

Why the Christian Church in America is Declining (Part Two)

*"But I have this against you, that **you have left your first love.**"* Revelation 2: 4

Introduction. Who do you love most in life? What do you love most? Now the hard question: has that love ever waned? You became distracted by other people and things—*the stuff of life*. Left unattended, those memories began to fade—some were forgotten altogether.

Such was the condition of the once great church in Ephesus.

Background and History of the Church at Ephesus

Ephesus was one of the world's great cities and seaports during that time. Its harbor was on the Aegean Sea across from Athens, Greece.

This church may have begun as a house church in the home of Priscilla and Aquila after the Apostle Paul left them there on his way back to Jerusalem as his second missionary journey came to an end. That journey took place during the years of 49 – 52 AD (Acts 18: 18 – 21)

*"Now Paul, when he had remained many days longer, took leave of the brothers and sisters and sailed away to Syria, and Priscilla and Aquila were with him. Paul first had his hair cut at Cenchrea (Greece port), for he was keeping a vow. **They came to Ephesus, and he left them there.** Now he himself entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. When they asked him to stay for a longer time, he did not consent, but took leave of them and **(Paul) said, "I will return to you again if God wills,"** and*

he set sail from Ephesus.

God did will that Paul would return, and he did. In 52 AD, Paul began what is referred to as his Third Missionary Journey and spent about three years in Ephesus growing up that church. He pastored it for three years. Then his mentee, Timothy, pastored it for eighteen months.

The Apostle John spent time there as well later—probably in the 60s AD. It is said that he took Mary, mother of Jesus, there to live. This church had the best of the best from its founding until they were left to stand on her own.

Paul's last contact with the church at Ephesus through the elders. He met with them on the island of Miletus. This was circa 57 AD. We read that account in **Acts 20: 17-38**

Paul left a maturing, healthy body of believers.

The book of Ephesians was one of Paul's prison epistles or letters. It was written while he was under house arrest in Rome around 62 AD.

*"For this reason I too, having heard of the **faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you and your love for all the saints...**" Ephesians 1: 15*

*"Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, **bearing with one another in love**, being diligent to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Ephesians 4: 1-3*

The love of God and for all saints in Christ was so apparent, Paul had heard of it. Their testimonies were strong in this love. He encouraged them to continue to stay strong in it.

Here was their greatest challenge to doing so. The churches planted by Paul and other early Christian leaders were

constantly being challenged or opposed by people in the native culture and country in which they lived. Greece, Macedonia, Asia – Asia Minor were pagan lands filled with many gods. Ephesus was home to the temple of the goddess Diana. It was one of the great Seven Wonders of the World. Spiritists, mediums, and magicians opposed Paul and his teachings. Some Jews also opposed him because they hated and murdered Christ.

There were men who infiltrated these churches for the purpose of creating division and doubt among new converts or those still trying to figure it out. Some who claimed to have received Christ as Savior became **apostate** and returned to their carnal practices, leading people in these churches away from the Truth.

This was part of what Paul warned them about. After much affirmation of their faith and inclusion in the Kingdom of God because of what Jesus did for Jews and Gentiles, he wrote,

*“So I say this, and affirm in the Lord, that you are to no longer walk just as the Gentiles also walk, in the **futility of their minds, being darkened in their understanding**, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; and they, having become callous, **have given themselves up to indecent behavior for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.**”*

Ephesians 4: 17-19

We know this continued to be a problem because of Paul's words to Timothy when he was leading that church. (1 Timothy 1: 3-7)

*“Just as I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, to remain on at Ephesus so that you would instruct certain people not to teach strange doctrines, nor to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to useless speculation rather than **advance the plan of God**,*

which is by faith, so I urge you now...Some people have strayed from these things and have turned aside to fruitless discussion, wanting to be teachers of the Law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions”.

The Revelation. Jesus began this amazing, and sometimes mysterious, revelation to John, the last remaining apostle, by commending and calling out seven key churches in what was then called Asia Minor—part of modern-day Turkey. Isn't it interesting that the Christian church was actually born, to some extent, in the country of Turkey during those years? That happened when Jews and Christians fled from Rome during the persecutions to those seven cities, among others. It remained a stronghold for Christianity for centuries.

The church at Ephesus was the first one on the list. Why? Perhaps because it was the largest or most influential due to the importance of the seaport city during that period. Or perhaps, Jesus was more upset with what they had become after so great a beginning with the key leaders of the Christian movement including Apostles Paul and John as well as Timothy.

First we have Jesus' commendation of the church:

*“I know your deeds and your labor and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil people, and you have put those who call themselves apostles to the test, and they are not, and you found them to be false; and **you have perseverance and have endured on account of My name**, and have not become weary.”* Revelation 2: 2-3

That was a great affirmation from Jesus—they did their best to keep out these apostate people and false teachers and prophets. That is hard work.

Now we get to the warning from Jesus in The Revelation.

“But I have this against you, that **you have left your first love**. Therefore, **remember from where you have fallen, and repent, and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and I will remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent.**” Revelation 2: 4-5

What was their **first love** to which Jesus referred? Let's look back at some of the first words in Paul's letter to this church.

“For this reason I too, having heard of the **faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you and your love for all the saints...**” Ephesians 1: 15

- **Their faith in the Lord Jesus** was so strong—obvious and apparent – it reached Paul before he came to them. That must have waned. Paul told Timothy in those verses we noted earlier to teach these false teachers and those following them the truth or move them out of the church. They were advancing their agendas and plans and not that of God – salvation through faith in Christ alone. They became engaged in foolish things that had nothing to do with advancing the Gospel.
- **Their love for all the saints**—other Christians. In many good commentaries and texts on this verse, this one is said to be the most obvious. Why?

Jesus' told them how to deal with this: **repent** Again for emphasis, He said it twice. He warned that failure to do so would result in the “lampstand” being removed. Apparently, the church did not heed His warnings as it disappeared. What once was among the greatest Christian churches did not exist anymore. And we know the entire country of Turkey – once a Christian stronghold – became, and still is, a Muslim country.

Next week we will examine *what* must be done and *how* we can return the church back to God before she is removed from the lampstand.

For Christ's sake,

Walter