*Meeting the Church at Ephesus*

Select Texts

8/13/23

Today we begin a new series on 1st Timothy. 1&2 Timothy and Titus are commonly called the *pastoral epistles* because they were sent to Paul’s ministry partners. Yet we ought not think of them as personal correspondence. It is clear, especially in 1 Timothy and Titus, that these letters were meant to be read and used by the church. When Paul wrote 1st Timothy, Timothy was serving as a pastor in Ephesus, which was a major city. Located in Asia minor, or modern-day Turkey, Ephesus was the third largest city in the Roman Empire, boasting a population of roughly 250,000 people. That was a huge population by ancient standards. If we are to understand this letter, we need to understand both the setting and circumstances that gave birth to it.

Ephesus was the center of political, social, and economic activity for the region, which the Romans called the province of Asia. There were three reasons the city was thriving. First, it was the center of trade for the region. Ephesus sat where Cayster River dumped into the Aegean Sea. Like many ports in the Mediterranean, the city faced challenges of the bay silting shut. Through some impressive engineering, they constantly dredged the bay to keep the port functional. From the city, a network of roads branched out along the coastlines and inland, making the transportation of goods by land and sea possible. Ephesus was the center of trade between the eastern and western parts of the Roman Empire.

Second, there was a large temple to Artemus in Ephesus, to which people from all over the empire traveled to worship. This god was related to fertility, magic, and astronomy. Acts 19 tells us that the silversmiths in the city had a lucrative idol-making business. Under the leadership of Demetrius, they instigated the riot we read about in that chapter, for they feared the effect Christianity was having on the worship of Artemus and, consequently, on their businesses.

Finally, because of its strategic location for trade, Ephesus was the Roman capital for the province. This only increased the volume and productivity of its trade.

Now, our concern is not with the city, but with the church that existed in it. The church at Ephesus was the original audience for four NT books. The first letter it received was Ephesians, which was a regional letter intended to be circulated throughout the province of Asia. Next, they were the recipients of 1&2 Timothy because Timothy was pastoring there when he received these letters. Finally, Ephesus was one of seven churches identified in the book of Revelation.

Because we have so much Biblical information about this church, we are able to trace its history over multiple decades. Understanding their history is important because 1 Timothy was written to a faithful pastor shepherding a church at a crossroads. The crossroads they faced is one every church faces at various points in their history. Understanding their challenges and the divinely inspired solutions to them is instructive for when we face the same challenges today.

Acts 19 tells of the birth of the church at Ephesus. Although it faced major opposition almost immediately, the story is of an amazing work of God’s grace. Paul came to Ephesus on his third missionary journey. When he arrived in the city, he found twelve disciples of John the Baptist. Paul explained to them how Jesus was the fulfillment of John’s preaching, which they readily accepted, were baptized, and filled with the Holy Spirit.

There was a large population of Jews in Ephesus. These twelve men were probably active participants in the local synagogue. Following their conversion, vs. 8 says Paul spent three months teaching in the synagogue about the kingdom of God. This was Paul’s normal pattern of evangelism. When he came to a new place, he always started in the synagogue. Once the Jews rejected Christ, he would turn to the gentiles. Most of the time, this hardening came quite quickly. The fact that Paul was able to teach for three months speaks to his success in Ephesus. Eventually, some Jews hardened their hearts against the gospel, so Paul took those who believed out of the synagogue to form the church. Paul continued to teach in the city for two full years.

During this time, three things happened. First, there was an extra-ordinary work of God’s grace. Many people believed the gospel and were radically transformed as a result. We are told, not only of miracles, but of genuine conversions that led to substantial life-change. Part of the worship of Artemus was the practice of magic. As people were converted to Christ, they abandoned their magic. In a dramatic event, we are told that books of magic totaling fifty thousand pieces of silver (a very large amount of money) were burned. The gospel was reforming so many lives that it was changing the culture of a city dedicated to idol worship.

A second important event that happened during this timeframe was that the Gospel spread outside the city to the surrounding regions. Vs. 10 says *all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.* As Paul ministered in Ephesus, people visiting the city on business or other purposes believed the gospel and took it home with them. This is what happened in Colossae. Epaphroditus was converted by Paul and took the gospel home with him, starting churches in Colossae and Hierapolis. The same thing happened in other cities as well.

The third important event was persecution. As is usually the case, a great demonstration of God’s grace was followed by great resistance from the enemy. In Acts 19:23-41, we are told of a riot started by Demetrius. The gospel was transforming so many lives that the silversmiths feared the end of their lucrative idol-making business. So, they started a riot. The church faithfully weathered this storm. In total, Paul spent three years ministering in this region.

So the initial phase of the church was one of fruitful ministry. The next time we meet this church is in Acts 20, where Paul has the elders of the church travel to Miletus, where he says goodbye to them because he knew that he would not see them again this side of eternity. It is a sad farewell that left everyone in tears. But in the middle of his goodbye, Paul says something important to our understanding of 1 Timothy (read vs. 28-32).

Paul knew a new foe would soon attack the church. Savage wolves would come masquerading as sheep. Some were outsiders who came into the church to cause problems; but others would arise from among the elders (from among yourselves). They would speak perverse things, drawing others into error. This is a challenge the church constantly faces. One of Satan’s tactics is to corrupt the gospel, for faulty gospels rob believers of their spiritual vitality and render them ineffective in reaching lost people with the true message of salvation. The history of the church is a story of constant threats by ungodly men who infiltrate the church and attack the *faith once for all delivered to the saints.*

But in these verses, we also find the solution to the danger they faced. The elders were to guard themselves from drifting into error, so they were not the ones who harmed the flock. Furthermore, they were to guard the flock by shepherding them in the truth. They were to stay alert, meaning they were not to let down their guard. This is how liberalism takes over orthodox churches and denominations. Faithful people fail to recognize someone’s drift into error, or under the false guise of grace, lack the courage to deal with it. As we are learning in our society, liberals are very good at getting control of the mechanisms of organizations by which they can influence massive changes. By the time people realize what is happening, the problems are often too advanced to reverse them. Thus, Paul tells the elders to remain alert at all times.

Finally, and most importantly, the elders were to keep their relationship with God vibrant and immerse themselves in His word. If they did that, not only would they keep themselves from drifting into error, but they would also protect their congregations from doing the same.

So the church that started so well is now given a dire warning: troublemakers from within the church will lead people astray. Fast forward several years, and we read this in 1 Timothy 1:3: *As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus so that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines, nor to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than furthering the administration of God which is by faith.* Paul’s warning became reality. Certain men had rejected the faith and a good conscience (bad doctrine and bad behavior usually go together) and must be dealt with.

This is the context for this letter. Timothy was left in Ephesus by Paul to deal with false teachers corrupting the church. Again, the opposition were recognized leaders in the church. This is why 1 Timothy 3 focuses on the qualifications of elders and deacons. If you are not careful who you select as leaders, you can inadvertently empower wolves in sheep’s clothing to work their destructive heresies on the body. Yet, even when we are careful about whom we recognize as leaders, we remain in a broken world. Sometimes, leaders do things that temporarily or permanently disqualify them from serving as leaders in the church. This is why 1 Timothy 5 tells us how to deal with an elder who has fallen into sin.

Now, we will survey the content of 1 Timothy next week. What I want us to see today is how the church at Ephesus was at a crossroads. There were two rival doctrines in the church. There was the faith once for all delivered to the saints by which men are saved; and there were rival doctrines that made alterations, omissions, and deviations from the truth. Altered gospels are false gospels. False gospels produce false converts who possess a false spirituality that will lead to the demise of the church. Which ‘gospel’ would they choose? Would Timothy succeed in his mission, or would the false teachers win?

The Bible answers that question. In Revelation 2-3 Jesus sends seven letters to seven congregations through the Apostle John. The first church addressed was the church in Ephesus. Listen to what Jesus has to say to them (read Rev. 2:2-3). This is a good 20-30 years after 1 Timothy was written. We discover that they no longer tolerate evil men. They test the doctrine of those who claim to be teachers and reject those who depart from the truth. They had stood at the crossroads of faithfulness and apostasy and chosen faithfulness.

Yet a new danger was lurking (read vs. 4-5). It is entirely possible to be orthodox in theology yet cold in our love for Christ. Jesus tells these believers to repent of their apathy and return to their first love. Like a marriage that has gone stale because the couple neglected their relationship, this church had neglected their relationship with Christ. Although the outward form of their lives and beliefs demonstrated truth, their hearts were adrift in apathy. They needed to repent and return to their first love. I wonder how many dying churches have this as their main problem: they need to return to their first love.

The story of the Ephesian church is a story of God’s grace. We see life transformation, evangelism, perseverance, and many other great qualities expressed by them. They responded to the leadership of Paul, Timothy, and John by returning to an orthodox faith. Furthermore, and if church tradition is to be trusted, Jesus’ call to return to their first love was also heeded by them. The church in Ephesus would play a huge role in the early history of the church.

Now, we are removed from this church by 2000 years. Life is very different today than it was for them; yet the challenge for the church today is no different than it was then. Satan continues to hurl two primary attacks on the church. First, he tries to corrupt the church’s beliefs. If he can corrupt our understanding of the gospel, he has won two victories. 1) An improper understanding of the gospel leads to defective evangelism and false conversions; and 2) bad doctrine produces bad behavior, for conduct is the product of belief. Sin corrupts our witness and distances us in our relationship with God. Satan knows he cannot take away our salvation, so he tries to render us ineffective in our service to God.

If he cannot get us to succumb to false doctrine, then he tries to lull us into spiritual apathy. Many Christians measure their current spiritual health by past activities rather than present relationship with Christ. This is a particular danger for those who have been in the church for a long time. To be honest with you, it is easier to deal with false doctrine and open sin than it is to awaken a lethargic Christian from their apathy.

1 Timothy addresses a pastor leading a church at a crossroads. Will they remain faithful to Christ, or will they go down the road of error, sin, and decline? As I have already mentioned, every church and every believer will stand at this crossroads multiple times. How do we know which path is the proper one? Are there habits we can form and priorities we can instill that keep us spiritually vibrant? These and many other subjects are the kinds of things we will wrestle with in 1 Timothy. This letter teaches us be intentional in our life as a church so that we can thrive in our service to God.