

THE ENDURING EPHESIAN CHURCH

A. Introduction

Today we will talk about the church in Ephesus. Turn to Acts 19. Paul's Third Missionary Journey in the mid 50s AD mainly involved his work in Ephesus; perhaps his most successful church planting. :8-12. God did extraordinary miracles through Paul. From Ephesus, the whole Roman province of Asia (SW corner of modern Turkey) heard the gospel. Probably the 7 churches of Asia mentioned in Rev 2 were started at this time; all the result of the gospel spreading out from the city of Ephesus. A great church was established – a center of Christianity for many centuries. Perhaps more than any other church, the NT gives us a picture of how the Ephesian church fared over time. We have the story in Acts and then 3 later letters involve this church. We will briefly look at each and apply some lessons to where we are today.

B. Founding of the Church

Look in Acts 20. After leaving Ephesus, Paul traveled around Greece and Macedonia strengthening the churches he had planted on the 2nd Missionary Journey. He then heads for Jerusalem, but stops to give a farewell address to the Ephesian elders. In his speech, he paints a picture of his ministry in Ephesus. :17-21 similar to what we saw a few weeks ago in the Thessalonian letters; he gave his whole heart to the church. :27-31 taught them the whole counsel of God; warned them against false teachers; had daily meaningful contact. This provides us a great example of how to build a strong church. Do we have this kind of relationships with each other? Does this describe our devotion to the church? If we want CG to become a great ministry, this is what we must be like. Let's take seriously the challenge to deepen our relationships!

C. Letter to the Ephesians

1. Turn to the Book of Ephesians. Written about 5 years later from Rome at the same time Philemon and Colossians were written (and near the time Philippians was written.) 1:1 says plainly it was written to the saints in Ephesus. Yet probably your Bible has a footnote that says some ancient MS don't have the words "at Ephesus." Some scholars question whether this letter was really written to Ephesus. Paul spent 3 years there and yet it is his most impersonal letter in the NT; no personal greetings. 1:12, 3:2 and 4:21 all sound like Paul is writing to people he had not worked with personally. However, most ancient MS do have "in Ephesus" and many scholars still hold to the view it was written to Ephesus. A leading theory is that it was a circular letter sent to Ephesus to be distributed to other churches. This would be consistent with the founding of Ephesus where the gospel spread to the surrounding region. This letter then may have been written to the whole province of Asia; the same churches addressed in Rev 2. Suggests the Ephesian church was still strong and the leading church of the region. Certainly no problems or heresies are addressed in the letter like many of the other letters of Paul.

2. The letter is a great summary of the basic truths of Christianity emphasizing the blessings we have in Christ and our salvation, how God works through the church, the unity we should have and a call to righteous living including teaching on marriage and parenting. Only the Book of Romans has a broader scope of basic Christian doctrine than the Book of Ephesians. Appropriate to a letter written to many congregations, the Book of Ephesians is the only place in Paul's letters where the word "church" refers to the church universal and not the local church.

3. One thing I would like to emphasize is in 2:14-18. Paul talks about how Christ bridges the racial divide between Jews and Gentiles. Christ does the same for us today bridging in our culture the racial divide between blacks and whites. I am so glad that CG remains a diverse congregation of blacks and whites (and Latins and Asians), including many interracial couples. I hope we will continue to build relationships across racial lines and fight to preserve that diversity. I hope and pray we never slide into becoming all black or all white as most denominational churches are and even most of the remaining ministries of the ACOC. I believe this was one of the major weaknesses of the old ACOC and one of the biggest reasons the ACOC was unable to remain united. As we build CG, I want us to always maintain racial diversity and never go down the road of spinning off into all white and all black groups.

D. I Timothy

1. This letter was written another 5 years after Ephesians; about 10 years after the founding of the church. Paul has been released from prison and is traveling again. 1:3-7 At this point, the Ephesian church does have some problems and Paul leaves Timothy there to straighten it out. Like Paul warned back in Acts, false teachers have arisen – who focus on myths and genealogies – meaningless talk - things that don't promote faith and love, a pure heart and a good conscience. The lesson for us is that when we have been around for a while sometimes we can get caught up in controversies and arguments that don't really serve to build us or others up. As we mature, we should become more concerned with faith and love and righteousness not less – we never outgrow these things! The Pharisees were like this consumed with legalistic issues but neglecting the weightier matters of God's Word. If we find ourselves focusing too much on "concerns" and "issues" in the church, we need to get back to the important things God wants us to focus on.

2. The letter focuses on the concerns of a mature, established church. Worship. Leadership roles. Helping widows. Appointing elders (we may be doing that again soon – amen!) A couple of things I think especially apply to us. First is Paul's teaching about the church helping needy disciples. Paul writes about widows who receive support from the church. 5:3-4 He emphasizes responsibility; people should talk care of their own family members; people should not expect the church to help their relatives; they should do it themselves. :5-6, 9-10 Paul also focuses on the moral character of the widows themselves. This is so contrary to the tendency encouraged by our society to think of ourselves as victims and think we are entitled to receive help. Somehow we seem to think integrity and personal responsibility aren't

supposed to apply to us when we are in financial need. But so often financial problems are caused or compounded by lack of character. Help from the church should be focused on those who have no other source of help and who continue to demonstrate character and a willingness to serve. Folks whose own irresponsibility got them into trouble are not the folks Paul is talking about here.

3. Lastly, I Tim ends with a powerful warning against greed – very relevant stuff for Americans 6:19-20. The love of money and the things money can buy is the central feature of our culture – permeates our business culture and how we think about our jobs – permeates entertainment and leisure with the constant bombardment of advertisements in the media – even permeates our family life and the pursuit of the American Dream of a comfortable life with the nice house, nice car, etc. – Christmas itself has become a vast commercial event; an orgy of spending that drives our entire economy. [In the OT holidays were all about sacrificing to God and remembering His blessings.] God says all this is a trap, plunges people into ruin and destruction - a root of all kinds of evil; causes us to wander from the faith and pierce ourselves with many griefs. He is talking about disciples here not people in the world. Brothers and sisters, I don't think we take greed seriously enough; it is the #1 sin of our society and yet I don't recall many sin studies or "disciplining times" where greed was the primary focus. I think greed affects us far more than we realize and it is hard for us to see because it so much a part of the society we live in. What is the solution to greed? :17 This is directly addressed to us – Americans – the rich of this world – we cannot put our hope in wealth – homes, possessions, savings, insurance, retirement planning – we must put our hope in God. :18 Be grateful for what we have and be generous.

E. Revelation 2

Written probably during the 90s AD - near the end of the 1st Century – 40 years or so after Paul planted the church in Ephesus. 30 years after the letter of I Tim was written about the church. How has the church fared all these years later? It is the first church addressed in Rev suggesting it may still be the leading church in Asia. :1-3 We so often focus on the rebuke of v. 4, but Jesus has many encouraging things to say. Deeds. Hard work. Do not tolerate wicked men. Not deceived by false apostles and resisting heresy in v.6 (still heeding 40 years later Paul's admonition from Acts to resist false teaching). He also mentions twice their "perseverance." The HCS translates it "endurance." They endured the persecution of the Jews in the 50s and they are now enduring the persecution of the Romans in the 90s. I preached about endurance in house church last Sunday. So often we think of this quality as a last line of defense against falling away; holding on by our fingernails; if you can't do anything else, at least you can hang on and endure. Yet I think endurance is a more vital quality than that; something we need for the long haul, something that helps us grow and mature, a key to remaining faithful our entire life – faithful to the end. How do you think you will be doing 40 years into your Christian life? Will you have persevered and endured like the Ephesians? Yes, they needed a kick in the pants to restore their first love and we may need that too, but they had not given up, not become discouraged or bitter or faithless. They were still working hard for the Lord,

battling false teaching, leading the Christians in Asia - these many years later. I have been a disciple for 25 years; when I hit 40 years, I hope Jesus can say of me the same things he said to the Ephesian church here :1-3. Amen. Let's close with a prayer.

Next time: Harold will talk about Romans.