

Christ's Letter to the Church at Ephesus

Background on Ephesus

- Ephesus was one of the four greatest Roman cities
- It laid on the banks of the Aegean Sea where the Cayster River flowed into the sea.
- Domitian named Ephesus the “warden” of the imperial cult.
- The church was started by Priscilla and Aquila who Paul left in Ephesus in AD 52.
- It was served by Apollos and Paul and was pastored by Timothy.

Encouragement in Christ's Ministry for His Church

- Christ points to his effective ministry for believers as He begins his letter to Ephesus
- Christ ministers to believers with His presence
 - He walks among the lampstands
 - His presence is among individual believers (I Cor. 6:13, Col. 1:27)
 - His presence is promised to believers who gather together (Matt. 18:20)
 - His presence is promised to the end of the age (Matt. 28:20)
 - He holds the stars in His right Hand
 - As the Good Shepherd, He guides and directs His under-shepherds. (I Pt. 5:1-2)
 - The safest place for God's leaders is in His right hand
- Christ is not aloof! He is present and active in the churches, walking with them and guiding their leaders.

Commendation for Discernment

- The church of Ephesus was known to Christ for their ability to discern the truth
 - They rejected evil
 - They were unable to tolerate evil men
 - This led to a wholesale rejection of evil men and their teaching
 - Evil can be shown in crushing legalism
 - Evil can be seen in indulgent antinomianism
 - Both teaching and actions can be evil
 - This was a charge their leaders received from Paul himself (Acts 20:28-30, Eph. 4:14)
 - For the Ephesian believers, their grounding in the truth became a defensive mechanism against error
 - They discerned false teaching
 - They used their grounding in doctrine to “test” those who brought claims of being an apostle
 - The apostles had authority over the churches
 - Certain men claimed to be apostles, hoping to gain power, prestige, and fortune

- They followed John’s commands to “test the Spirits” and were able to discern truth from error (I John 4:1-3)
- As a result, they hated the works of the Nicolaitans
 - The Nicolaitans were a heretical group that troubled the early church (2:15)
 - Tradition holds that they were followers of one of the first deacons, Nicholas, who abandoned the faith.
 - They apparently claimed to be apostles, but were not.
 - They were guilty of practices linked with Balaam, which refer to idolatry and immorality. (2:14-15)
 - Baalam (Idolatry for wealthy gain- 2 Pt 2:15-16, Jude 11)
 - Sexual Immorality
 - Their teachings regarding idolatry would have been very attractive.
 - The Roman Emperor at the time, Domitian, increased pressure for Roman citizens to worship him.
 - Commerce was regulated by local trade guilds who were often tied religiously to a patron deity.
 - In order to engage in commerce in that city, homage to that deity would often have been required.
 - It is likely that the Nicolaitans would have taught that it was permissible for a Christian to worship Christ and engage in polytheistic worship for economic reasons.
 - In Ephesus, sexuality immorality was commonplace in religious life.
 - Ephesus was home to the temple to the fertility goddess Artemis
 - The pressure to conform to the culture’s view on sexuality would have been palpable
 - The Nicolaitan’s libertine and antinomian view regarding sexual purity would have provided an opportunity to embrace the wider culture within a “Christian” context (2 Peter 3:15-17)
 - Christ’s commendation of their rejection of evil and discernment of false teachers highlights their continued importance today and in the ages to come.

Commendation for Endurance

- Christ commends them for their patient endurance
 - This refers to perseverance in the midst of trial
 - This church’s trials were many
 - As the gospel was first being preached there, a riot occurred over devotion to Artemis (Acts 19:23-41)
 - The believers were still likely suffering financially because of their devotion to Christ.
- Through all the trials, the believers were “bearing up” and not growing weary underneath the pressures.
- They endured these trials for the sake of Christ’s name

Rebuke for Waning Love

- Although showing doctrinal insight and faithful suffering, Christ still had something against them
 - These words indicate divine displeasure
 - They also warn of future judgment if a change does not occur.
- They had abandoned the original fervor of love they had when they first came to believe.
 - Their love for Christ had waned (Matthew 24:12).
 - Their love for their brothers and sisters in Christ had waned.
 - This abandonment of love was a violation of all that God requires of His people (Mk. 12:29-31)

A Call to Repentance

- Christ commends one response of this church: Repentance.
 - In Christ's command to repent, we see exactly what repentance entails
 - Repentance begins with a sorrow over sin
 - Repentance requires a change of heart
 - Repentance results in a change of action
 - Their stand against errant doctrine is a "good work" but without love, it is useless! (1 Corinthians 13:1-2)
- Christ warns of dire consequences if there is no repentance.
 - Christ's presence would not be a source of strength but rather a visitation of judgment.
 - Christ would remove the lamp from its place, removing this congregation of believers from Ephesus.
- According to church tradition, the church heeded this warning, repented, and did indeed become a congregation that held fast to its fervor in the Lord.

The Issues of Ephesus for Today

- Christ is present with believers as they walk through this life.
- In an age of confusion and subjectivism, biblical discernment is vital for the Christian.
- In an age of growing hostility, endurance that depends on Christ must be the key to bearing up under the world's hatred.
- Christians must seek a fresh and vibrant love for Christ.
- Christians must repent of a lackluster love for Christ.
- Christians must remember that Christ disciplines His church.