

THE GOSPEL MAGAZINE

Editor

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Editorial

HAVE YOU EVER NOTICED how the Bible stresses the need for reality? The Lord Jesus Christ used very strong language against unreality and make-believe. He denounced the Scribes and Pharisees in words of fearful severity and called them “hypocrites” — those who only acted a part.

In the Book of the Revelation the bankruptcy of the Church at Sardis is exposed. It had “a name to live and was dead”. Outward appearances proved to be very deceptive — it was no more than an ecclesiastical corpse.

We must recognise the difference between the outward appearance and the inward reality. The devil loves unreality and seeks to encourage it. We need to remember that there are such things as unreal repentance, as in the case of King Saul and Judas; and unreal faith as in the case of Simon Magus; and also unreal love.

The Apostle Paul gave some very practical advice to his readers: “Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith.” He was urging them to be firm with themselves to see if their faith was just a matter of the head, or whether it was of the heart. We could not do better than follow his advice. Let us pray that God will graft His Word inwardly in our hearts.

A Word of Reproof

A Sermon by the Editor

"I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love"
(Revelation 2:4)

LET US LOOK at the Letter that the risen Lord sent to the Church at Ephesus. John the Apostle was by this time a very old man; he had been banished to Patmos; and sent there, not because of any misdemeanour on his part, but purely because of his faithfulness to Christ. He says he was there "for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ". Now unto him was given the wonderful message of this Book and so through him was sent the Letters to the seven Churches in Asia.

Ephesus was nearest to Patmos by a number of miles than any of the others, it was about 60 miles from Patmos to Ephesus. Let me just tell you a little about Ephesus to sketch in the background. Ephesus, of course, had a distinction all of its own. It was styled the Metropolis of Asia by Didymus and he says it was the Capital of the Roman Province. It was a very prosperous business centre, situated on the trade route from Rome to the East and, of course, had a magnificent temple in honour of Diana of the Ephesians, which was acknowledged as one of the great wonders of the world. The Apostle Paul ministered there for about two-and-a-half years. He recognised that it was a strategic place to plant the Gospel, so that from this place outwards it spread, and we do know that people were turned from their idols to serve the living and true God. They brought their magical equipment and burned it in token of their complete cutting off from their former life. So a great work of grace was done in Ephesus. It was to this Church in Ephesus that Paul wrote one of the wonderful Letters that we have in the New Testament. After the Apostle Paul left, Timothy took over the superintendency of the work and ultimately it was the Apostle John who presided over the work for some years. He outlived the rest of the apostles.

This Letter begins with a note of commendation. If you look through the seven Letters you will find that in each of them the Lord Jesus Christ passes judgment on the Church concerned. For instance, to the Church at Smyrna He gives praise, but to the Church at Laodicea, on the other hand, He had only condemnation. "You are neither hot nor cold — you are neither one thing or the other, neither good nor bad."

Notice how it begins: "I know thy works." The risen Lord is in a position to evaluate the condition of each Church. He is the all-knowing Lord. He is omniscient, and knows their state. He is the divine Overseer of the Churches. He dwells in the Church because He has said: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst." He lives with His people; He

dwells in them. He inspects them, and His first word to them is this: "I know." That is very shattering because He knows us through and through. "O Lord, thou hast searched me, and known me," says Psalm 139, and it is the same here. But notice what He has to say by way of commendation. He has three virtues which He singles out without qualification.

THREE VIRTUES

First, there is distinguished labour. Verse 2: "I know thy works, and thy labour," and, literally, the Lord says, "I know thy diligent labour". It was strenuous and exhausting labour. The Ephesian Church was an active Church. It was busy in the service of God and of men. It was an aggressive Church, not one that would sit down on its laurels and take things easy. It was a Church that was up and doing. It was a Church where they took their responsibilities seriously. The sick were visited; the young were taught; the lonely were kept company; those who had little were provided for, and when there was a job to be done there were no shirkers — they didn't leave it to someone else; they all got on with it. "I know," says the risen Lord, "thy diligent labour." That is a commendation isn't it? "I know thy labour."

Notice in verse 2 not only distinguished labour, but distinguished patience. "I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience." If you read the Letter again you will find evidently they had been exposed to some fierce opposition. They did not have it easy. Ephesus was a great centre of emperor worship and magical rites from the East and, above all, the worship of Diana the goddess of the Ephesians went on in their midst. We read in the Acts of the Apostles how that on one occasion a riot broke out because of Paul's preaching. It had such effect that it really hit the vested interests; the sale of the idols went down, and this was just too much for the merchants of Ephesus and a riot was caused. This happened years ago, but the unpopularity of Christianity still lingered. The Christians knew what it was to be hated, to be snubbed in public and to be maligned in private. They knew something of social ostracism. They were boycotted. They found these things very hard going, and there were certain tradesmen who would not sell to Christians, but, in spite of all this tribulation, the faith of the Ephesian believers had not been overthrown. They were firm and unswerving in their allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ. "I know thy patience," in spite of all the difficulties and all the problems. I am sure our Lord meant too that He knew their patience in their work of outreach as they patiently sowed the seed of the everlasting Gospel — and the Lord Jesus notes their patience and commends them for it. He knows just what it involved for them. Patience today is counted for little. This is an age where people want to get on quickly. They want a quick return for their outlay, but the Lord says, "I value patience". He commends them for it.

Notice thirdly, He commends them, not only for their diligent work and their patience, but for their distinguished jealousy for the right. If you look at verse 6

the Ephesians had been visited by some self-styled **apostles**, the Nicolaitans. Exactly who they were and what they taught we cannot say, but their teaching was mistaken and commended in some degree immorality. This was what they were up against — this false teaching that came in. Richard Trench, once Archbishop of Dublin and Dean of Westminster, thinks that the name Nicolaitans is a symbolic name, like many of the names in the Revelation, and he says the name “Nikolaos” really means “destroyer of the people”. So it would be an apt epithet of this sect who were spreading their evil doctrines through the Church in Asia. You remember Paul when he gathered together the elders of the Ephesian Church at Miletus and gave them parting instructions saying: “For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock” (Acts 20:29). Here it was being fulfilled, as Scripture is always fulfilled.

What line, then, did the Church at Ephesus take in view of this erroneous teaching that had raised its head in their midst? They tested the spirits. John says: “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God.” Also Paul told the Thessalonians: “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.” So, when this teaching came they thought about it, they discussed it, they searched the Scriptures, they put it alongside the Scriptures, they put it “in the balances of Scripture and it was found wanting”. You remember, of course, the Bereans, when Paul went to preach we read of them that “they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so”. This is exactly what they did at Ephesus after an honest hearing of this message that would be propagated and after careful testing they rejected the Nicolaitan message. It was “weighed in the balance and found wanting”. So the Lord commends the Church here because it had the gift of discernment and discrimination. They were wise enough not to suppose that Christian charity can tolerate false teaching. Love neither embraces error or evil. One of our former congregation, now gone to glory, used to often say with great feeling that “charity to error” is “treachery to truth”. There is an awful lot in that statement.

So the Lord here commends the Church that they were able to discriminate, that they could weigh things up and bring them alongside Scripture. So there is a wonderful commendation. It was in a way a splendid Church, noted for its work, for its patience, for its discrimination; “but,” says the Lord, “there is one thing lacking” — and that brings me to my text.

COMPLAINT

“Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou **hast left thy first love.**” Here comes the complaint — from commendation we pass to complaint. Will you notice that reproof only comes after commendation, and surely there is something here for us to learn, for our words of remonstrance will be **more** successful if they are preceded by every acknowledgement which justice **and** generosity can suggest. It was a tactful approach — commendation and **then** complaint. And

what was the complaint? It was this, that they had fallen from their early life of devotion to Christ. Of course, our Lord had warned that in the last days, "because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold", and here was one outworking of His prophecy.

So we move on to the last thing. The Lord spoke in terms of commendation and **then** in terms of complaint.

Notice the last thing — command. The Church is to recollect its former condition. "Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen." That is the first thing. Memory is a very precious gift; to look back sometimes can be wrong. It was so in the case of Lot's wife who turned back when she was expressly told not to. To turn back when we have set our hand to the plough is wrong, but it can also be sensible on occasions to look back and to remember all the way in which the Lord has led us, and so at times we are to compare what we are now with what we once were, to see if we are making progress, to see if we are still showing the love that He looks for, and it can be a shattering experience. *Remember* is the first word the Lord gives.

The second word is *Repent* — and repentance is a change of mind leading to a change of direction. Will you notice He does not urge them to feel bad about their sins. That will come no doubt. It is not what they *feel* about them, so much as what they are going *to do* about them — "Repent" therefore.

"Remember"; "Repent"; and the next thing He says is, "and *do* the first works." They are to resume their former state. Having abandoned their first love they must go back to it by God's grace. Notice, too, that the risen Lord not only issues commands but He gives a solemn warning. Clearly He says not to repent will mean that their Church's existence will be terminated, "or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent". It is quite a staggering thought that no Church has security, but it is continuously on trial. The Church is not so much the building, much as we love it. The Church is the people. There are many Churches today that have ceased in effect to exist, even though their buildings remain, for their candlestick has been removed. The Lord still says: "Except ye repent, except ye return to your first love, I will remove the candlestick." So the threat was over this Church. It was not guaranteed continuity unless they did as He told them.

So it must come to us as a warning. Oh, may our love be ardent and glowing and self-denying! We are to be vigilant and to cleave to the Lord lest He comes to us and says: "Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love."

John says: "We love him because he first loved us." The cross is the place where the flame of our love will be kindled afresh. So the Church here in Ephesus was commended, it was taken to task, and it was given a solemn warning.

These are messages for all time — messages of abiding value. It may be the Lord is speaking to the Church in our generation, to us perhaps in particular. There is a work to be done, a fight to be fought, truths to be championed; but,

above all else, there is a Person to be loved and we are to love Him with the love which we had for Him at the first. Indeed, our love should go on and grow, and do we not need to say very sincerely, all of us, the words of William Cowper:

“Lord, it is my chief complaint
That my love is weak and faint,
Yet I love Thee and adore;
Oh for grace to love Thee more.”

That, briefly, is the message to the Church at Ephesus. May we have grace given to lay these truths to heart. Amen.

M.H.

For Younger Readers

CARINE MACKENZIE

THE PLOUGHING MATCH

BEFORE THE FARMER sows the seed in his field he has to prepare the ground. The first thing he does is to plough up the earth with a huge machine made of steel which turns over the soil to break it up. This is done nowadays with a tractor pulling a plough which may turn over four or six furrows at once. In the olden days a single plough was guided by the ploughman and pulled by a horse. It was, and still is, important that the furrow is as straight as possible.

Ploughing is an important part of the farmer's work but some people enjoying ploughing so much and are so good at it that they enter into special competitions called ploughing matches. The aim of the competition is not to see who can plough the furrow the fastest but to find out who can plough in the straightest line.

If the ploughman keeps looking behind him to see how he is getting on then his line will soon go off the straight.

If he just tries to compare what he is doing with the other furrows that other competitors have done then he too will not get a straight line.

The best way for him to get a really straight furrow is by fixing his eye on something permanent on the other side of the field and to keep looking towards that object. That is how to become a prizewinner in a ploughing competition and to do a really good job of preparing a field for the seed.

The Christian life is something like that ploughing competition. If we live our lives just looking at ourselves and how we are doing we will soon stray from the right path. If all we do is compare our life to that of our neighbour or our friend, then that too will result in falling into sin.

We ought to live with our eyes firmly fixed on the only permanent, unchanging object of our faith — the Lord Jesus Christ. True blessing is to be found by looking — “Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2).

When our eyes are fixed firmly on the Lord Jesus, when we are considering Him and all that He endured for His people, what an encouragement that is for us. We are told to do just that, “lest we be weary and faint in our minds” (Hebrews 12:3).

So if we feel weary and despondent, or feel like giving up, then the answer to that problem is not looking at ourselves, or at our neighbour, but looking to the Lord Jesus and considering what we read in His Word about all the things He has suffered for His people and the wonderful promises He has given them.

PUZZLE

The Bible speaks about ploughing and ploughmen in several places. Sometimes the spelling is different. Find the missing words from the following verses. The initial letters of your answers spell out the word PLOUGHING.

1. A high look, and a _____ heart, and the plowing of the wicked is sin. Proverbs 21:4.
2. And Jesus said . . . No man having put his hand to the plough and _____ back is fit for the kingdom of God. Luke 9:62.
3. Thou shalt not plow with an _____ and an ass together. Deuteronomy 22:10.
4. Prepare war . . . let all the men of war draw near; let then come _____, Beat your plowshares into swords. . . . Joel 3:9-10.
5. Doth the plowman plow all day to sow? doth he open and break the clods of his _____. Isaiah 28:24.
6. He that ploweth should plow in _____. 1 Corinthians 9:10.
7. Even as I have seen, they that plow _____ and sow wickedness, reap the same. Job 4:8.
8. They shall beat their swords into plowshares . . . _____ shall not lift up sword against _____, neither shall they learn way any more. Isaiah 2:4.
9. Behold the days come, saith the Lord, that the plowman shall overtake the reaper and the treader of _____, him that soweth seed. Amos 9:13.