

Church Growth and Decline

Introduction: *Lesson Text: Revelation 2:1-5*

- A. The church at Ephesus had a wonderful beginning....Paul visited the city on his 2nd missionary journey (52 AD). Aquilla and Priscilla converted Apollos. (Acts 18)
1. On his 3rd missionary journey, Paul found certain disciples of John's baptism, who upon learning of Christ, "were baptized in the name of the Lord." (Acts 19:1-7).
 2. Paul stayed three years in Ephesus and his preaching was so successful that many became believers, turning from idolatry, burning their books of magic (Acts 19:17-20). The church began with great enthusiasm!
 3. On his way to Jerusalem, Paul met with the elders of the church (Acts 28:17-38). In about 63 AD Paul wrote a letter to the church, the book of Ephesians.
- B. But by the time John wrote Revelation, we find changes had taken place (Rev. 2:1-7)

I. Ephesus: Loyal But Lacking

- A. **The church is praised** for its work, toil, and its endurance. They are commended for their intolerance to evil men and false doctrine. (Rev. 2:2,3)
- B. They were doctrinally sound and busy in good works. There is no indication they had perverted the worship or the organization.
- C. **But something was lacking:** "*Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love*" (Rev.2:4). Perhaps the church had departed from that original fervor and devotion which first characterized them as Christians.
1. They continued to battle against error and worldliness, keeping up all forms, but the first love was gone.
 2. We can be busy in doing good works, in laboring for the Lord, and being doctrinally sound, but if we have lost the spirit of love, then our labor is in vain! (I Cor. 13:1-3)
 3. "*To hate error and evil is not the same as to love Jesus Christ.*" (Stott) We must observe the letter of the law, but let's not forget the spirit as well.
 4. "*The church at Ephesus was like a gun barrel, straight, but just as empty.*"
- D. **How serious was the problem?** They had "*fallen*"! They needed to "*repent*". The Lord was threatening to remove the church's candlestick! (Rev. 2:5)
1. How the problem is likely to show itself:
 - a) Worship begins to degenerate into a mechanical routine; its life and fervency is lost.
 - b) Promptness is lost from obedience. Toil becomes drudgery when love has gone. Work becomes a burden, a "have-to" kind of thing.
 - c) Lack of compassion and sacrificial service to others.
 - d) Externals become a substitute for service from the heart.

II. Four Stages of Decay

A. The four stages or steps are ways of thinking or attitudes concerning the church.
(Illustration: A business going from success to bankruptcy.)

1. The Creative Stage

- a. Everyone is involved and excited. *“There is great enthusiasm and passion to recruit others and the members acknowledge the challenges of the future with confidence and hope. Each person sees a role he can fulfill in achieving the church’s goal. All these ingredients work together to produce steady if not explosive growth.”* (Johnny Felker)
- b. The focus is not on what “I” can get out of it, but self-sacrificing.
- c. However small, you believe your work makes a difference. Your heart is in the work, not in protecting your "rights" (opinions).

2. The Management Stage

- a. Goals have changed, The goal is to keep and maintain the work based on what you now have. *“The “who will we reach and why” of the stage one has changed to “how can we serve those already reached” in stage two. The church is very busy; but growth is slowing as time for evangelism is replaced by other activities.”* (Johnny Felker)
- b. You look at others and their work to judge what is your "fair share".
- c. Each member seeks to maintain an acceptable "status-quo". No one wants to "rock the boat". Many become lukewarm and indifferent. (Rev. 3:14-17)
- d. You may glory in your past success, but the fact is you are no longer making the kind of sacrifices and effort you once did.
- e. Those who seek to return to the past commitments are viewed with indifference, or worse, as a threat .
- f. This stage may be maintained indefinitely.

3. The Fault-Finding Stage

- a. At this stage it is obvious that things have gone wrong. Rather than return to past commitments, you look to blame others.
- b. At this point most teamwork ends; you become overly critical; your goal is to justify yourself.
- c. Power struggles, gossip and backstabbing become a major problem.
- d. The leadership becomes discouraged and passive.
- e. The work is slowed to a crawl.

4. The Declining Stage

- a. *“At this stage the church has begun to lose members. The losses may be due to various factors, some over which the church has little control and some which the church has created. The morale of the church wanes as attendance figures slide downward. Weak members are the first to move away. Stronger members of the church can be overcome with depression, discouragement, and even capitulation to the downward trend. Here the church is faced with a critical decision— to make the needed changes to turn things around or to let things run their course and watch the church be reduced to a shell of what it once was...”* (Johnny Felker)
- b. There may be some “spurts” of growth from transfers moving in, but just as many or more losses from those leaving and moving out.

- c. At this point, division and splits often occur. Some will do almost anything to vent their anger and take "what is theirs".
 - d. This stage can result in the "death" of a congregation with only a few who continue to hold faithful. (Rev. 3:1-4)
 - e. Some may wonder, how did things get to this point?
- B. The good news: It is possible at any point to reverse this trend.

II. The Four Stages of a Local Church

A. What is your attitude?

1. Can you identify yourself as being in one of these four stages? (Be honest.)
2. When I speak of the church, I speak of the Christians who compose the church.

B. Where does this church belong? Where are you as a Christian?

1. The Creative Stage

- a. Do you remember your attitude when you first became a Christian? Do you remember what it was like when this church first began?
- b. Some attitudes I have seen in new Christians:
 - (1) They can't wait to share their faith.
 - (2) They are not worried by what they don't know, but rather are excited about learning more.
 - (3) They want to know what more they can do, not "what can I get by with". (II Corinthians 8:1-5)
 - (4) They are excited about others who are Christians and they want to encourage them.

2. The Management Stage

- a. Many churches and thus individual Christians may find themselves in this stage. Whatever the reasoning, **do you think "keeping house" for the Lord will be acceptable?** (Matthew 25:24-30)
- b. *"...there is a natural tendency to focus primarily on the needs of those attending rather than place the emphasis on those who are outside. This inward focus causes the church to depend more and more upon the "faithful few" who may eventually grow weary of the burdens of service. In addition, the lack of fresh-minded newcomers robs the church of energy and enthusiasm for future work."* (Johnny Felker)
- c. Some "goals" of the management stage:
 - (1) You seek to protect what is "yours": bank accounts, the building and facilities, and physical things as a whole.
 - (2) Glory in people, but only as they represent "numbers" and therefore outward success.
- d. Attitudes of the management stage:
 - (1) When work is done, one looks to what others are doing so they can either glory or complain. (II Cor. 10:12,18)

- (2) Stubbornness against those who challenge a return to commitment because "We have been a faithful church for years."

e. Fruits of the management stage:

- (1) "Minimums" become "maximums". In other words, "What can I do to get by?"
- (2) Lack of authentic spirituality. Emphasis is on the outward things.
- (3) Fear replaces faith. People are more concerned about failing than aggressively seeking to do the work of the Lord.

3. The Fault-Finding Stage

- a. Sadly, many churches in time fall into this tragic stage where they "bite and devour" one another. Galatians 5:15
- b. By failing to do the work of the Lord with a pure heart, any Christian in time can fall to Satan's devices.
- c. Selfish and proud people cannot see their own faults, but they are quick to attack others. James 3:13-16
- d. Attitudes of the fault-finding stage:
 - (1) Discouragement and negativism breeds gossip and fault-finding.
 - (2) Cliques and "power plays" are used so a few can get their way either as "majority rule" or "minority rule".
 - (3) The tendency is to enlarge problems while ignoring those who are serving God.
 - (4) Very little thought is given to evangelism and the work.

4. The Declining Stage

- a. By this time the Lord's work is in shambles. Lost souls are the result. (Hebrews 12:15)
- b. The ugly fruits of division and the destruction of God's work should make us determined not to go down this path!

III. The Remedy For Church Decline and Return To Growth

- A. **"Remember"** – recall your earlier service of love. Do you remember when you first became a Christian? Do you remember when this church first started? What was your attitude?
 1. Recall the old days and the fervent relationship you had with the Lord and His people. (Hebrews 10:32-34) - Does this memory bring joy?
 2. It's not too late to return to that attitude of love and devotion.
- B. **"Repent"** – change your heart. Rekindle the love you had in your heart for the Lord, for the church and for others. (Rev. 3:19-21)
- C. **"Do"** – do the "first works" motivated by love. (Gal. 5:6) Let us be completely dedicated to God's work. Luke 9:23-24

Conclusion

There is no guarantee that the Lord's church will continue in this community unless we are faithful in our generation. Please note that there is no church at Ephesus today.

Let us properly evaluate ourselves in the light of God's Word. (II Corinthians 13:5) The Lord knows our hearts so let each of us be honest. If the Lord wrote a letter to this church, what would He say? If the Lord wrote you a personal letter, what would He say to you?