

The Future of Evangelicalism

Selected Scriptures

September 25, 2021

Travis assigned me for this section to speak about the future of evangelicalism. And, a, I'm not a prophet or son of a prophet. I've never even managed to make a profit on any investment or business venture that I've ever made. But people ask me all the time, "What do you think the next big challenge to the Gospel will be?"

And I have learned to decline to make any kind of predictions like that because my stock answer is, I, I don't know. I just know that it will be worse. It will be more subtle and more heretical than any of the previous assaults on Gospel truth because that's the way it goes. Prior to 2015 or so, I did not predict that the issue of social justice would take over and change the whole emphasis of an organization like Together for the Gospel.

I also didn't foresee that something totally non-theological, something that's not even a point of religion, like the Covid crisis, would divide and destroy as many churches as it has. I didn't have a clue that either of those things might happen. And they have been enormously destructive to the ministry and the unity of evangelical churches just over the past three or four years.

So I'm not going to stand up here and pretend that I can predict what the future of evangelicalism will be. Other than to say that the horizon looks pretty dark to me at the moment. And yet, I always say this, I'm not a pessimist. I, that doesn't discourage me that the horizon is dark, that things look bleak in the future. You read biblical prophecy and understand it correctly, and I think that's the way it's going. That's the way this world is going.

"When the Son of man returns, will he even find faith on the earth?" Scripture says. Ah, but I'm not a pessimist, I'm a Calvinist and that means I know that in the end, the truth will

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win out and I can't wait to see how the Lord does that. But what I want to do in this hour is take you to Scripture again and look at a passage that talks about what the future of evangelicalism ought to be. Because I'm convinced that all of the current problems in the evangelical movement stem from a lack of conviction among leaders and lay people alike.

And, and I've said repeatedly, evangelicals are too concerned with what's stylish and too eager to win the world's affection. Not concerned enough with the one thing most needful, namely, our love for Christ. And specifically, such a deep and abiding love of Christ that it overwhelms and conquers all the other things that, that compete for our affection. A love for Christ that governs every desire that we have. Love for Christ that vanquishes every unrighteous craving and every unholy appetite, those things that still cause us to struggle in the flesh.

Love for Christ is, I am concerned, the first and most essential element of Christian piety and practice. Don talked about it earlier this morning in Christ's encounter with Peter after the resurrection. That's what Christ himself was going for with

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Peter, a profession of his true love for Christ. He wanted to bring that out in, not only out of Peter's lips, but out of his heart. Because he knew that that one thing, if Peter could hang on to it, would be what would anchor him for the rest of his life. That he truly loves Christ.

Love for Christ is the first and most essential element of Christian piety and practice. And I'll go even further. Love for Christ is the one true mark of a healthy church. If you have a church that is distinguished by genuine love for the true Christ, then you have a great church regardless of the size of your congregation. And I want to take you to a passage where Christ himself makes that very point. Revelation chapter 2. Revelation 2.

Revelation 2 and 3, of course consist of seven short letters from Christ dictated by him to be sent to a circuit of churches in Asia Minor at the end of the First Century. And only two of those seven churches were healthy faithful churches. There was the persecuted church at Smyrna and the persevering church in

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Philadelphia. And for those two churches, Christ had nothing but words of approval and praise.

But the rest of this entire section of Scripture and his messages to the, the other five churches in this section were harsh, really. Notes of harshness all through it because those churches were in various stages of decline and defection. Some marked by apathy or compromise or corruption or worldliness or a lack of correct biblical discipline. One church, Sardis, was totally dead. And another, Laodicea, was just a lukewarm corpse of what it had once had been.

And then the remaining three churches in this list were on the downgrade and all of them sinking fast. Let me point something out to you about these seven churches. If you would trace those churches out on a map, maybe you have a map in your Bible you could look at this. But you will see that they are in geographic order the way Christ addresses them. They go like this: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and then Laodicea in that order.

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And if you notice the first church on that list is Ephesus, which is a port city and it was, at the time, a colossal town, the largest in the area. It was the chief port city. And in fact, the first three of these cities, Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum, are all coastal towns. They're all port cities. Ephesus was the biggest and most important. Smyrna was the next port as you travel north on the coast. And then Pergamum was further north than, than Smyrna.

All of them on, right on that same coast. And presumably, all of these churches in this list of seven were the fruits of the Apostle Paul's missionary work. Because we know that he founded the church at Ephesus. We have the record of that in the book of Acts. Acts 20. Immediately after he leaves Ephesus, he goes to Troas, which is the next major port, the fourth port city along that coast after Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum.

And so Paul was well familiar with this territory. We know that. We also know that there was a community of believers at Troas, as well, because you remember that's where Paul preached past midnight and raised Eutychus from the dead. But notice, this

series of letters to the churches in Revelation, Jesus sends no message to Troas.

After the letter to Pergamum, he basically turns inland and moves south again and his third message is to the messenger of the church in Thyatira, which is not a coastal city, it's further inland. And from there, still inland, he moves southeast to get to Sardis and then Philadelphia and then Laodicea. Laodicea is at the same latitude as Ephesus. It's just further east. It's about 100 miles east.

So in other words, if you trace these cities on a map, it takes you in a circle. This was an ancient mail route. If a courier was to deliver messages to the towns in the same order that they're given, by Christ here. That's the order he would go in in order to deliver those messages. Same order that they were organized in Revelation 2 and 3.

And for that reason, I'm convinced that the Lord's own intention was that all of these messages were meant to be read in all of the churches, not just the specific church to Sardis be read

there and vice versa. All seven of them were to be read in all of the churches. They were not intended to be private communications to the churches. The words of praise are purposely public commendations. And the words of rebuke are also purposely public reprimands, and warnings, and denunciations, that Christ means, means for everyone in all those churches to hear.

And notice there's nothing delicate or subtle about the way he speaks to these churches. And in fact, I would say, I know beyond a doubt that it was the Lord's intention for all of these letters to be seen and heard by every member of every one of these churches because they were preserved in the canon for precisely that reason. For all of us. Every congregation of believers and every individual believer can learn from every one of these communiques. Because, like all of Scripture, they are "breathed out by God and profitable for teaching and reproof and correction and training in righteousness." And there's a lot of correction and reproof in these letters.

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And furthermore, I think the seven churches combined make a kind of microcosm of 21st Century evangelicalism. You could point out literally any number of churches today, famous churches, some of the best known churches in the evangelical movement that share the same characteristics as any one of these First Century churches. Most churches fit into one or more of these categories. Even the, the diversity, the stark variants that you see here from church to church is similar to the broad diversity among today's evangelical churches.

So we can all learn from these letters. And most of all, I think we should be both appalled and stricken with a healthy sense of spiritual fear to realize how prone to apostasy Christians in general are. Not only you and I as individuals Christians, but even as whole congregations. Whole congregations of churches are susceptible to apostasy. And if, as I've suggested, these churches were founded by the Apostle Paul, they could not have been, not one of these churches could've been more than 50 or so years old when Jesus wrote these letters.

So you have to ask, how could churches in the Apostolic era within the lifetime of the Apostle John go so bad so quickly? How could so many of these churches become so apostate? Because the prospect of apostasy is present in every church in every era. That's the answer why. And if that doesn't stir your deepest concerns about doctrinal accuracy and faithfulness to Scripture and the need to be on guard against error, then you need to examine yourself and get your heart right.

And I wish we had time to study all of the messages, both the rebukes and the commendations in all of these letters. But obviously, we can't do that. So the one I want to highlight for you is the first one, Christ's letter to the church at Ephesus. And I chose this passage because this is what I think Jesus might say to the best of today's evangelicals. His, his message to the evangelical movement as a whole might sound more like his words to Lao, the Laodiceans, you know. You make me sick. You make me want to vomit. That's essentially what he told the Laodiceans.

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But this message to the mother church, a, a, a doctrinally sound and, and seemingly commendable church at Ephesus clearly applies to all of us. These words are shocking because Christ chides them in verse 4 with an admonition that I think is, if perhaps one of the most troubling rebukes Jesus ever gave to anyone other than Judas. These are words that are addressed to entire congregation. But they do contain a principle that's applicable to each one of us.

And this is also perhaps the one biblical message that the 21st Century evangelical movement most needs to hear and to heed. If you want to know the future of our movement, this is what it should be. Jesus says, "I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love that you had at the first." Now understand the magnitude of this. Jesus is speaking to a celebrated church of renown. And, and a church that had far reaching influence, arguably across the board, this was the best and most important church in all of the New Testament record.

This is the primary church of the Apostolic era. But Christ rebukes them because he says they've relinquished their love for

him. And verse 5, "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lamp stick from its place, unless you repent." In other words, he's saying if they don't repent and recover their first love, he's gonna unchurch them. He's going to remove their lampstand, is what he means.

In other words, they would no longer be considered a true church. So that despite all of the things they're doing right, and they were doing a lot of things right, he was prepared to disfellowship them. So a congregation can have all the standard marks of a true church. You know, sound doctrine and a squeaky clean reputation to boot, and still be rejected by Christ if they don't love him with a fervent love.

And that's why I've argued for years that love for Christ is the singular mark of a true and healthy church. And by the way, there's no question what he means when he speaks of "the love that they had at first." He's talking about love for Christ himself. That is the only thing that this expression could possibly mean because love for Christ is implicit, for example,

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in the first and great commandment. This is the starting point of all true religion that you should love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

And Christ, of course, is God incarnate. And so our earnest and all-consuming zealous love for him is mandated by the first and most important of all the commandments. And love for Christ also is the essence of saving faith. Genuine Christians are defined by their love for Christ. Or to say it another way, love for Christ is what separates believers from unbelievers. 1 Peter 1:8, "Though you have not seen him you love him." And 1 Corinthians 16:22, "If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed."

So again, love for Christ is the essence of saving faith. That's the love that the Ephesians had when they were first converted. It was a profound love for him. So keep that verse in your mind. It's the key verse in our study. And I want to take a more expansive look at these first seven verses in chapter 2. But first, in order to consider the larger context with you, I want to talk about the church at Ephesus in general. So be ready to

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turn some pages. You can put your Bible ribbon here in Revelation 2 and I promise we will come back to this page.

But first let's try to get a, a bigger picture of what's going on here. You know, aside from Christ's words in these two chapters, Scripture says very little about most of these seven churches. But the one church with lots of history, whose history is pretty thoroughly covered in the New Testament is the church at Ephesus. And it's the first one Christ writes to. Because this was one of the most important churches in the New Testament with a rich history, and, and with an amazing legacy.

This was the largest and best known of all these seven churches. It was the mother church, probably, to all the others. It was also the one that's geographically closest to Patmos, which is where the Apostle John was imprisoned as he wrote this down. And so it was the also the first church on this mail route that connected these seven cities.

The church at Ephesus, you know, was the fruit of Paul's missionary labors. And Timothy had pastored there after Paul

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moved on. The Apostle John himself also served a celebrated stint at their pastor in his advanced years just before he was sent into exile at Pas, Patmos. So this is a church that had enjoyed every conceivable advantage of Apostolic influence and good teaching and prosperous growth.

And great pastors! Paul and Timothy and John. And, and this was perhaps the most privileged church in the whole Apostolic era. Now, Paul's association with Ephesus is an interesting New Testament theme. Paul's first visit to Ephesus was very short. It was literally the last stop on his second missionary journey on his way home. That second church-planting expedition of Paul's took him as far west as Corinth, where Paul, you know, planted a church, and remained there as their founding pastor in Corinth for 18 months.

And when he left Corinth, he was headed back to Jerusalem, but on the way from Corinth to Jerusalem, his ship made port very briefly in Ephesus, just long enough for Paul to go and visit the synagogue there and start laying the foundation for Gospel ministry in that city in Ephesus. In fact, let's look at it. A,

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Acts 18 is where we have the description of this. Acts 18. Paul is on his way home from Corinth sailing to Caesarea, which is the port city closest to Jerusalem.

Acts 18 verse 19, "And they came to Ephesus, and" Paul, "left them," that is, it's Priscilla and Aquilla he's talking about. "He left them there, but he himself went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews." So he's in Ephesus and apparently it's the Sabbath because the Jews are gathered in the synagogue. And, and as he is, Paul's custom, he visits the synagogue in order to take the message to the Jews first.

And he meets with an uncharacteristically receptive audience, verse 20, "They asked him to stay for a longer period." But notice Paul's response that is also uncharacteristic and a little bit surprising. He declined. "But on taking leave of them, he said, 'I will return to you if God wills,' and he set sail from Ephesus."

So he's only there for at most a day, maybe even just a few hours. And it's not like Paul at all to walk away from an open

door like that. But the facts we glean from the subtext are fascinating and kind of explain what he's doing here. Look at the end of verse 18. It says, "At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow." So Paul had apparently taken a Nazarite vow, possibly as a, as a way of expressing his gratitude for his success in Corinth.

Cenchreae is the port city east of Corinth. Corinth, you know, is on a, on a isthmus. So if you're gonna go west, you go from Corinth. If you're gonna go east, you sail out of Cenchreae, but they're practically within walking distance, these two ports. And while he's in Cenchreae, he's waiting to board the ship that he's sailing on. While he's there the time frame of his vow is complete, so he cuts his hair.

Now the Old Testament prescription for a Nazarite vow is in Numbers 6:18. And it says this, that when the time of the vow is fulfilled, the Nazarite shall shave his consecrated head and shall take the hair from his concentrated head and put it on the fire that is under the sacrifice of the peace offering."

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Now there is only one place to give a peace offering and that's on the main altar at the temple in Jerusalem. And rabbinical tradition in Paul's time said that if you lived in some remote part of the world and you took a vow, then you had 30 days from the time you cut your hair to get to Jerusalem in order to offer the hair from your consecrated head on the altar at the temple.

So Paul is under time constraints here. From the time he cuts his hair in Cenchreae, he has just 30 days to get to Jerusalem. And that means he can't wait at Ephesus. He can't linger there. But Ephesus represented a wide open door for the Gospel. And so Paul leaves Aquilla and Priscilla to stay there in that city. Now their ministry seems to have been on a small scale with individuals. Every time we see them, they're, they're teaching on an individual level. They didn't stand in front of audiences and preach. And obviously, Priscilla's a woman so she can't do that anyway.

But Acts 18:24 says that Apollos showed up at Ephesus and they ministered to him. And under the tutelage then of Priscilla and Aquilla, Apollos quickly developed into a mighty teacher and

defender of the Christian faith. And Apollos, you know, would later become a companion and fellow worker with Paul, both here in Ephesus and also on Paul's second visit to Corinth. And apparently Priscilla and Aquilla excelled in dealing with individuals like that.

So, so they stayed in Ephesus and, and just did personal evangelism. And they probably founded and hosted the Ephesian church in its embryonic form, as a kind of home Bible study in their home. Because when Paul later writes from Ephesus to the Corinthian church, he makes reference in 1 Corinthians 16:19 to Aquilla and Prisca, he calls her Prisca in that, in that context. "Aquilla and Prisca together with the church in their house."

So it's just a small church meeting in their home, but it seems the church in Ephesus began slowly like that. At, you know that Ephesus was the home of the famous temple of Diana. And Diana worship was not only the dominant religion there, it was a major point of civic pride. That comes out in the book of Acts. And so it seems the Gospel ministry that Aquilla and Priscilla started

was slow to make any kind of headway against the city's devotion to Diana. Just a few people who converted. And the church in Ephesus didn't really seem to thrive until Paul returned on his third missionary journey.

And the interval between his second and third journeys is apparently very brief because Luke covers it in the book of Acts in just two verses, Acts 18:22 and 23. "When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church." That would be the church at Jerusalem. That's why Luke says, "he went up." It's always up to Jerusalem. And then from Jerusalem, a, presumably after the ceremony where he put his, his consecrated hair on the fire.

After the ceremony to complete his oath, it says, "He went down to Antioch," verse 23, "After spending some time there in Antioch, he departed." So it's vague. How much time he actually spent in Antioch between the second and third missionary journeys we don't know. But it may have been close to a year. My MacArthur study Bible says possibly from the summer of AD 52 to the spring of AD 53. So we'll go with that.

And then it says, "He departed and went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples." So in other words, he is going back through Asia minor, the Turkish peninsula there, strengthening and following up on churches that he had already planted. But Paul is eager to get back to Ephesus. And in order to fulfill the promise he made in Acts 18:21, when he says, "I will return to you if God wills."

Acts 19 describes what happened. Acts 19:1 and notice Apollos had already moved on to Corinth and he was now ministering in the church there in Corinth. And it happened that while Paul, Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. So in other words, he's arriving there after going through the Ger, Galatians, the Galatians churches. He arrives in Ephesus by land. Even though it's a port city, he didn't get there by ship. He arrives by land.

And it says, "There he found some disciples." Now, doesn't it sound to you like believers in Ephesus are still pretty rare?

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And these guys that Paul found, it turns out, were disciples of John the Baptist. Scripture says about 12 men in all. And they immediately embraced a fuller understanding of the Gospel and were baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit.

And then Paul revisited that synagogue in Ephesus, same one mentioned in chapter 18 verse 19, where the, you remember the people seemed so open they wanted him to stay. Acts 19 verse 8, "And for three months," he, "spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks."

So he has a famous ministry teaching there. And there's an outpouring of miracles associated with Paul's visit this second time in Ephesus. Verse 11, "God was doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul." And apparently that stint in Ephesus lasted about two years. So this is a longer time than Paul had

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spent in Corinth. When you realize that Acts 19 covers more than two years' time, you gain a new appreciation for Luke's ability to condense a whole lot of history into just a few words. He, he's better at that than I am.

But these were a couple of tough years for Paul. His experience in Ephesus started with this outpouring of miracles. And it was punctuated by hardship and opposition and it ended with a riot. But the church there grew and flourished under Paul's leadership. And by the time Paul moved on from Ephesus, the church there had elders. It was fully established. The church at Ephesus would then continue to thrive under the care of those elders, true pastors.

1 Corinthians 16 verses 8 through 10 tells us that when Paul wrote that epistle, 1 Corinthians, Timothy was in Ephesus with Paul. So the Ephesians knew Timothy as, as well. And 1 Timothy 1 verse 3 indicates that at some point, Timothy was sent back to Ephesus to oversee the church there. So that's why I said he was one of their pastors. In fact, the earliest church historians

record that Timothy served as pastor of that church for a long time.

And then Paul's final face-to-face contact with the Ephesian church occurs at the end of his third missionary journey. After leaving Ephesus, his travels took him to Troas where he raised Eutychus from the dead. And then he went to Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Corinth and then back in the direction of Ephesus. So again you can trace that on a map. It's a circle.

He comes back to Ephesus, but this time he wants to get to Jerusalem again, this time for Pentecost. And so he decides not to stop at Ephesus at all, but instead he summons the elders of the Ephesian church to Miletus, another port nearby. Summons the elders there for a farewell meeting with them. He knows he'll never return to Ephesus again. And he tells these elders in Acts 20:25, "Behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again."

So he believes this is the last time he'll ever see them. And also because of his prophetic gifting, Paul knew that hard times

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lay ahead for this church in Ephesus. And so his farewell speech to them includes a pretty strong warning. Acts 20:29, he says, and you know this passage, "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."

And so Paul says some of the Ephesian elders themselves were going to pose a threat to the soundness and health of that church. And so keep that warning in mind. It's gonna come up again. By the way, this plea for the Ephesian elders to be on guard dovetails perfectly with all the words of urgent warning that Paul gave to Timothy, words of caution. Remember Timothy was actually one of the, if not the leading elder in Ephesus.

And Paul's epistles to Timothy are full of admonitions and, and warnings telling Timothy to be on guard because difficult times were coming. And as we're going to see in Revelation 2, difficult times did come. According to church tradition, this is not the biblical record, but church tradition says that Timothy

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was martyred in Ephesus. Put to death for his faith around 80 AD when he encountered a procession of these Diana worshipers, making a parade through the city in a state of drunken, lewd, pagan revelry. And timothy started preaching the Gospel to them.

He was an open air preacher, I guess. And they beat him up and dragged him along behind their procession and then took him and stone him to death. And he is reportedly buried there in Ephesus. Sometime after Timothy's death, the Apostle John became the senior pastor at Ephesus. Remember that from the cross, Jesus had committed the care of his mother, Mary, to John.

And here's an interesting fact. You know that in nine, in 1950 I think it was, the, a Catholic church dogmatically defined the doctrine known as the Assumption of Mary, the belief that Mary didn't die; she was taken to heaven. But before someone thought up that tradition, the older Catholic tradition was that John took Mary to Ephesus when he was there to be their pastor. And she died in Ephesus. And to this day, there is a holy site marking the tomb of the Virgin Mary. It's recognized still as a sacred place by the Eastern Orthodox church. Although I think

Catholics had given up on it, I think, because they, they adopted a new view of tradition.

Irenaeus was a theologian who lived in the Second Century. He personally knew Polycarp, who was a close disciple of the Apostle John. So in other words, Irenaeus was just one degree of separation from the Apostle John. And Irenaeus recorded this story about John in Ephesus that he says he got from Polycarp. Polycarp told him that John went into bathe in the baths at Ephesus. And when he saw there was this famous gnostic heretic, Serenatas, inside the bath, he left without bathing saying, "Let us flee in case the bathhouse falls down because this enemy of the truth is in there." I love that story.

But anyway, that's the backstory on the church at Ephesus. It was founded at the very earliest around AD 52. This letter from Christ comes in the last decade of the First Century, around AD 96 or thereabout. That means that within 45 years of its founding, this highly privileged church was in a serious enough state of decline to warrant a stinging rebuke from Christ.

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It's kind of shocking, isn't it? But the truth is that's more common than you might think. Even for a church as highly esteemed and highly influential as the church at Ephesus. I could literally point out any number of churches today that started well, but totally apostatized within 50 years' time. That always happens whenever something other than love for Christ captivates a congregation.

Now, back to Revelation 2. You, I hope you kept your ribbon there. Go back there. And listen to the letter Jesus sent to this church at Ephesus. With all of the history of that church in mind, listen to it now. Verses 1 through 7. Christ is dictating this to the Apostle John.

He says, "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. I know your works, your toil, and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but you've 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.

“But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at the first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place unless you repent. Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”

Now let's break this down. All of Christ's seven letters to the churches are addressed to the angel of the church. That's how it's translated in, I think, just about every major English translation. The Greek text actually does use the word from which our word, angel, is derived. But the literal meaning of the word is simply messenger. The messenger of the church, that would be, I think, the person who does the preaching, the pastor, their senior pastor and that makes perfect sense. His

task is to preach the Word and Christ is giving him an inspired text tailored directly to the needs of that church.

And it's clear, by the way, that the content of these letters are, as I've said, meant for everyone in the church and that's clear from the letter itself. Because at the end of all seven letters, he, you have the same statement you see in verse 7. "He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." And as I said earlier, by the fact that these letters are included in the canon means there's truth in them for you and me. And we should read them in that light. They are profitable to us for teaching and reproof and correction and so on.

Now there was much in this church that was commendable. And Christ gives them a list of their strong points. They were hard working. They persevered. They couldn't stomach evil people or false teachers, verse 3. They didn't grow weary in well-doing when other people might have. And skipping to verse 6, they literally hated this licentious heresy of the Nicolaitans that was apparently both pervasive and popular throughout their

region because he mentions it in other letters to other churches.

And if that's all you knew about the church at Ephesus at the end of the First Century, you might think this is the model of Christian faithfulness. They, they seem to have heeded Paul's warning about fierce wolves that would come in not sparing the flock. I guess that those who called themselves apostles and were not were the same men who had risen from within their own presbytery, speaking twisted things that draw the disciples away after them.

They had received excellent counsel not only from the Apostle Paul, but also from the Apostle John about what they should do when false teachers came with doctrines foreign to what they had received. I think I read John's admonition last night where the Apostle John says in his second epistle, "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching," and he's talking about the same teaching that they had heard from the Apostle Paul and Timothy and the Apostle John himself. If someone comes to you

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with a different teaching, John says, "Do not receive such a person into your house or give him any greeting."

And the Ephesians seemed to have heeded those warnings. Unlike most of the other churches that Jesus is writing to, the Ephesians had zero tolerance for false teachings. This was a discerning church. You'd think, again, this is a good church. In fact, when I read that list of commendable features in the church at Ephesus, my first thought was, "You know, very much like our church. Very much like your church."

Exactly the kind of church so many discernment-minded people on the Internet say they're looking for. And everybody complains that it's hard to find churches like that. You know, where heresy isn't tolerated, and self-appointed apostles and other evildoers are routinely excommunicated. And, and people serve without complaint. And they endure persecution patiently. Who wouldn't want to be a part of church like that? Surely, that's a healthy church, right?

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They serve, they sacrificed, they were steadfast, they were separated, and they suffered for Christ's sake. So their virtues are even alliterated. This is a great church and furthermore, this a true church according to every classic reformed definition. They, they met and excelled in every one of the what, what reformed people generally consider as the three marks of a true church: the Word, their sacraments, and discipline.

What's wrong? Because this is not a healthy church. Out of all seven letters from Christ, five of them containing rebukes of one kind or another, verse 4 is, I believe, the most troubling and heartbreaking words Jesus spoke to any of them. When he says to this church with all these virtues, "But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at the first."

He tells the church at Laodicea that they're lukewarmness makes them want to vomit. He tells the congregation in Sardis that they're already dead whether they realize it or not. He rebukes some of the people in Thyatira for their tolerance of a evil woman whom he calls Jezebel. He couldn't do that today, could he, in the climate, call any woman Jezebel. She called herself a

prophetess and led people into acts of sexual immorality. They tolerated it anyway.

To the church at Pergamum, he said if they didn't repent, he would come and wage war against them. The only threat he makes to Ephesus is verse 5, that he will come and "remove their lampstand from its place." But still, his lament about their failure in verse 4 is perhaps the most heart rending sentence in these two chapters. "You've abandoned the love that you had at the first." It's as if he's saying to them, "You don't love me the way you should."

It's not like with Peter where he asked them to affirm their love. He told them because he knew what was in their hearts. They had abandoned the love they had for him. And because what he's talking about here is their love for Christ himself, this otherwise orthodox and seemingly stable fine-looking church is not a healthy church. They have no real love for Christ. They were going through the motions of piety and praxis.

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Their religion at the end of the day was reminiscent of the religion of the Pharisees. You know, gleaming white and spotless on the outside. As far as all appearances were concerned, they looked good, but they were dead on the inside. And you might not have even observed that if you visited their church. But Christ knew because he knows our hearts. And that is repeatedly stressed in his message to this church.

Verse 2, "I know your works." Verse 3, "I know you are enduring patiently." He sees everything so he could see their works. He knows everything including the secrets of our hearts. As it says in John 2:24, "He knows all people and doesn't need anyone to bear witness about man for he himself knows what is in man." So no one needed to tell him about the patient, unwavering tenacity in the hearts of these people. But he also knew that they didn't really love him the way they did at first.

Though they were tenacious when it came to enduring persecution, bearing up for his name's sake, he says. They weren't so purposeful in their love for him and, and they had somehow let their hearts grow cold. Perhaps it was the routine of all that

toil. Or the tedium of remaining steadfast in the faith. Or the vexation of having to deal with those who call themselves apostles and are not. All of that stuff, while relentlessly summoning this strength to bear up under the strength of persecution, they hated the works of the Nicolaitans.

And Jesus himself says that's good but if we're not careful, even a legitimate holy indignation like that can eclipse the love we need to cultivate. Whatever it was that had derailed the Ephesian church, their shrinking love for Christ was a serious spiritual setback enough to nullify all the good things Christ commended them for.

And I want you to notice the severity of his threat. Verse 5, unless you repent, "I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place." That is not an idle threat and it's not a small thing. In other words, he's saying to them they will no longer be regarded by him as a true church at all. He will in effect excommunicate the entire congregation. And that, by the way, is not, again, all that uncommon. And, and it often happens within 50 years' time or less.

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Churches apostatize all the time. There are, I would guess, fewer than 100 churches in the world today that have maintained their love for Christ, their commitment to the authority of Scripture, their zeal for the Gospel and their faithfulness to sound doctrine for more than three centuries. There are a few. Spurgeon's tabernacle in London is one of those. It's been a faithful church for more than 350 years.

On the other hand, I could take you on a tour of the neighborhood of our church within in a half mile radius of Grace Community Church in California. I could show you dozens of churches that are less than 75 years old where the candlestick has been removed. The Gospel is no longer preached. The ministers are not qualified, and they've become social centers, rather than churches. All of the good things Jesus said about this church at Ephesus didn't nullify the gross evil that underlied their dwindling love for him.

It, it was the worst evil of all because without love, Paul says, every other virtue has no value whatsoever. That's the

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whole point of 1 Corinthians 13. "If you have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge," and, "and have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love," Paul says you're nothing. And without true love for Christ whatever profession of faith you make is meaningless.

I said earlier that love for Christ is the very essence of true saving faith and I want you to know I didn't make that up. That's the word of God, John 8 verse 42, "If God were your Father, you would love me," Jesus says. 1 Corinthians 16:22, "If anyone has no love for the Lord Jesus, let him be accursed." Matthew 10:37, Jesus said, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me."

When Peter denied Christ three times, that's the very way Christ reached out to restore him, as Don said this morning. He didn't ask Peter to make promises or take an oath or perform some work of penance. He simply asked him three times, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" And here's a fact that I find astonishing. When Paul closed his epistle that he wrote to this

very church at Ephesus, he ended his letter with a one sentence benediction. It's the last verse in the book of Ephesians.

Ephesians 6:24, "Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible." That's a synonym for believers, Christians, those who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible. Now think about this, if the Ephesian church's love for Christ was incorruptible, how could it be slackening or diminishing? How could they lose it or leave it behind? And the answer for true believers in their fellowship is that they could never actually lose or abandon their love for Christ. It would clean contrary to the nature of saving faith.

They'd have to abandon the faith completely and if they did that, it would be proof that they never had faith to being with. 1 John 2:19, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us." If you have true love for Christ, you're not going to lose that love. But the warmth of our love for Christ can diminish. The intensity of a believer's love can decline or be eclipsed by other things.

And in this case, it may be that a passion for orthodoxy actually took precedence over their affection for Christ on a gradual way. And when that happens, what you are left with is a lifeless orthodoxy that can quickly turn into a kind of hateful unorthodoxy. And there are hundreds of spiritually dead and, and abandoned, empty fundamentalist churches in America that bear testimony to that.

One generation passed from the time Paul wrote that to the Ephesians until Christ wrote them this letter. So it may be that by the time Christ writes to them, it's the next generation that's beginning to dominate to the leadership of that church. And they didn't love Christ the way their parents did. It's a reminder that we need to be diligent in the spiritual aspects of our parenting.

We also have to ask, is there a remedy when a church's love for Christ has decline? And the answer is, yes there is, and it's simple, and it's clear. You can sum it up in three words. Verse 5, remember, repent, and return. "Remember from where you have

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fallen," Jesus says. "Repent and return to doing the things you did at first." Remind yourself of where you began with Christ. Rekindle that unbridled zeal that is so common to new believers. A true devotion to Christ. A deep gratitude for our salvation. An eagerness to serve the Savior, not to earn merit, but out of sheer gratitude, thankfulness for the sacrifice he made.

Remember that and remember what you felt and how you thought when you first saw the truth of the Gospel and when it was fresh and new to you. And when you came to know Christ for the first time in all his glory and rekindle that love. Remind yourself of the love he showed for you when he himself bore our sins on the tree, in his body on the tree. So that by his wounds you could be healed. And if you truly fill your heart with those truths and keep those truths in mind the way you did at the first, you'll rekindle that love that was starting to wane.

But there's more, verse 5, "Repent." Because we have to remember, it's a sin not to love Christ the way we should. And actually the, it's, that's the core problem in all of our sins. That's the first thing most of us need to repent of, like Peter

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in John 21:17, we think, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." But also like Peter, we are rightly ashamed because we know that our love for Christ is not what it ought to be. That's a sin that we should ponder and repent of daily.

And third, verse 5, "Return and do the works you did at first." What are those first works? What's he talking about there? Well, if you were truly and soundly converted, then, like the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 1 verse 9, "You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven." So do that again. Purge your life of idols. Serve God. And live with the expectation that Christ could come again at any moment. Just fix your heart and mind on him.

And the chill that has hindered your love for Christ is going to be re, reversed by a new warmth. Now if you know me at all, you know I strongly believe pastors need to cultivate theological depth in themselves and in their flocks. I think biblical understanding is vitally important. Wise discernment is sadly lacking in the church and we need that as much as we need anything. And a willingness to defend the truth is in short

supply today. We've been talking about that as one of the problems of the evangelical movement.

But the Ephesian church had all of those things. It was their love for Christ that was being eclipsed. That's the number one thing even today's evangelicals need. We need to concentrate on developing that one virtue to foster and fortify our love for Christ because if you have true love for the true Christ, the fact is all those other things are going to fall into place. You're going to love his truth and want to study it. You're going to be discerning. You're going to hate evil. All those things are true if you love him. Jesus said that himself, John 14:15, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

So how do you identify a church that loves Christ? Well, they preach Christ, not Hollywood. They worship Christ, not raw emotion, and not doctrinal orthodoxy. Christ is the central subject of their songs and their sermons and their conversations and their testimonies. Because love for Christ will show if it's real. It's obvious. It's impossible to hide. Indeed, if you have it, you won't try to hide it.

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Now let me give this closing word of encouragement to all of you and especially to those of you who are in positions of church leadership. If you shepherd a flock or a part of a flock of people who genuinely love the true Christ, you are shepherding a great congregation regardless of how many there are. I think virtually all of us would say, though, as individuals, we're not there yet. We live in a world that is teeming with idols and constantly assaulting us with countless distractions. And if you think it's hard for you, it's far worse for members of the flock who live and work in the secular world. Don't lose focus on this one issue.

Our love for Christ constantly needs the fuel and the oxygen that pastors are charged with giving us when the flock comes together. Preach the Word in season, out of season. That's the number one thing we can do. Encourage our pastors to preach the Word. Be hungry for the Word. Cultivate a hunger for the truth of God. And as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:23, "Above all we preach Christ and preach Christ crucified."

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And if you hear that message constantly, you cannot help loving him. Keep him always at the center of the message you, you want to hear. Forget the movie reviews and the analyses of popular culture. Forget about the gimmickry and topical nonsense that all the church growth gurus are saying we need in order to revive the evangelical movement. "If anyone has no love for the Lord Jesus Christ let him be *anathema*." The Lord is coming.

And our job as pastors, as church leaders, as members of the congregation is to set ourselves for the proclamation of the Word of God. And to let that be what we feed on, what we hunger for so that our love for him never grows cold. That's how a church keeps its lampstand in place. That's how we guard against cold and mechanical orthodoxy. That's how a church maintains its own health. And that's what we need to do if we want to hear the Lord say, "Well done."

Let's pray. Father, we confess our love for Christ isn't what it ought to be. Rekindle that flame and may it stay burning with a profuse heat and a perpetual light. And may we be faithful not only to the truth that you've given us, but also above all to

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the Lord whom we are committed to follow and to love. And in all that we do, whatever your will for us, may Christ be the focus of our lives and our testimonies and the words we speak. We pray in his name, amen.