

# Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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## God's Message to Seven Churches: Ephesus; Commend and Warn

*Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks; I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted. Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent. But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God. (Revelation 2:1-7, KJV 1900)*

Having set the stage, let's take a closer look at each of the seven churches to whom John wrote. Despite many admirable traits, Ephesus seems to have had an attitude problem. When we read Paul's letter to the Ephesian Church, we see a delightful absence of rebuke or correction. The letter contains an exemplary balance of eternal principles related to our eternal salvation, as well as in-the-trenches instructions for our daily living.

Most New Testament commentaries date Paul's Ephesian letter around 60 A. D. Though there is some disagreement regarding the date of Revelation, I hold to the majority view that the Holy Spirit directed John to write this letter in the last decade of the first century, say, somewhere around 95 A. D. Thus some thirty to thirty-five years lapsed between Paul's letter and John's.

From Paul's letter, we get the impression of a sound, "Got-it-together" church. From John's letter, we see a church that still does a lot of things right, but they have slipped, primarily in terms of their attitude. They've left their "...first love..." "First" can refer to simple sequence, or it can refer to priority. While both ideas can easily apply to John's words, it seems that the Ephesians' major problem had to do with priority. They had left their most important love.

Biblical love has very little to do with sentimental or emotional feelings and far more to do with how we act. Notice the long sentence in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. Every verb that Paul uses to define godly, Christian love is an action verb, not a "feeling" verb. Thus, by leaving their first love, the Ephesian Church has drifted away from the godly conduct that her sound, godly faith prompted.

*These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks.* By describing Himself as we see in this sentence, Jesus not-so-gently reminds the Ephesian Church that He is in charge, not she. He holds her, and all other churches, in His hand. He, not she, walks in the

midst of all His churches, to direct, to judge, and to correct. When either an individual preacher or an individual church begins to think that they have authority over other preachers and churches, trouble soon erupts. A few years ago, a man told me that the Lord had revealed to him how his whole fellowship of churches and preachers had drifted, and the Lord called him to redirect the whole fellowship back in a different direction. Needless to say, the man's subsequent actions created destructive havoc, not revival. Sometimes a man who happens to serve as pastor of a larger church in a given area will convince himself that he and his larger church is the godfather of all the smaller churches in the area. As he tries to throw his weight around outside the church that he serves, godly spiritual growth and harmony will suffer or vanish altogether.

When such situations appear, the people who embrace these godfather attitudes need to go back to the Holy Spirit's message through John to the Ephesian Church. The Lord Jesus Christ, not a given preacher or church, holds all His churches in His right hand, and he, not they, walks in the midst of His churches. The Father has fully provided for leadership and dominant influence in His church.

And hath put all *things* under his feet, and gave him *to be* the head over all *things* to the church, **(Ephesians 1:22 KJV)**

"...under his feet..." interestingly is quite similar to John's "...walketh in the midst..."

When we lose our sense of priority, particularly the most important priority of our lives, we turn our heads away from God and seek to replace Him with something or someone else. If we hold a position of leadership, we not only endanger our own faith, but we endanger the blessings of those who look up to us and who follow us.

*I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which*

*are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted.* The first two words in this passage should shake us like a moral earthquake and get our attention. Having lived through many fairly small earthquakes, I can tell you from experience that an earthquake has a powerful way of getting your undivided attention. If we forsake our first love, our most important behavior toward God, we need just such a “Shakeup” to nudge us back. No more effective “Tremor” exists than the Lord’s direct statement to us, “I know....” The last people to resort to manipulative political efforts to maneuver people to their personal way of thinking and doing should be Christian people who truly believe in God. Only as they forget this principle, “I know...” do they resort to such self-control strategies (You can’t indulge in self-control or try to control others, and honor the **Biblical principle of self-denial**). He knows the good that we do, and He also knows the bad. He further knows the motives that prompt our actions.

The Ephesian Church continued to “labour” and showed exemplary patience in the face of adversity. She even stood up strongly against evil-doers. Interestingly, while possibly indulging in too much self-focus, she also rejected certain men who presumed apostolic authority, but who were not in fact apostles. She didn’t give up in adversity or trials. Despite the Lord’s stern warning, Ephesus had many good things that the Lord commended.

*Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.* For an individual or a church to lose or confuse their priorities and allow anything or anyone to compete with God, or, worse yet, replace Him, constitutes a moral and spiritual fall. No less than a heinous moral sin, God requires those who fall into this sinful attitude to repent and return to their most important works. Notice John’s putting “...first love...” together with repentance and doing the “...first works....” By leaving their “first love,” the Ephesian Church had specifically left their “first works.” The only recovery from forsaking her first love was to reinstate her first works, her most important conduct.

What is the nature of the Lord’s judgment in this case? Exactly what is He threatening to remove? What is a church’s “candlestick”? No mystery, John has already told us.

The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches. **(Revelation 1:20 KJV)**

A popular view of these letters posits that the Lord threatens to remove the church’s pastor if she, or he, refuses to repent. The Lord may impose His righteous judgment against an erring church or pastor in any number of ways, but our pursuit here is to learn what the Holy Spirit directed John to communicate to these churches. Based on Revelation 1:20, the Lord warns the church of a far greater judgment than the simple removal of her pastor. He threatens to remove her status as one of His churches. He effectively threatens to disown her! Think about my earthquake attention-getting analogy. Wow!

We normally think of repentance in terms of moral sin, but Scripture uses the term in a far broader way. While we see indications in the letters to some of the other churches that the Lord rebuked and warned them against moral sins, in this letter, the warning deals with a spiritual lapse. The Lord requires repentance no less in this case than if the church had indulged a Jezebel-kind of wicked person. It was religious people on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) whom Peter commanded to repent. In fact, a study of this word in the New Testament will underscore that the New Testament uses repentance far more frequently toward spiritual attitudes, beliefs, and actions than toward moral failures. It applies to both, but the person who has avoided moral, fleshly sins in admirable fashion may need to repent fully as much as the worst of sinners.

A candlestick holds the oil and wick that, when lit, gives light to the area around it. We began this study from Paul’s first letter to Timothy with the reminder that God’s primary design for one of His churches is that she take seriously her divine assignment to serve as His “...pillar and ground of the truth.” (1 Timothy 3:15) Scripture often associates truth with light and error with darkness. When the Lord adds His wondrous grace to a group of people, His “light” of truth, He honors them as one of His churches. When these people turn from Him and from His truth, His “light,” He warns them repeatedly, but, at some point, He issues this last warning. Either they heed His warning and repent or He withdraws their light. The preacher or church that once knew and loved His truth will become confused, blinded, and begin to embrace one error after another. Perhaps the leading indicator that the Lord has so judged a people appears in their rejection of Biblical truth.

Not long ago, a reader asked me why I typically refer to “A New Testament church.” My answer appears in this study. Many groups call themselves a “Church.” Many even include the accepted adjectives with their name. But no group that has failed her Lord’s truth-test can claim to be a true and faithful “New Testament church.” And that “Church” is the topic of our study.

This letter instructs us profoundly. Are we listening? Do we need to repent?

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Worship service each Sunday  
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10:30 A. M.  
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