

A True Tale of Two Churches

The churches at Ephesus and Thyatira were two of the seven congregations given special attention in the book of Revelation. Each received a strong condemnation with a call to repentance from our Lord (Rev. 2:1-7; 18-29); each for different, even opposite, reasons.

Now, they were not all bad. In fact, each congregation had qualities that would commend them to God and to brethren everywhere. In fact, so many good qualities are mentioned for each that they might have escaped rebuke from anyone less than the Lord himself. But, it

is the opposite nature of their particular problems that captures our attention. I am confident that we have these same conditions among churches of today.

EPHESUS:
Strong on Doctrine
Weak on Love

Ephesus was a working, patient, and uncompromising church. (v.2). These brethren apparently understood that being patient did not mean that one had to tolerate any and everybody. They could not "bear those who are evil". Just

because someone said that he was an apostle did not mean they had to accept them. They tried some who made such claims and found them to be liars. They had apparently learned the lessons taught them by Paul and Timothy well. (Acts 20:28ff; 1 Tim. 1:3,4). They knew how to hate. The Lord commended them for hating what he hated - the deeds of the Nicolaitans. (v. 6). These brethren, unlike many today, had not grown weary of fighting and laboring for Lord's name's sake. (v.3). Few churches could exceed the doctrinal soundness, good works, and vigilance of this church.

"Nevertheless...."

"Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love", Jesus said. (v. 4). In the midst of their zeal against error and working for His name's sake, they had left their first love. Jesus does not specify any particular outward sign of their lack of love - only that they had it at first and that it involved works; because in repenting, they were told to do their first works. Is it possible that we can get so caught up in fighting error, hating sin and keeping the church pure of false doctrine that we simply forget that, at the same time, we must maintain the capacity to be loving, tender and compassionate?

We simply must not forget that no amount of service can compensate for a lack of love (1 Cor. 13:1-3). We must not forget Jesus' answer to the

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question about the greatest commandment - firstly, love for God, secondly love for neighbor.

Yet, the kind of love that Christ enjoins upon us is a responsible love - not a mere whimsical feeling that allows one to express his feelings anyway that seems good to him. It is not a love without rules of engagement! When I was a youngster, it was not uncommon to hear people say that doctrine did not matter - just so long as one loved the Lord! Years passed, then we began to hear from the children of that generation that morality really didn't matter - just so long as one loved the person with whom he was involved. The children had just learned to use the second commandment the way that their parents had used the first. There simply cannot be real love (in the Biblical sense) for God or children of God without keeping God's commandments (I John 5:1-3).

THYATIRA:
Strong on Love
Weak on Doctrine

The brethren at Thyatira were to be commended for their works, love, service, faith and patience. (v.19). In fact, they were a growing church - the last of their works were more than the first. I think it safe to say that these brethren would certainly have been tender, loving and compassionate toward one another. I have no doubt that if one of them needed any assistance at all, they would have received it from the others. I suspect that if any one of them were sick, bereaved, or burdened in any way they would have found loving concern and help from their brethren. I would think, from this description of them, that if you visited their services that you would find a friendly welcome and expressions of hospitality. They likely would go out of their way to impress you with how much love they had for the Lord.

"Nevertheless....."

"Nevertheless I have a few things against you...", Jesus said. (v.20). What on earth could be said against a church that was so active, so loving, so serving, so patient, with so much faith? It allowed false doctrine to be taught -- unchecked, by one of its members who called herself a prophetess.

Oh, that! Well, she wasn't teaching it from the pulpit was she? Thyatira's love and patience had extended too far -- far enough to embrace false teaching; teaching that led to fornication -- a practice clearly and unmistakably sinful.

Now, I can just hear the excuses offered by some when and if the brethren there ever decided to follow the instructions of this letter:

"Well, nobody is perfect."

"Does not 'love' and 'patience' apply to sister Jezebel, too?"

"Well now, a lot of good people have gotten involved in this, if we come down on Jezebel now - we might lose them all."

"Since love is the most important thing, and we all agree that we love each other, then why can't we just forget this doctrinal difference and go on being brothers and sisters and turn our attention to saving all those lost souls out there in the world? Aren't we already doing this on the meat-eating issue?"

It may very well be that some of us in our zeal for our Lord's house have been so fervently involved in keeping the churches from going into digression and/or becoming grossly polluted with sin (which we should have done) that we now know only how to fight and hate. It may also be that some of us in our zeal to cultivate a greater capacity for love and patience (which we should have done) that we now simply cannot bring ourselves to fight or hate anything - not even damnable heresy.

Brethren, let us be neither

an Ephesus or a Thyatira. We need godly balance. Let us learn that scriptural love is compatible with hating sin and dealing strongly with false teaching and sinful practices. Let us learn that we can be firmly committed to sound doctrine, exposing and weeding out sin that finds its way into congregations and at the same time be tender, loving, compassionate, courteous, long-suffering, patient and all the other gentle virtues of being Christians. - Editor.

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CORRECTION

In last month's Reflector, the second numbered point in brother Hall's article on the Holy Spirit read, "The Christ is led by the Spirit through the scriptures, the word of God." It should have read, "The Christian is led by the Spirit through the scriptures, the word of God." We made other typographical errors, but we felt this one needed correction.- Editor.

VERY RELIGIOUS

"Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious..." - Paul (Acts 17:22).

As Paul visited Athens, he could see evidence that they were a religious society. Many objects and temples of worship could be seen. Religion and/or philosophy were freely discussed (verses 18-21). Paul was allowed, even urged to speak his mind on the subject. He preached the One God (The One True Object of worship) and spoke against the others. Can you imagine Paul's being asked to speak to that group, speaking for his allotted time without clearly drawing a contrast between the truth about God and their idols - then excuse his actions on the grounds that he didn't want to close the door of communication with these people?

If Paul visited Our City, he could see that we, like Athens, are a very religious society. He could look around and see the many places of worship. He would see a very tolerant society, one willing to accept any new thing in religion, as long as it did not interfere with the things already established. He would find that the same God was worshipped at the various places of worship every Sunday - but he finds many ways of worship. Now, should his reaction be similar to his reaction at Athens, or should he simply let the situation alone - after all they all worship the same God. As long as they recognize the One God, is not one religion about as good as another?

We need to honestly examine this question for ourselves in the light of what the Bible teaches.

There are four basic things taught by all "Christian" religions in our country: (1) Some way to get right with God,

(2) Some way to worship Him as God, (3) Some way to work for God, and (4) Some way to live daily before God.

There are four basic questions that we need to ask in our examination: (1) Is each way equally true?, (2) Can we accept one way as good as another?, (3) Does each way rest on as good authority as the other?, and (4) Can we afford to be totally passive toward all ways that differ from what we believe is right?

SALVATION

Is one way to get right with God as good as another? Paul said that he desired that Israel of his day should be saved? They were not right with God because they were going about to establish their own righteousness rather than submitting to God's righteousness. (Rom. 10:1-3). If one way is as good as another, why were they not already saved - they had a zeal for God and were doing something to be to be made righteous? God does not allow us to choose our own way to be made righteous - we must submit to his way.

Believers in the Christ who have repented of sins, confessed Christ, and are baptized are right with God. (Acts Mk.16:15,16; Rom. 10:10; Acts 2:38). These are children of God, in Christ, and His church (Gal. 3:26,27; 1 Cor. 12:13). Men may invent and offer other plans to get right with God such as "faith only" (before and without baptism), kneel down by your radio and pray, etc. Are these as good as God's plan?

WORSHIP

Is one way to worship God as good as another? Jesus quoted and applied an Old Testament passage to this problem: "In vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrine the commandments of men" (Matt. 15:9). Now, they were worshipping the right Object of worship - God. But

they did it with traditions of men, rather than orders from God. Singing is from God. (Eph. 5:19). Pray is from God (1 Tim. 5:18) Eating the Lord's Supper one the first day of the week is from God (Acts 20:7ff). Sunday collection is from God (1 Cor. 16:1,2). Preaching and teaching are from God. (Acts 20:7ff.) Is instrumental music just as good as singing in worship in this age? If so, where does the New Testament teach it? Is counting beads, lighting candles for worship, monthly Lord's Supper services and Thursday night collections as good as some of what we can read about in the New Testament? How do you know?

WORK

Is one way to work as a church as good as another? We can read that congregations are authorized to support evangelism (Phil. 4:15,16). We can read where the church is to edify itself in love (Eph. 4:12). We can read that congregations can supply the needs of needy saints (Acts 11; 1 Cor. 16: 2 Cor. 8 & 9). We can in full faith and confidence involve the church in these works. What about churches that turn to social, political, recreational and economic missions? Are they just as scriptural as those that limit themselves to what they can read in the New Testament?

LIFE-STYLE

Is one way to live before God as good as another? Read Col. 3:20-23). Is one mode of sexual behavior as good as another? Is one course of ethical conduct as good as another? What about the "alternative life-styles" so much talked about today? What about churches that openly receive those who have chosen these life-styles: homosexual relations, marriages entered after being divorces for cause other than fornication (see Matt. 19:1-9), situation ethics, etc. etc. What about churches that not only look the

other way when this goes on in their midst, but even find ways to justify such "alternate life-styles".

We may be very religious as a society. But it is not enough to be religious - we must be religiously right. We must serve the One God in the way He has chosen - not any way we choose. It is not a matter of what "my church teaches", but what does God reveal in the Scriptures. It is not even a matter of what "what does the church of Christ" teach? In fact, you will find many among churches of Christ that will teach about anything and churches that will support them in it. It is a matter of what does the Bible teach that his people - his church - should be and do. Let us turn to the Scriptures for the answers, practice what we learn, give up anything we cannot prove that God wants in religion and urge all our friends and neighbors to do the same.

The Parable of The Prodigal Mother

Listen to the Parable of the Prodigal Mother: A certain man had a wife and three children. The wife, becoming dissatisfied with housekeeping, and coveting money being earned by her neighbors, said to her husband, "Husband, secure for me the social security number that falleth to me, and divide me my portion..."

With a reluctant heart the husband granted her desire and divided his wealth. Not many days later the wife donned slacks and, with tool box under her arm, waved goodbye to the children, and took her journey into a far country and there secured a man's job in a factory. She made big wages but she associated with the wicked and listened to the vulgar stories that they told. There

was a mighty spiritual famine in that land, and she grew lean in her soul. The children, turned loose at the mercy of neighbors, soon forgot that they had a mother; but the husband remembered the duties of a wife and wished that his wife would return to her home.

The husband dined on cold lunch meat, while the wife tried in vain to fill her stomach with the husks of the cheese crackers that fell from the canteen vendor's machine. And no man gave unto her the respect due unto a lady.

One day at rest period as he sat engulfed in cigarette smoke and smutty stories, she came to herself with remorse, "Here I sit, surrounded by vulgarity, and sacrificing the respect due a lady. At home is a deserted husband, while my children roam the streets unrestrained. The money I make seems small compared to peace of mind and soul." In vain she tried to smother her conscience with the thought that she was contributing to the family's economic welfare. So she said to herself, "I will arise and go to my husband and will say unto him, Husband, I have sinned against Heaven and neglected my family in a

terrible way. I am no more worthy to be called thy wife, nor the mother of thy children. Make me as thy hired housekeeper." So she gathered her tools together and started home.

And when she was yet a long way off, the husband saw her, and clasped her in his arms. And his wife said, "Husband, I am no more worthy to be called thy wife, nor the mother of thy children." But the father said to the children, "Run and bring hither a dress, and the best apron. Put shoes on her feet, and rush to the meat market and get a steak of the fatted calf, and let us have a warm meal once more. For this your mother was lost, and is found." So they rejoiced and made merry. - via Pulpit Helps and East Florence Contender. (Editor's Note: Pulpits Helps is not published by members of the church of Christ, which shows how many religious people in the world view this problem. The article is not intended to put any additional burden upon those mothers who must "of necessity" work. But all too many work by choice to the neglect of their husbands and children. These should think seriously about this article.)

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