

The Letter to the Church in Ephesus

This week we will focus on a close study of the letter to the church in Ephesus. In our class meeting we learned that Ephesus was the largest city in Asia Minor. In fact, it is one of the three major trading centers ranked with Alexandria and Antioch in the eastern part of the Roman Empire. It was a Hellenized, cosmopolitan and pagan city. One of its prominent features being the Temple of Artemis which brought pilgrims and a vast industry associated with the temple and its manufacture of idols of the goddess. Paul encountered first-hand the dangers associated with interfering with the commercial business of the temple in Acts 19:21-41. Paul founded the Ephesian church during his second missionary journey nearly 40 years earlier. At that time he warned the church against false teachers. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul comments on their steadfast faith and diligent resistance against the false teachers that did come into their midst.

Of all the churches mentioned in the Seven Letters we have the most scriptural information about the church in Ephesus. We will take two weeks to examine this letter to the church in Ephesus. This will permit us the luxury to take some time to look into a passage in the book of Ephesians allowing us to better understand this important letter found in Revelation.

Keep Watch

The book of Acts records Paul's diligence in establishing the church of Ephesus. In it we hear of his deep and well-founded concern for their future. Let's take a close look at one of Paul's primary concerns for the Ephesian Church.



Read Acts 20:27-31.

How did Paul describe his teaching and preparing of the church in Ephesus?

What did Paul warn would come into the church in Ephesus?

What did Paul exhort the church to do?

What words does Paul use to describe and reveal the depth of importance of this to church to the Lord?

Paul, with intensity and urgency, exhorted the church to remain steadfast in its faith, guarding itself from false teachers that would come into the church from outside, as well as false teachers that would rise from within. The aim of these false teachers would be to turn the church away from the teachings that Paul gave them. These false teachers would undermine their faithful, leading them astray for their own glory. He describes these false teachers as "*wolves not sparing the flock*". What they intend for their own glory would serve to cause destruction among God's prized flock. With this strong warning, the church in Ephesus took to heart Paul's words and built a reputation of always examining carefully the teachings of their pastors in accordance with scripture and recognizing false doctrine.

I Know...

Jesus is portrayed in Revelation 1:12-13 as walking amidst the Seven Lampstands. It is an image of the High Priest *present* and *active* among the churches. He knows very intimately the church in Ephesus – every detail, action, ministry, thought and prayer of that church was known to him. What Jesus knew about the Ephesian church was important enough to be held up as an example for generations to come. When John sent this letter to the church in Ephesus, he was intimately acquainted with its history, strengths, weaknesses, and its character.

As we prepare for today's homework, let's say a prayer together. *Lord Jesus, we are so grateful for the gift of your Word and that through it we come to know you better and better. In your own voice this letter was written to not only the faithful of Ephesus two thousand years ago, but the faithful today, as well. As faithful believers we seek the timeless relevance of your Word. We pray that you will reveal to us its significance for our church today and give us the insight we need in the studying of your Word –Amen.*



Revelation 2:1-3, 6

How does Christ describe himself in verse 1 and what does this tell us about him?

List the three commendations Christ gives to the church in Ephesus:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Let's spend some time examining each of these commendations. The Amplified Bible goes a little further than does the NIV or the NKJV, saying, "*I know your industry and activities, laborious toil and trouble, and your patient endurance.*"(Rev. 2:2) What industry and

activities is Jesus praising this church for? What do you imagine the activities of this church included?

Christ next commended the church for their strong stance against false doctrine. We saw earlier this week in our homework that Paul had beseeched them to stand firm against those who would come into the church turning them away from what was true and just. The Ephesian church did just that. Again, the Amplified Bible goes into this commendation with a little more detail:

“...and how you cannot tolerate wicked [men] and have tested and critically appraised those who call [themselves] apostles (special messengers [of Christ]) and yet are not, and have found them to be impostors and liars.” (Rev2:2)

What kind of words did Jesus use to describe their diligence?

To whom did this church subject such close and careful scrutiny? (see also Acts 20:29-30).

Turning to verse three, let’s carefully examine that commendation. What do you think are the “hardships” that this church has endured without growing weary?

In verse 6, Christ praises them for what?

What can we take from Christ's comment "*You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate*"? It is not often we hear something specific that Jesus hates. What is it that he hates? What can we infer from the context of his comment?

Our passage today starts with the image of Jesus Christ, in the role of the High Priest walking and working among the lampstands, tending to the needs of each one, so that not even one lamp will become extinguished for lack of attention. He is acutely aware of every detail in his churches. Every action, word, character trait, motive, behavior – whether praiseworthy or otherwise cannot be hidden from him. Intimately he knows everything in which the church is involved. He first commends the church for their hard work, industry and toil - words all reflecting the great care and painstaking activity of the congregation in their commitment to serving not only their members, but also their community. They are diligent in their call to minister to the sick, the hungry, the destitute, the widows, the orphans, to anyone in need. They excel in their endeavors to show the love of Christ to the community through their works of charity.

Christ next commends the church for their diligence in ferreting out false doctrine. This church took to heart Paul's exhortations and did their job in rejecting false teachers and wrong doctrine. They were top of the class in their ability to spot false teaching. They recognized false teaching and false apostles for what they were: lies and impostors. Christ even goes so far as to signal out their intolerance for the "*practices of the Nicolaitans*". The Amplified Bible reads, "*You have this -in your favor and to your credit – you hate the works of the Nicolaitans [what they are doing as corrupters of the people], which I myself also detest.*" (Rev 2:6) Little is known what those practices entailed, likely somehow bringing together Christianity and pagan worship in some way. Possibly having to do with idolatry and sexual immorality, but in any case the behavior was detestable to the Lord. Their practices served to corrupt the people – God's people and Christ would have none of it. Whatever the practices were, we can infer that not only did the church reject the teaching, but openly refused to tolerate it within their church community. They stood against the actions of the Nicolaitans, earning themselves praise.

Christ's third commendation is in regard to the church's patient endurance of trials. The word translated as "endurance" is the Greek word "*hypomonē*" which carries the meaning of patient endurance under extreme hardship or life threatening circumstances in trials related to service in the gospel¹. In a community devoted to the worship and industry related to the Temple of Artemis, Christians found themselves persecuted, maligned, rejected, slandered, and ostracized. Jesus commends this body of believers for bearing up to this persecution without becoming weary or exhausted. Their strength did not wane or grow weak in this constant battle. The church in Ephesus had received the message and example from Paul, Timothy and John, and responded well to the call to stand firm under trials and persecution.



Our society today is not so different from 1st Century Ephesus. Christian churches are finding themselves in a society that has little tolerance for what society perceives as "intolerance". How do we apply Christ's statement against the Nicolaitans to our situation today in a world where *everything* is to be tolerated?

¹ Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words.