

Note: This is an excerpt from the book, *Love in Crisis: Modern Parallels to the Church at Ephesus*, by Robert Wurtz II, edited by Ken Walker. Published in October of 2015 by Creation House.

Chapter 1

Crisis in the Churches

The origins of the famed Washington National Cathedral date back to the early days of the United States. In 1791, President George Washington commissioned Pierre Charles L'Enfant to create a visionary plan for Washington, D.C. The French-born civil engineer and architect imagined a great church for national purposes. Yet it wasn't until 1893 that Congress issued a charter to the district's Protestant Episcopal Cathedral Foundation, enabling it to establish a cathedral. The longest-running construction project in the capital's history finally commenced in 1907.

Since that time, this church has served as a spiritual center for the nation's capital, hosting crucial national events and memorial observances. President Woodrow Wilson attended 1918's official Thanksgiving service there to mark the end of the First World War. A decade later President Calvin Coolidge opened the general convention of the Episcopal Church. In 1956, the Cathedral dedicated President Woodrow Wilson's tomb. In 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King preached his last Sunday sermon from its pulpit.

After the turn of the century, President George W. Bush's Inaugural Prayer Service met there. Just months later, the Cathedral convened the National Day of Prayer and Remembrance service after the tragic terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, that destroyed New York's World Trade Center and heavily damaged the Pentagon, less than two miles away. Three years later, thousands would mourn the death of President Ronald Reagan in its hallowed halls. Thousands more mourned the death of post-Watergate President Gerald Ford on the centennial anniversary of the advent of its construction.

This distinguished position in U.S. history makes recent developments at the Cathedral that much more disappointing—and symbolic of the spiritual and cultural drift that afflicts the

church in America. I'm referring to its leaders opening the sanctuary in November of 2014 for a Muslim prayer service. It was reportedly designed to highlight the need for "religious tolerance" and for people of faith to reach beyond traditional boundaries. Yet how could any true Christian leader consider extending the use of any Christian church building to Muslims? The very thought of it would shock even nominal Christians. Can you imagine a mosque being used for a Christian prayer meeting? Muslims take their religion too seriously to allow another faith to invade their territory.

The event upset a woman from Michigan who managed to gain admission to the invitation-only service. Before being removed by Cathedral police, she shouted, "Jesus Christ is on that cross over there. Get out of our church. Leave our church alone!" Echoing her remarks, Franklin Graham—son of longtime evangelist Billy Graham—wrote on his Facebook page: "It's sad to see a church open its doors to the worship of anything other than the One True God of the Bible who sent His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to earth to save us from our sins. Jesus was clear when He said, 'I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me'" (John 14:6).¹

Despite such protests, the service's organizer—Reverend Gina Campbell—welcomed the gathering, saying the National Cathedral represented a place of prayer for all people: "Let us stretch our hearts and let us seek to deepen mercy, for we worship the same God."²

Examining History

How did we reach the place where Christian leaders cannot discern the critical differences between those who worship the Son of God and those who openly oppose Him? I believe the answer lies in contrasting modern churches with the church of Ephesus. Through the grace and power of God, this body of believers sprang up in first-century Asia Minor like a root out of dry ground. They started out with an incomplete understanding of the gospel and a deficient conversion experience. Nevertheless, God took these imperfect Ephesians and built a church that prevailed against the gates of hell. How? To discover the keys to their success, I will chronicle how they started in the Spirit's power, continued in the Spirit (before growing cold), and then returned to their first love.

The church at Ephesus offers a mirror to examine our own experience. As we look at this body, we can ask such questions as:

- Have we followed the pattern set forth in the building of the Ephesian church?
- Do we love God in the way He deserves?

- And these equally significant questions—where have we placed our faith? Our hope? Our love?

These questions and others like them are crucial to examining our spiritual condition as individuals and as churches. God wants us to love Him and others with the same love He shows for His Son, Jesus. Indeed, this is one of the essential aspects of living as “sons of God”; namely, that we have the life of God in us. This will only happen if the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5).

It is easy to throw stones at people who are opposed to the gospel. Yet, Peter tells us that judgment begin at the house of God (1 Pet. 4:7). Each of us who claim to be Christian must ask ourselves, *Where am I appropriating my love?* It is not sufficient to simply say we love God; our words and our actions have to match. Why deceive ourselves? After all, many things and people compete for our love. As children of God in a fallen world, we are tempted to love things we have been commanded not to, particularly the things of this world.

For some, misappropriated love is not just a perpetual temptation; it forms the root of the sins that harass them. They are giving love to *something* they shouldn't, or they are focusing too much attention on another *person*. The Bible labels such behavior *idolatry*. In Old Testament days, prostitution was often called harlotry, which has been defined as “taking the love that belongs to one person and giving it to another.” God commands and deserves to be loved with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength. For anyone who questions why they should love God this way, the answer appears in 1 John 4:19: “We love him because he first loved us.” God created us and provides us with the essential means of living. He intends people to acknowledge His provision as an act of goodness. Ultimately, God's goodness is designed to lead people to repentance. We are to turn away from pursuing money, riches, and fame, and live for God. We are to live as practical, real-life demonstrations of His love, care, and concern. We are to be examples of Jesus so others will be drawn to Him.

Appreciating God

God expressed His love to us in order to initiate an intimate relationship with Him. God created men and women so He could enjoy reciprocal love with beings who were compatible with His nature. He shared His love with us in hopes we would respond by sharing our love with Him. We are to live in covenant with Him. Nevertheless, in order for this intimate relationship to work, people must recognize and appreciate God for who He is and for what He has done. If He had

done nothing more than create us and provide for us, He had done enough to deserve our love forever. How much more since He gave us His Son?

The sad truth is that, in spite of the fact that God created humans, men and women rebelled against their Creator. We chose to sever the relationship. This behavior didn't end with Adam; it became mankind's pattern throughout history. I love the story of the prophet Hosea, who went to the extreme of marrying an unfaithful prostitute to teach his fellow Israelites a real-life object lesson: just as his wife had forsaken him, they had run away from God. Yet He wanted them back and was willing to pay whatever price it took to bring them to redemption. Imagine the scorn, heartache, and humiliation Hosea suffered as he obeyed God and married a prostitute. That's God's way of explaining to us how He felt when His people were unfaithful.

The problem throughout history has been that most people will either not acknowledge God's goodness or remain willfully ignorant of it. They pretend that God has done nothing worthy of recognition and often question His existence. Some go as far as embracing atheism, declaring God doesn't even exist. Meanwhile, others who don't go to this extreme still engage in self-justification as they refuse to honor and love their Creator.

Again, while it becomes easy to point fingers or cast blame at those who don't direct their attentions or affections toward God, such refusals should prompt self-examination—namely, to ask ourselves, *If we are not giving God the love He has commanded and deserves, to whom or to what are we giving it?* It is a grievous thought that we would misappropriate the love that God alone deserves and give it to another. After all He has done for mankind, this is unconscionable—and yet it happens regularly.

I wrote this book for those with a deep desire to live a life pleasing to God. It is for people who want to love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength—and to love their neighbors as themselves. In an age where the emphasis of mainstream Christianity seems to be on all kinds of subjects, I seek to turn our attention back to what the Apostle Paul called the greatest of the virtues, love. It is a tall order to love as God wants us to love, and yet all of God's commandments boil down to those two basic things. Jesus put it best when He said, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Matt. 22:37-39, KJV).

Defining Love

It sounds simple enough, but in basic terms, what is godly love? To understand what it is *not*, we can look at the world around us, which operates primarily in self-love. This explains much of the conflict in modern society and rampant racial divisions, political polarization, hatred, and bitterness. It is the reason CEOs think nothing of lavishing multi-million-dollar bonuses on themselves while some of their employees struggle to make ends meet. Yet, everyone has a basic understanding of love. Jesus taught that even tax collectors and other sinners knew how to love—at least, they knew how to love those who loved them. The same is true of most of us. We are fairly proficient at loving those who are agreeable to us. Our actions stand in marked contrast to the example Christ set. The most challenging thing Jesus ever faced happened on the cross. While suffering the worst injustice in history, He uttered these shocking words, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34). Paul commented on this in his letter to the Ephesians: “Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma” (Eph. 5:1-2). When the world applied the fire of injustice to Jesus, a sweet-smelling savor of pure love arose to the nostrils of God.

It is staggering to consider that God daily blesses people who are at enmity with Him. Yet this is what He charges us to do. We must ask ourselves if we are loving others with this kind of perfect love. Can we love our enemies and seek reconciliation? When we have been hurt and abused, taken advantage of, or persecuted without cause, can we still love the person or persons involved? This is what Peter challenged people to do when he wrote: “For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God” (1 Pet. 2:19-20).

Despite this clear instruction, some might argue, “Some might say, “Well, that was Jesus. No one can love like Jesus loved!” While I don’t pretend that this is an easy task, what about Stephen? While being stoned to death by a merciless mob, one of the early church’s first deacons asked God to not hold his attackers guilty. How? Why didn’t he curse and swear as pain and agony bore down on his battered body? Because he loved with the love of God. His reaction provided the fragrant proof of his love.

This is love on a different level. Paul exhibited the same kind of love when people attempted to kill him and nearly beat him to death on numerous occasions. Even though most of his fellow Israelites rejected the Messiah, he declared, “For I could wish that myself were

accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh” (Rom. 9:3, KJV). It is easy to casually read those words and ignore their significance. Paul was willing to sacrifice his own immortal soul if it could bring salvation to the very people who attacked, ridiculed, and sought to destroy him. This could never happen, but it showed how deeply he loved his people, the Jews. What a contrast with many Christians! This is fervent, unfeigned love from a man who once had persecuted and slain Christ’s followers.

Displays of Love

In John 13:34-35, Jesus taught His disciples that they would be known as such by the love they displayed for one another. These words stand as a hallmark for anyone who claims to be born again. Loving this way authenticates our witness. Not only did Jesus command us to show this kind of love, He has empowered us to do it through the Holy Spirit—and He expects us to do so. If we refuse, we find ourselves in the same state as the saints at Ephesus who had abandoned their first love. God expected the church at Ephesus to act as His lampstand in a darkened world. In the same way, we are not qualified to be a church if we are not burning with this type of love. Are we demonstrating this kind of love? Or are we like James and John, who when a village of Samaritans rejected Jesus, asked Him: “Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them, just as Elijah did?” (Luke 9:54).

Anger and evangelism do not mesh with each other. Love is a response to God’s commandment. It is the first fruit of the Spirit described in Galatians 5:22 and evidence that God lives inside of us. As John so aptly put it: “He who does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:8). It matters not how correct our beliefs, how bold our profession of faith, how devoted our study of Scripture, or how lengthy our prayers. If we do not love with God’s love, it is all meaningless.

This is the point of looking at the example of the historic church at Ephesus. How could God take rather ignorant, hate-filled sinners and turn them into people who loved like Jesus loves? I will address that question as I trace the history of a band of sinful pagans to their startling transformation by the Holy Spirit. I will review how they became more than nominal Christians, a people possessed by zeal for God (especially His love) and the center of prime New Testament teaching. Not only did two leading apostles, John and Paul, work diligently with this church, Timothy later arrived there to serve among the elders. Indeed, Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians while at Ephesus, the book that contains the great love chapter, 1 Corinthians 13. Church historians believe John also wrote John 3:16 from Ephesus.

The Departure

Although inundated with revelations about God's love, the presence of the Holy Spirit, and other, unparalleled privileges, something went wrong. While in exile on the island of Patmos, John received a vision of God's great glory and majesty. Revelation opens with a description of how the book originated with the Father, who gave it to Jesus, who then sent it to John through an angel. The first order of business featured a report on the spiritual condition of seven once-great churches in Asia, starting with Ephesus:

To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, "These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands: 'I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary. Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent'"

—Revelation 2:1-5

Considering this church's beginnings and the spiritual heights to which it ascended, it is almost unbelievable that they could have neglected their love for God. What horror John must have felt! While the Ephesians seemed to be doing everything right, it stemmed from the wrong motivation. Where once they were moved by their love for God, now they are moved by something else. Their first love (the Greek word is *protos*) had vanished.

Once believers leave behind their love for God, all other loves diminish proportionally, leaving them an empty shell. The Ephesians may have not realized it, but their spiritual deeds were like (in the words of 1 Corinthians 13:1) "sounding brass or a clanging cymbal." When the holy fire of God's love went out, they may have become like the disciples who wanted to call fire down from heaven on the Samaritans. How could the Ephesians, or twenty-first century American Christians, leave their first love? It starts whenever people take the love that belongs to Christ and give it to something, or someone, else.

If there is no love for Christ, we need not expect a love for other saints, our family, our neighbors, and certainly not our enemies. Forsaking our great love for Christ means opening the door to all kinds of problems: contention, competition, strife, fear, envy, resentment, and jealousy, to name a few. We can grow cold and self-righteous, condemning others without admitting our shortcomings. Has there ever been a time when love was talked about as much as it is today, and yet *God's kind of love is neglected?*

Tracing Their Footsteps

In order to trace the footsteps of the church at Ephesus, we must recognize God's purposes in saving people from their sins. God is love, and He intends that the men and women He created in His image conform to that image. The power of God's love shines through in the story of Ephesus, an utterly-pagan city with a history of idolatry dating back centuries. The darkness of such a place directly related to the absence of God's love. The heaviness and oppression that stemmed from people never learning to love their neighbor or show other expressions of God's love, would have been a crippling thing to experience—even for a non-Christian, if they were transported back to that city and time.

In America and the Western world, we have enjoyed centuries of Christian influence that has illuminated the earth with God's love. Unless we have visited nations where God has been suppressed for decades, we cannot fathom the joylessness and lovelessness of pre-Christian Ephesus. This is what makes the church's history there so incredible. The powerful, authoritative preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ at Ephesus led to a genuine example of New Testament church life. The Ephesians believed, repented, were baptized, received the Holy Spirit, and brought forth spiritual fruit.

As did the other churches, the Ephesians "began" in the Spirit (see Gal. 3:3). Nevertheless, something terrible happened. To understand Jesus' diagnosis that they needed to *repent and do the first works*, we need to know what those first works were.

It is good to know this story has a happy ending. We know from church history that—after the Lord's letter of correction—Ephesus continued to thrive as a church until at least the seventh century. Three key church council meetings convened there. This tells us clearly that the early Ephesian church obeyed the directive in Revelation 2 and returned to its first love. It is good to know this story has a happy ending. I pray the Ephesians' return to Christ after such a great fall will serve as an example to modern-day churches and individuals. Whether we have

left our first love, or have never known it, we can all find a place of repentance and establish, or re-establish, Jesus Christ as our Lord. When we love Him with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, His fire will burn in our hearts. With Him as our first love, we can love God and one another as Christ loved us.

Endnotes

1. Mark Woods, "Franklin Graham condemns Washington cathedral for hosting Muslim prayer service,"

(<http://www.christiantoday.com/article/franklin.graham.condemns.washington.cathedral.for.hosting.muslim.prayer.service/43127.htm> (accessed July 15, 2015)).

2. Ibid.

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