apostleship in II Corinthians by reminding that church that he had performed the “signs of an apostle” in their midst, which would have been gifts of the Spirit unmistakably given to only apostles – healing, prophecy, etc. These false apostles may have had some tricks up their sleeves too, as it seems that some real discernment was needed to unmask them.

We are not told (v. 3) what the church was enduring patiently, so they may have had various sources of pressure or persecution, not just an onslaught of false apostles. Jesus had predicted while He was on earth that those who followed Him would be persecuted and hated for His namesake, so it should come as no surprise that this was occurring (MT. 10:22; 24:9). The Ephesians were enduring for the sake of the purity of the Gospel by not tolerating false apostles.

They had not grown weary in their efforts, even though this sort of fight can take a lot of you. Just think of the spiritual wars we are engaged in in 2009 – abortion rights are being expanded, and your disgust over this immoral practice has now earned you the status of potential terrorist; homosexual rights have gone beyond equality to a protected status the very disagreement with this new status earns you the name hate-monger & might even get you put in jail; new antagonistic hate speech & hate crime laws are being put on the books with a vengeance; many new laws aimed at the church and church-goers are being considered and intolerance for even opinions that vary from left wing liberal thinking is fast becoming the norm. This church at Ephesus persevered & we must too – no matter what the cost of that perseverance might be. In Canada, by the next generation, it may cost us our freedom to follow Christ, or worse.

III. The Rebuke, the Remedy, the Warning vv. 4-5

This brief statement of Jesus exposes a critical problem in Ephesus; “I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first”. It is the only thing He rebukes them for but it is major. The word “first” seems to be a key word in the verse – that they had forgotten and left the most important aspect of their service – love. Their doctrine was good, they’d been commended for ferreting out false apostles after all, and had worked hard and endured hardship, as well as having hated evil, but they fell short of showing love. ③

Think about it – Jesus narrowed down the commands to just 2 in Matt. 22:37-40 – and this church was deficient in that very thing. Their works, though good works, had become mechanical, and they were just going through the motions. They had love at first – cf. Eph. 1:15, but decades had passed and they had let love fall to the bottom in importance – cf. II JN 6 – there must have been some disobedience present according to this verse which exposed the weak spot in that church. Remember that I, II & III John were also written to Ephesus.

This weakness opened the door to apathy, to a lethargic view of evangelism, to a state of static or minimal growth in both numbers and Christian maturity.

So Christ now guides them in v. 5 – “Remember therefore from where you have fallen.” In the Greek, the tense of this word “remember” is “keep on remembering”. They needed to recall what God had saved them from and why – cf. Eph. 2:8-10 – so Jesus tells them to repent because they were going in the wrong direction, with their love decreasing rather than increasing as it should have. This repentance would lead them to do “the works you did at first”, so whatever works they were doing now (v. 2) to be commended for, were deficient in that earlier works were done with this aspect intact. The implication, since these works are not named by Christ here, is that they would have known what this meant if they heeded the letter when they received it.

The command to repent is followed by an ominous warning in v. 5b. “If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its’ place, unless you repent.” What does Jesus mean by this? Why say it symbolically? Some see this as a promise of Christ’s return in general, & others see it as a special judgment at Ephesus in particular and that is how I would interpret it. Jesus is threatening a divine judgment here that would close down the Ephesian church. How? We are not told here, but we have seen it occur even in our own lifetimes in local churches. Church splits that are not recovered from can and do cause churches to die; local economic problems can kill a local church; scandals can kill a church; doctrinal disagreements; arguments over how to spend church revenue; and many other ways come up which can bring a local church down. God of course, still controls all things, so it is Him who brings the conditions into being which bear on how a local church will fare in either growth or recession.

The eventual fate of the Ephesian church was in fact localized. We have to presume that Jesus’ warning went unheeded, at least in future generations and the silt moved in and closed the city’s economy down and the church is no longer there in that region. Today, this entire part of the world is given over to Islam. The church fathers indicate that Ephesus did repent in early 2nd century, but subsequent generations fell from repentance. This is an important lesson for us today – we must ensure that our children and their children follow Christ by teaching them & guiding them in the faith.

IV. The Promise of Blessing

vv. 6-7

Jesus now returns to a commendation for them. They hated the works of the Nicolaitans, which Jesus also hated. They hated evil deeds in general (v. 2) but especially the deeds of this group of people. It is possible that the lack of love mentioned above had to do with their transfer of hatred from the deeds (sins) of the Nicolaitans to their person, yet cf. Ps. 139:21-22 – although we are to love our enemies, we are to have some hatred towards God’s enemies too. ④

Who were the Nicolaitans?

Three main views exist:

- They were followers of Nicolas of Antioch who was 1 of 7 original deacons of Acts 6:5, a converted Jew who became apostate.
- They were a sect that had misinterpreted a statement by Nicolas & they lived indulgent lives – the lust of the flesh and with a Gnostic^{iv} viewpoint.
- Nicolaitan comes from a compound Greek word “*nikos*” (from where we get our word & sporting goods logo “Nike” & “*laos*” meaning “conqueror of the people”. In Hebrew, Balaam or “devourer of the people” – they were perhaps forerunners of clerical hierarchy who tend to rob people of spiritual freedom.

The first view above is the most prevalent in early writings, but from the context of commendation, it is obvious that the Nicolaitans were doing public things to make it clear that they opposed the true gospel.

The exhortation of “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” is found in each of the 7 letters as well as in many places in the 4 gospels^v. The message is now pictured as having come through the Holy Spirit to the hearers rather than from Jesus, as it is Scripture & it is the Holy Spirit who superintends the

transmission of Scripture. The people are responsible to hear it, heed it & apply it by doing what has been recommended to them.

The mention of “an ear” implies the ability to perceive the message so as to respond positively to it, and as a result, that person who heeds and reacts to it will be one who overcomes or who conquers. The idea of being an overcomer (KJV) is found in a lot of John’s writings, but it is not a separate class of believer he has in mind, but is to be the goal of every believer – cf. I JN 5:1-5. The eating from the tree of life promised here is not restricted to some special class of super-believer but is reserved as a hope for all the faithful – for every true believer. This tree of life recalls Gen. 2:9 – 3:22 & looks forward to Rev. 22:2,14. Whereas Adam & Eve were chased out of the garden before they could eat of the tree of life and live eternally in a sinful state (Gen. 3:22-24), by Rev. 22, the tree of life is there for everyone because everyone with access to it there will already be in the eternal state – glorified.

All the promises found in these 7 letters are symbolically promises to all the faithful of every age / every era – as benefits of Christ’s redemption of them and their promised participation in God’s kingdom.

“The paradise of God” – the Greek word here is “*paradeiso*”, meaning a pleasure garden, a park-like zoo built for Persian kings. It is used in Luke 23:43 & II Cor. 12:4. It means the abode of God, our permanent home where our citizenship is registered – part of the New Heavens & New Earth. It is meant to be a motivation for our obedient love for God and for His people while we walk on this earth’s sod. We look forward to the joy that will make all suffering here of no consequence when we look back on it – cf. Rom. 8:18; II Cor. 4:16-17. This is a promise we need to all take to heart.

Next lesson – Rev. 2: 8-11 The Church at Smyrna

ⁱ Robert Thomas, Revelation 1-7; p. 128

ⁱⁱ IBID, p. 129

ⁱⁱⁱ William Hendriksen; More Than Conquerors; Baker, 1995; p. 61.

^{iv} Gnosticism was a system of belief that stressed knowledge and had as a few of its’ core tenets: dualism (good & evil are of equal power); matter is evil; Christ’s resurrection was spiritual only, because if it was physical, then that body could only be evil; salvation was based on special knowledge, not faith or works; etc. Source: Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics; Norman Geisler; 1999; Baker Books; pgs. 273-274.

^v Note Matt. 11:15; 13:9; 13:43; Mark 4:9; 4:23; Luke 8:8; 14:15.