

Introduction

Think for a moment with me about the challenges and pressures that exert themselves upon 21st century churches in the United States. There is lingering pressure from Darwinism and the rise of atheistic science. More recently post-modernism is sweeping the culture with the idea that there is no such thing as objective truth and touting a corresponding message of tolerance. In many of our lifetimes, we have witnessed a moral shift of gargantuan proportions that has embraced lifestyles and ideas of sexuality and gender that run completely counter to biblical ethics. Those who resist this shift are considered hateful and mean-spirited and bigoted. Moreover, ours is a culture of consumerism driven by marketing and outward appeal. What matters is how enticing something can appear. Yet another characteristic of this age is the strong passion and pursuit of the accumulation and enjoyment of wealth. The love of money and the hedonistic provisions it can supply run rampant among us. Finally and permeating it all is a generation driven by and for entertainment. The most important questions for most people are: is it fun? And is it exciting? People live in the virtual world of tv, movies, video games, and amusement parks.

So secular science says there is no God. Post-modern philosophy says there is no truth. Increasingly society is saying there is no reason to exercise sexual self-control. People are driven for what excites their senses and helps them forget that one day they will die.

The impact of these conditions is apparent as one looks across the landscape of what is called the church in this day and age. Some churches with charisma and sparkle proclaim a feel-good message of how to obtain money and health and a problem-free life. Some churches exist with a will simply toward helping the less-fortunate and raising the living standard to a higher level. Many having stepped away from God's word have embraced society's morals. They affirm people living in open rebellion against God. Many churches have found their niche in the culture as places to go to be entertained. Image and presentation are everything and substance matters little. In contrast, some churches are determined to hold fast to old time traditions and have become so devoted to the fight that it seems that's why they exist. Still other churches seek to simply be faithful to God's word and remain unstained by ungodliness while at the same time reaching out to the world with the gospel of Christ. These are often overlooked as insignificant and strange by their surrounding community.

As we study the seven first century churches of Asia which Jesus addressed in the Revelation, we are going to find that they bear a remarkable resemblance to those of today. So as we read the mail Jesus sent to those churches, we will be confronted with matters still relevant today. Jesus meant it to be that way. In the case of each message to each church, he exhorts the readers to "hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Let's listen carefully as we hear what the Spirit says this morning to the church in Ephesus.

[Read Text and Pray]

Ephesus was the most prominent of the cities in which the seven churches were located. It boasted a large population for the day of 250,000, rivaling even Rome itself. Ephesus was wealthy and hedonistic and religious. The dominant religion of the city was the worship of Diana, also called Artemis. The temple in which she was enshrined was an impressive Greek style marked by its

pervasive columns all around. In size it was larger than an American football field. The temple of Artemios was a hub of worship, sexual immorality, and finance.

But in this city God had planted a church. And that church had been blessed by the fact that it was founded by the Apostle Paul, who also spent 3 years teaching there. Later it was served by Paul's protégé, Timothy and later by the Apostle John himself. If there was a church that one would think would be solidly established in the doctrines of the faith, it would be the church in Ephesus, and it appears that it was. However, when we take note of the letter of Jesus to the angel of the church in Ephesus, we find that not all was well. It seems that while the Ephesians were solid theologically, something was missing cardiologically. They were all about doctrine and rightly so, but their love had grown cold, and that displeased the Lord. The main idea for us in this message is that Jesus delights in doctrinal fidelity, but he deplores a waning love. He presents himself to the church there in such a way as to both commend them and correct them.

I. Jesus Walks Among the Lampstands

A. At the outset of each of the addresses to the seven churches, Jesus identifies himself in a particular way that is drawn from the images in the first chapter of Revelation. He presents himself to the church in Ephesus as "the one who holds the seven stars and walks among the lampstands."

Holding the seven stars calls to mind John 10 where Jesus underscored that no one is able to snatch his sheep out of his hand. He has a firm grip on his people.

Walking among the lampstands gives us the sense of fellowship. Remember the aftermath of the Fall back in Genesis 3. Adam and Eve sinned against God. Their eyes were opened and they were ashamed. "And they heard the sound of the Lord God WALKING in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves among the trees of the garden, but the Lord called to them."

The emphasis is on his possession and his careful watchfulness. The churches and their leaders belong to Christ. He will not let them go, but neither will he fail to call them to account. He watches over them, and he watches them closely. And they need to be prepared to be called to answer to him and deal with their sin.

B. Grace Community Church is itself a lampstand. You and I are called together to be holding forth the light of Christ in the midst of this world. By our existence and faithfulness to Christ's instruction to the church, we function to display the glory and grace of Christ to the people around us. Christ holds us in his hand, but he also walks among us. He watches over us, but he is also watching us. We are responsible to him. We are stewards of the charge we have received.

Christ walks in our midst to strengthen us, to protect us, but also to reprove us. We must take our responsibilities as a church seriously. The image of Jesus walking among the lampstands helps remind us of our accountability to him.

II. Jesus Knows the Churches

Having drawn attention to his identity, Jesus asserts his knowledge. In the case of each church, Jesus uses two words to communicate his penetrating awareness. He says, "I know." It calls to mind the image of the fiery eyes depicted in chapter 1:14. His eyes were like a flame of fire. Jesus tests the works of his people and of his churches. He looks intently at them and sees. They cannot

escape his deep and penetrating eyes. Those eyes see our actions. They see our thoughts and intentions as well.

Hebrews 4:13 declares that, in fact, "no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account."

Christ's knowledge of us is both assuring and alarming. It is comforting because he knows our faithfulness and he knows our circumstances. There is nowhere we can go, and no enemy who might pursue us but what Christ, the one who holds us in his hand, knows. There is no temptation that can come upon you but such that he knows. And he is faithful to provide a way of escape so that you may bear up under it. The knowledge of Christ is a comfort of which he wants you to be aware.

But Christ's knowledge is uncomfortable as well. Christ sees where the Ephesus church has been faithful, but he also sees where they have failed. He sees and knows the same about us. We cannot hide from the gaze of Christ. It should be a helpful deterrent against sin and unfaithfulness to remember this fact. When you are alone, you are not alone. When the flesh whispers in your ear, "no one will see; no one will know;" respond with the truth: "Jesus will know."

III. Jesus Delights in Doctrinal Fidelity

A. Jesus lists a number of good things he knows about the church in Ephesus. He says,

"I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary."

Jesus further says in verse 6: "Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate."

This bunch in Ephesus was a solid group. They did not bend. They towed the line. Their works were good. They were withstanding the evils of the culture in Ephesus. Patiently enduring, they were withstanding the antagonism of their neighbors and stood unashamed of the name of Jesus. The church in Ephesus was well schooled theologically. Well just think about it. As we mentioned, they learned directly from Paul and Timothy and John. Their elders had been solemnly and affectionately warned by Paul. In one of the more touching moments after Christ's resurrection, Paul is on his way to Jerusalem and is sure his life is about to take a turn to Rome. So he sends from Miletus to have the church elders come to him. And when they arrive, he reminds them of how he lived among them serving the Lord in tears and in trials, pouring out his heart and life for them, teaching them the whole counsel of God. And then, knowing this is the last time he will see them, he says this to those elders: "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. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert."

It appears those elders took to heart what Paul had said. Because they were steeped in truth, they could discern error. And this church hated error. They fought for the truth. They recognized those who falsely claimed to be apostles as such, and they hated the works of those pesky Nicolaitans

which Jesus also hates. We do not know for sure what it was about the Nicolaitans that was so bad, but early church commentators have suggested that they were unrestrained in indulgence. It certainly would fit the culture in Ephesus.

B. Can we just admit that being doctrinally solid does not come easy? It does not come without wrestling hard and carefully to understand the scripture rightly and to bring your thinking under its authority. Paul tells Timothy, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). In addition, this difficult endeavor does not come without being challenged both by those who think doctrine is unimportant and by those who peddle their own mistaken ideas.

C. Maintaining doctrinal fidelity is hard, but it is worth the price of the hard work. After all, we are seeking to preserve and protect and hold forth the truth. Another thing Paul says to Timothy straight-up is that the church is "a pillar and buttress of the truth." And that truth centers in on the precious gospel of Jesus Christ by which sinners are saved.

Do you know what the gospel is? Every Christian should be able to state clearly and confidently the basic gospel message of the Scripture and be able to distinguish it from common errors. Can you? What would you say the gospel is? I am going to give you the very short version right now.

The word gospel means "good news." And here is the good news. Humanity's lost and condemned estate has been overturned by God. Jesus of Nazareth, God's own son, came to earth as a human being. He completely obeyed God's law and suffered God's condemnation of sin in the place of sinners, rising victoriously from the dead. And all who will repent from sin and trust exclusively in Jesus are saved.

And by the same token, ONLY those who repent of sin and trust in Jesus will be saved. For there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved. What no law nor mere human effort could do, God has done. He offers salvation as a gift to those who will believe.

If you have not yet embraced this gospel, I appeal to you right now to be reconciled to God through his gift of grace named Jesus. Repent of sin and cast yourself on him to receive forgiveness and cleansing from God himself.

There is more to being solid doctrinally than the gospel, but there is certainly not less. And Christ Jesus applauds the doctrinal soundness of the Ephesus church. Everything Jesus says to this church underscores the importance of understanding and holding fast to the truth of the Bible. Whatever you already know, you should be striving to increase in that knowledge. Christians cannot afford to be lax in learning. Peter says, "make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with KNOWLEDGE" (2 Peter 1:5).

IV. Jesus Deplores a Waning Love

While Jesus commends the toil, patient endurance, and doctrinal fidelity of the church in Ephesus, he has a serious concern about them. In fact he is rather put out with this church. If they do not change in regard to this concern he is threatening to remove them as a church. Here is something Christ has AGAINST the church. He puts it this way: "you have abandoned the love you had at first."

We do not have to discern between whether the love of which Jesus speaks is their love for him OR their love for one another. If you don't love Jesus, you can't really love your brother, and if you do not love your brother you cannot be loving Jesus. The Ephesus church had forsaken the love they had at first, their love for Jesus as well as their love for one another. Living in Ephesus was hard for a Christian. Society was against them at every turn. It did not like their stand on morality. It did not like the Jesus they preached. It detested that their message was a threat to their very economy. It found ludicrous their lack of love for the things of the world. And not only was society against them, there were also those false teachers. Man, they were so wrong and such pests!

But the Ephesus Christians were determined! They were ready for the battle. In fact, it appears that the Ephesus church had become so engrossed in the fight for truth and righteousness that they lost sight of the reason for the fight. They stopped taking pleasure in Christ and in his church and took pleasure in the fight itself. You know people like this; perhaps you are one. We who seek to be grounded solidly in truth and in standards of godliness must see in this church the danger of sinking into the love of fighting.

General George S. Patton is known for famously looking out on the battlefield and proclaiming his love for the fight. He once blurted out, "Magnificent! Compared to war all other forms of human endeavor shrink to insignificance. . . . I do love it so!" What did he love so? War! He loved the battle. He loved the fight.

You can start to tell you love the fight when all you want to do is talk about what you are against and what is against you, and when you glory in the battle, and when you develop a snarly judgmental attitude that loses sight of grace, and when you run to a battle but drag yourself to your prayer closet. You see, the fight itself for preserving and defending the truth and the gospel in particular is selfish and sinful if not fought as an expression of devotion to Jesus Christ.

V. Jesus Dictates How to Be Restored

Christ presents a three-fold prescription for the church.
Remember. Repent. Return.

Remember. Think back to the sweetness of your most intimate devotion. Think back to the joys of sacrifice and service that permeated your earliest days as a believer. Remember how it was when you could not pray enough, when getting up first thing to read the word and pray was a delight. Remembering will help you recognize if in stead of increasing, your love has waned.

Repent. Acknowledge your coldness toward Christ and his church as sin and turn. Stop shunning Christ. Stop being cold to his bride. Do not go off trying to do for Christ without spending precious time alone with Christ. It is so easy to let what appears urgent to tyrannize you and lead you to slough off what is truly important. When discussing prayerlessness, it is not seldom that I hear Christians say, "I am just so busy!" I think that is exactly what the Ephesus church would have said. Why don't you commune with Christ the way you did at first? "Well, you see, we are just so busy. We have to preach to the culture and we have these works we have got to do. There are nightly doctrine classes. And then there are the abominable Nicolaitans! We know prayer is important but at the end of every day, we are just spent. Repent! Don't stop working but don't relish the fight. Fight when necessary but only out of devotion to the savior.

Return. If you have abandoned the love you had at first, set your heart once again to pursue him and seek his face.

Conclusion

Finally, brothers and sisters, what Jesus is saying here does not mean we must choose between doctrine and devotion. What Jesus had against this church is not that this church was too doctrinal. The problem is that their devotion to doctrine rose above their devotion to Jesus. Their love for him and for one another and for the world had waned. They had theology but no cardiology. That's what Jesus deplored.

So how is your theology? But equally important this morning consider how is your cardiology. Do you love as you did at first? Or has it waned because you have separated your knowledge of and stand for the truth from your relationship with the one who IS the TRUTH?

Prayer

Benediction

My brothers and sisters, our savior sees; our savior knows. He walks among us. May he strengthen us such that what he sees is first devotion to him out of which flows our devotion to doctrine and good works. A-men