

What Was the Error at Ephesus?

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the commandment of God our Saviour, and Lord Jesus Christ, which is our hope; Unto Timothy, my own son in the faith: Grace, mercy, and peace, from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord. As I besought thee to abide still at Ephesus, when I went into Macedonia, that thou mightest charge some that they teach no other doctrine, Neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than godly edifying which is in faith: so do.? (1Ti 1:1-4)

If our assumption is correct that Paul left Timothy at Ephesus to correct specific deficiencies, what were they? We must begin with the premise that Paul's letter will address the areas in which problems existed, so we look within the letter for clues to identify the problems. Rather prophetically Paul warned the elders that some of their own number would introduce problems in the church at Ephesus (Ac 20:30). What specific clues do we find in First Timothy to indicate that problems existed, what they were, and how to correct them? Here are a few clues, borrowed from Gordon Fee.¹[1]

1Ti 1:3, Paul directs Timothy to "charge some that they teach no other doctrine." Although at this point Paul does not name these men, he obviously has someone specific in mind. He views them as redeemable, but fallen into grave error. They are to be confronted and charged with the gravity of their current teaching.

1Ti 1:7, these men desire to be teachers, but they do not comprehend the error of their present course or the consequences of their error.

1Ti 1:19-20, Paul names two men who have erred concerning faith, men whom he "turned over to Satan," possibly by directing their excommunication or other disciplinary measures.

1Ti 6:3-5, Paul specifically warns against errant teaching and describes the character of the false teachers who refuse the correction that he and Timothy or others offer to assist their recovery.

1Ti 3:1-13; 5:17-25; Paul defines the qualifications and conduct of godly leader-teachers in specific details. The degree of specificity that he includes in these passages offers strong indication that the church at Ephesus had in some way compromised the qualifications of leadership and had promoted unqualified men to these offices.

1Ti 2:9-15 and 1Ti 5:3-16 suggests that the false teachers found fruitful support among some of the women in the church and were backing them to the detriment of the "hygiene," the sound spiritual health, of the church.

Perhaps the church functioned through multiple "house-churches," small gatherings that met in the homes of individual teachers between the general gatherings of the whole assembly. If this were the case, a small group leader could easily influence the people who gathered under his teaching into error.

Fee acknowledges that the specifics of the errors are difficult to define. He makes a good case that the errors involved both behavioral as well as cognitive dimensions. However he offers several probable errors based on various passages in the letter. 1) The false teachers were involved in speculations and disputes over words. 2) They encouraged arguments and quarrels. They were proud, arrogant, and divisive. 3) Fee assigns personal greed as the root problem in these errant individuals. Godliness "is a means to turn a drachma."

In some way they related their errant teachings to a faulty use of the Old Testament, including "myths"

and “genealogies”.

There were also elements of Hellenism, particularly Greek dualism with its “dim view of the material world.”

Although the reference appears in 2 Timothy, Fee suggests that denial of the literal resurrection of the body may have also impacted this church.

The reference to “knowledge, so called” may indicate that the gnostic error that appears in Corinth and Colosse may have also invaded the church at Ephesus.

From a more global assessment of the major problems documented in the first century, Fee examines the potential that efforts to “Judaize” Christianity were part of the problem at Ephesus, as it certainly appears in Antioch and other churches mentioned in the New Testament.

The complexities of these factors seem staggering. They make our local problems seem insignificant by comparison. However, we should take courage that, despite this diversity of likely errors, Paul approaches the situation with striking optimism. The solution to these and other difficulties appears in wise leaders who insist on teaching and living the teachings of Scripture alone. Despite infectious spiritual viruses that abounded, diligent adherence to the faith set forth by the Lord Jesus will inoculate the church from these errors and will ensure a sound, “hygienic,” healthy church for generations to come. Perhaps some of Fee’s suggestions involve a stretch, but none of them is outside the probable, given the presence of all these errors in the New Testament era and culture.

Should a church reflect its culture, or should it confront its culture with an alternative New Testament culture? Despite loud protests to the contrary, many contemporary church cultures justify their existence on the basis that they appeal to and comply with the needs of our culture. From the Willow Creek experience that literally created a church culture based on a survey of “unchurched” people in the local community to the counter-culture mood of the Calvary Chapel movement to the less radical elements within contemporary Christianity, many churches assess their reason for existing based on a personal assessment of the current culture and what they think within their esoteric assessment they can do within that culture.

On the opposite side of the spectrum we should be cautious that we do not adopt such an anti-culture disposition that we fail in our efforts to reach and to change the culture in which we exist. Many Christians, not just our own fellowship, tend to isolate themselves from the surrounding culture so that the broad culture either knows nothing of them, or it marginalizes them as “radical, right-wing, fundamentalist, extremists.” In a taped series of messages on the typology of the tabernacle and sacrifices of Levitical worship Dr. Stephen Olford complained that many of the members of the church that he then served in New York City failed when he urged them to invite non-Christian or non-Baptist friends to join them in special church services or seminars such as the one he was then conducting. He alleged that these folks intentionally avoid any social contact or substantial friendship with anyone who is not a strong professing Christian. This problem violates Jesus’ analogy of the faithful believer as being “salt” and “light” in the world. Salt cannot benefit any food unless it comes into direct contact with that food. Light demonstrates its value when exposed directly to darkness. A Christian will only have a beneficial impact on the world in which he lives by personal contact with those who live in that world. Dr. Ron Rhodes, a noted Christian apologist from southern California, makes a similar point. He alleges that the pseudo-Christian cults do not win converts by a superior Biblical interpretation, but by investing in the lives of their friends and neighbors during times of need. They are present and helpful during a time of need, thus ingratiating their friends to their religion. Rhodes offers wise counsel; historical Christians can become effective in winning people away from these cults, primarily by becoming involved in their lives and by offering sacrificial help to them in times of need. Be better than the cultists at their own practice. May we be effective Christian servants to those around us, not

passive insulators from the culture.