

**T**O THE first-century traveler who sailed across the Aegean Sea, Ephesus must have seemed magnificent. Its population of three hundred thousand, bustling commerce, and political prominence as a free city all drew large numbers of visitors. Disembarking from the ship in the harbor, tourists and businessmen alike could not fail to be impressed by the Arcadian Way, the thirty-five-foot avenue that stretched up the gentle slope to the city itself. Lined with columns, this avenue presaged other engineering, architectural, and intellectual triumphs: the Library of Celsus, a major stadium, the theater with its seating capacity of twenty-five thousand, and above all the Temple of Artemis ("Diana") — one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

Yet the perceptive visitor might well ask himself

how long this splendor could last. Even in the first century, the city, despite its splendor and wealth, was beginning its long decline. A thousand years earlier, the sea had lapped the shores near the site of the Temple; but by the first century the silting from the Cayster River had pushed the harbor far out to sea. In time, the harbor would be abandoned, and Ephesus would wither and die. Today, six miles stretch between the sea and the ruins.

Ephesus enjoyed a succession of capable Christian witnesses. Priscilla and Aquila settled there about A.D. 51. Paul spent two and a half years there, and the church was so well-established during this period that the gospel radiated outward from this center into all the important cities of Asia Minor. Later, Timothy ministered in Ephesus; and last of all came the apostle John.

This same John penned the letter the exalted Christ wants him to communicate to the Ephesian church (Rev. 2:1-7). The letter is troubling; one senses that the church and the city in which it is located share features no church should bear. Like the city, the Ephesian church still flourished, but decline had already set in—a decline well shrouded in the trappings of success, but carrying a threat of ultimate obliteration.

The resurrected and exalted Jesus identifies himself in terms of the apocalyptic self-disclosure of the first chapter: "These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands (2:1; cf. 1:12-16). At the beginning of the letter, then, the Ephesian believers are forcefully reminded that the exalted Christ, though long ascended, is nevertheless present with them. He walks among the churches, almost as if he is on an unceasing inspection tour. His promise, now decades old, "and surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age," brings more than the blessing of his presence: it brings threat of judgment. What the church needs is to be conscious that its Lord is still present; and, conscious of this, to be concerned about the significance of his presence.

How would churches change if they were pro-

# A Church that Does All the Right Things, But . . .

D. A. CARSON

## Shortcoming of the corporate model.

foundly conscious that the loving, holy, exalted Lord Jesus walks among them? That his presence brings judgment as well as blessing? That the day of the Lord may be darkness as well as light?

Of this we are sure: his assessment of his churches is impartial, accurate, and prompted by love. After all, he loved the church so much he gave his life in sacrifice for her. Will he now treat her harshly, out of some whimsical caprice? Of course not! Rather, if judgment must begin at the house of God, it is for the good of the house of God. Thus, in his letter to the church at Ephesus, Jesus must threaten his people and point out their sins; but he also takes note of their victories and graces, offering encouraging commendation. And where he highlights the sin, he provides precise instruction on what to do about it.

### Commendation

1. Jesus commends the Ephesian believers for their disciplined and persevering labor. "I know your deeds," he says, "your hard work and your perseverance. . . . You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary" (2:2a, 3). These worshipers were not content simply to come and sit. They worked hard. The pattern of witness and expansion that stamped the church under Paul's ministry had carried on. These believers grew in their knowledge of the Scriptures, prayed faithfully, witnessed persistently; and over the years they planted church after church. Older members could look backward over the previous four decades and observe with quiet thankfulness that there was scarcely a Christian witness anywhere in Asia Minor that did not owe its beginnings, directly or indirectly, to this one church.

The Ephesian believers expended themselves unstintingly in the cause of Christ. Yet their work was not characterized by mere activism, for it had been molded by hardship. The Ephesian believers had not, apparently, suffered from as much open persecution as some of their brothers and sisters

in the cities in the interior; but their witness had not been easy. From the earliest days, the Temple of Artemis provided such a focal point for local and even international paganism, not to mention the related commercial interests, that mob violence had occurred (Acts 19). Their society was fundamentally opposed to the Christian goals.

Yet the church still labored faithfully: the active work of forceful witness mingled with the passive work of patient endurance to spread the gospel of Christ. Small wonder Jesus commends them.

2. Jesus commends the Ephesian believers for abhorrence of wicked men, and for their consequent maintenance of an upright and faithful ministry: "I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false" (2:2b). Jesus himself warned of false prophets who would dress up like sheep yet ravage like wolves (Matt. 7:15); and Paul had warned an earlier generation of Ephesian elders, saying, "I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:29-30). The Ephesians had faced such apostasy, and had eventually triumphed over it. Now they were discerning, and would not soon be taken in again.

The result of vigilance in such matters is crucial to the well-being of the church. If any church accepts as messengers of God men who on any pretext practice wickedness the Bible condemns, teach doctrines the Bible controverts, produce fruit that is not demonstrably the fruit of the Spirit, that church is asking for a draught as poisonous and death-dealing as that used in the jungles of Guyana.

3. Jesus commends the Ephesian believers for hating the practices of some others, saying "But you have this in your favor: you hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate" (2:6). It is extremely difficult to ascertain historically just who the Nicolaitans were, or what they believed and practiced. The best judgment is that they

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claimed to be Christian, while retaining pagan idolatry and pagan immorality. The Ephesian Christians were not taken in: they hated such practices, imitating the hatred of the Lord Jesus himself, and for this they are commended.

Part of loving God is hatred of evil (Ps. 97:10; Prov. 8:13; Amos 5:14, 15). Nor is that distinction entirely biblical that advises us to hate a man's wickedness while still loving the man. The shortest lexical study of all "hate" and "loathe" words in Scripture provides a more nuanced pattern in God himself. God hates sin—and he hates sinners. But whereas his hatred of sin is implacable, unwavering, and undiluted by pity, his hatred of sinners is melded with profound love for them. *In holy Scripture, hatred and love are not necessarily mutually exclusive.*

God's hatred is not malicious, but rather a generous hatred of all that is evil. It is expressed in his wrath, and grounded in his holiness. God's love does not in any way mitigate his hatred, because it does not first weaken his holiness. Rather, his holy hatred and his pitying love conspire to forgive his people their sins by sending his own son to die on their behalf. The cross is the ultimate measure of God's love.

Our problem comes when we pursue one of these attributes at the expense of the other, or in a manner not consonant with divine example. We claim to be upright, and learn to hate our enemies, especially if we persuade ourselves that they are the enemies of God. Soon we cannot tell the difference. And even where we can, we forget that God both hates and loves sinners. If we hate his enemies and do not also love them we are soon rebuked and told that we must love our enemies, because God sends his sun and rain upon both the just and the unjust. Vengeance, after all, is the Lord's: he will repay. Conversely, in the name of love we call every man a brother in the Lord, or perhaps a separated brother in the Lord, thinking we are fulfilling the two greatest commandments. We even call the Nicolaitans our brothers.

The Ephesian church may provide an example. These Christians are commended for hating the practices of the Nicolaitans, and the church of Jesus Christ today needs this example as much as it needs the biblical exhortations to love our enemies and pray for them. We need to pursue the beauty of biblical balance which, in some matters, finds the truth not in some awkward tension or rough compromise, but in the converging of parallel lines in the infinity of God's character.

It is easier, however, to apply this message to a bygone generation than to our own. We may assure ourselves that if we had lived in Ephesus in the first century we, too, would have hated

idolatry, loathed the fertility cult, abandoned pagan carousing, rejected sexual promiscuity, abhorred emperor worship. We may also assure ourselves that if we had lived in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England we would have sided with Wesley and his friends in loathing slavery, tackling prison reform, calling down judgment on the London brothels, hating the prevalent child exposure and child abuse.

But what should the church be hating today? What things does Jesus hate today?

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**Reproach**

"Yet I hold this against you," Jesus says: "you have forsaken your first love" (2:4). This devastating charge is the more horrible for the fact that the recipient of the love is not specified. We do not read, "you have forsaken your first love for God," or "you have forsaken your first love for fellow believers," but simply, "you have forsaken your first love." The love the church gives out, whether to God or to man, has dwindled and withered. Its efficient good works and sensible discernment are gigantic; its love is dwarfish.

This passage must not be misunderstood. The problem with the church in Ephesus is not that its graces have unwittingly smuggled in vices. The explanation is both simpler and far more reprehensible: these Christians have started doing all the right things *simply* because the right things ought to be done. The patterns of responsibility and industry have long been established. The ruts are worn deep into the soil of their routines. They still proclaim the truth, but no longer passionately love him who is the truth. They still perform good deeds, but no longer out of love, brotherhood, and compassion. They preserve the truth and witness courageously, but forget that love is the great witness to truth. It is not so much that their genuine virtues have squeezed love out, but that no amount of good works, wisdom, and discernment in matters of church discipline, patient endurance in hardship, hatred of sin, or disciplined doctrine, can ever make up for lovelessness.

So the church, like the city, still appeared resplendent, while threatening decline stood out starkly for those with eyes to see.

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**Remedy**

A wonderful aspect of our Lord's letter to the church at Ephesus is his refusal simply to commend and reproach, and nothing more. With the reproach comes the remedy, given in three imperatives to be taken as diverse aspects of the one medicine.

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1. "Remember," Jesus says, "the height from which you have fallen" (2:5). Memory is a tricky faculty that can be put to good or bad use. There is a place for "forgetting what is behind" as part of our "straining toward what is ahead" (Phil. 3:13). But there is also a place for remembering what is behind. Jesus is saying to the Ephesian church something like this: think back to earlier days in your walk in the Way, when the spontaneity of your love for me and for each other knew no bounds. Remember the times when out of sheer love for me you gathered for prayer. Remember when you cheerfully took on another's problems not out of duty but out of love. And remember the devotion in your worship, when you poured out your love from hearts unsullied by the rigidity of mere duty, when your partnership with one another in the enterprise of the kingdom provided a basis for fellowship deep and true. Remember these things. Remember them *constantly* (for such is the force of the present imperative in the text). They provide some measure of the shameful height from which you have fallen.

2. The second command is "repent." What is remarkable about this is that repentance is bidden in the arena of emotions, not in the arena of actions. Elementary as it is, we need the constant biblical reminder that we are responsible not only for what we say and do, but also for what and how we love and think. Repentance is therefore as possible in the latter areas as in the former. The Ephesian believers are commanded to repent of their lovelessness.

3. Finally, "Do the things you did at first." This is part and parcel of repentance, of course; but to put it this way ensures that the command to repent will not be taken to mean simply, "Say you're sorry." The Christians in Ephesus must do again the things they did at first, those things prompted by their first love. The imperative does not mean they are to work up their first love by means of returning to *first duties*, for the tenor of this letter is that the Ephesians were remarkably efficient at doing their duties. It is not that they must do *more* things—as if the things they did at first must be added to the things they are now doing. Rather, they must return to the *quality* of the first things, those that were done out of unfeigned love rather than out of mere efficiency.

Failure to heed this triple imperative will bring judgment. "If you do not repent," Jesus warns, "I will come to you and remove your lampstand out of its place" (2:5b). The threat is not a reference to the parousia, but to some more immediate judgment: the lampstand is removed, this local church ceases to exist. The people might still be there several generations hence, the well-oiled ma-

chinery operating with a gratifying purr. But such an assembly is no longer a church.

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**Incentive and Perspective**

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"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God" (2:7).

The Spirit does not say precisely the same thing to every church. One church needs encouragement, another rebuke, a third a mixture of the two. One church is small and poor, another is large and rich. The supreme irony is that most Christians hear best what the Spirit is saying to someone else. Speak to the fundamentalist about the truth, and he hears you, precisely because he doesn't need to; it is the person with fuzzy notions about the eternity of the truth who will not hear. Speak to the *genuinely* broad-minded ecumenist about love, and he hears you, precisely because he doesn't need to, but fundamentalists of a harsher variety will not. Speak to the Ephesian Christians about discipline, endurance, perseverance, and sound doctrine, and they will hear you—precisely because they don't need to. But will they hear when you speak of lovelessness? The one who truly hears what the Spirit says to the churches will be the one who is receptive to the words of God that he least wishes to hear.

Even what is meant by "overcoming" may change from church to church. To overcome in Smyrna means to endure persecution even to the point of martyrdom. But clearly, to overcome in Ephesus means to love. Christians in Ephesus and Christians in Smyrna must both persevere to the end, they must both overcome; but the precise site for their tests is not the same in the two cases. Christians in China or Russia must overcome in spheres where I am not tempted. But let us never think that Christians in the West have no spheres in which we must overcome. Let us hear what the Spirit is saying to our churches. If we do not overcome the temptations that beset us, our lampstand will be removed as surely as was that of Ephesus. If we belong to merely efficient churches, then one crucial area in which we must overcome is this matter of loving God with heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves.

It is to the individual overcomer that fruit from the tree of life is promised. Proverbs 3:18 tells us that wisdom "is a tree of life to those who embrace her"; and Revelation 22:2 places the tree of life with its perennial fruit in the heavenly Jerusalem. The point is the same: man's highest goal is to know God and be known by him forever. And only the overcomer will taste this bliss. □

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