

## THE CHURCH WHICH LOST ITS FIRST LOVE

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At one time there were as many as 500 people in worship. At one time the church was healthy and thriving. But in recent years, after an ugly church split, the congregation dwindled to 75 members. Then another conflict came up and there were only 40 people. It sounded like the death knell. It's a scene that's repeated all too often in churches everywhere. But this time, the few remaining members of the church in Springfield decided to make a dramatic and bold decision. They closed the church. What is the reason for a church's doors to be closed? Because it has lost its first love for Jesus who died for them.

God's love is the greatest force in the universe. It alone can truly captivate the heart and move upon it to chose a change of course.

When Saul was stopped from his murderous persecuting ways by Jesus on the Damascus Road, he got a revelation of what a religious bigot and scum bag he really was, and how much he was loved by God. He, who should have been struck dead for his evil ways, was graciously preserved and the lights were turned on in his mind regarding the Messiah Jesus as the fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophecies. The love (*agape*) of Christ compelled ["constraineth," KJV] him. When he said that "One died for all," he reasoned that it had to mean that "all died;" so that "those who live" cannot in peace of conscience go on living "for themselves." They are constrained henceforth to "live for Him who for their sake died and was raised to life." 2 Corinthians 5:14, 15. Paul saw something that set him on fire for the Lord until that last hour in the Roman Mamertine prison when he laid his head on the block before the executioner, and died for the One who had died for him. "God forbid that I should glory except in the cross," he had said. No glorying in his own response, or his own faith, or his own obedience.

When Paul was church-planting in Ephesus "he went into the synagogue and spake boldly for the space of three months." Acts 19:8. The apostles always gave the Jews the first opportunity of hearing the doctrine concerning Christ. Speaking three months boldly in the synagogue certainly effected his purpose.

When the Jews had been fully warned, Paul having spoken in the synagogue for the space of three months, some of them turned to

actively opposing his doctrine, and he left them, and separated the disciples from the congregation. But he did not leave the city. It is not likely that a large proportion of the people had heard him in the synagogue of the Jews, and with commendable perseverance he determined to proclaim the truth to all, while the opportunity was afforded, and the minds of many were already awakened on the subject. He labored, speaking daily in a public place; namely, "disputing daily in the school of one Tyrannus" (Acts 19:9); and continued thus doing for the space of two years; "so that all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks" Acts 19:19. In this a great purpose was accomplished, worthy of the labor and the time employed.

The position and importance of the city of Ephesus made it a desirable point for the apostle to labor in for so long a time. The goddess Diana and her famous temple were here, of which Dimitrius said "whom all Asia and the world worshipeth" Acts 19:27. The Temple of Diana was considered one of "the seven wonders of the ancient world." It was built at the expense of all Asia Minor; and Barnes says, "by contributions from a great number of princes, and doubtless multitudes from all parts of the earth came to Ephesus to pay their homage to Diana." Thus by Paul's remaining here so long, opportunity was given to all in Asia to hear the word of the Lord. We should wisely exercise our judgments in improving the openings presented to us by Providence for furthering the cause of truth.

Paul was a superior worker of miracles. "And God wrought special miracles by the hands of Paul: so that from his body were brought unto the sick handkerchiefs or aprons, and the diseases departed from them, and the evil spirits went out of them." Acts 19:11, 12. Paul is not to give the impression of being some religious superman whose works display a perfect power and might of his own. Rather, God guides the hand that Paul lays on the sick to heal them. Sweat-cloths that Paul wore on his head, and aprons or even handkerchiefs that had come into contact with Paul's skin, when laid upon the patients, success ensued: illness disappeared and evil spirits came forth.

The name of the Lord is not to be taken as a charm; it is not magic, but reality. When Paul was at Ephesus, wonderful miracles were wrought by him in the name of the Lord Jesus. "Then certain of the vagabond Jews, exorcists, took upon them to call over them that had evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, We abjure you by Jesus, whom Paul preacheth. And there were seven sons of one

Sceva, a Jew, and chief of the priests, which did so. And the evil spirit answered and said: Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are ye? And the men in whom the evil spirit was, leaped on them, and overcame them; and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of the house naked and wounded. And this was known to all the Jews and Greeks also dwelling at Ephesus; and fear fell on them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified." Acts 19:13-17.

So we see that it is not some utterance of the name that is of value, but the recognition of the being and character of the Lord. There is salvation in that name. "Thou shalt call His name Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sins." His name is what He Himself is. Note the words used by Peter: "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, even in Him doth this man stand here before you whole." Acts 4:10. To stand in the name of Jesus is to stand in Jesus. The name is the person. God is the Saviour, and His name is in Christ.

Some years ago, in Germany, a young man lay upon the operating table of a hospital. A skilled surgeon stood near, a group of students round about. Presently, bending over the patient, the surgeon said: "My friend, if you wish to say anything, you now have the opportunity, but I must warn you that your words will be the last words that you will ever utter. (He had cancer of the tongue.) Think well, therefore, what you wish to say." You can readily imagine that such a statement at such a time would give pause to anyone. The young man therefore waited, apparently lost in deep thought. A deep solemnity settled over the faces of the onlookers. What words would he choose for such an occasion? The students bent eagerly forward. Some time passed, and then the lips at last parted, and at the sound of his voice you could have seen tears swim in the eyes of those present: "Thank God, Jesus Christ!"

His name is His character, His personality, and cannot be separated from Himself. Names of men and things with us are mere matters of convenience and fancy; they mean nothing. And this is doubtless one reason why people do not better understand the force of "that glorious and fearful name, the Lord thy God." To take the name of God in reality is to take the life and experience the power of it. "They that know Thy name will put their trust in Thee; for Thou, Lord, hast not forsaken them that seek Thee." God has never failed any person; we may go to Him in the name that is above every name, asking for His own sake to take away our sins, and to cleanse us, and we shall

never be disappointed. What a blessed promise! "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain." The Lord says to the one who trusts Him, "I will set him on high, because he hath known My name; he shall call upon Me and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him and honor him. With long life will I satisfy him, and show him My salvation." Ps. 91:14-16.

"Many of them also which used curious arts brought their books together, and burned them before all." Acts 19:19. Magical arts, enchantment, divination; all this was declared to be an abomination to the Lord. Deut. 18:9-12. It was done by consultation with demons professing to be the spirits of the dead. When these magicians became converted to the doctrine of Christ they quit those practices of the heathen. And this proves that the standard Christianity under the preaching of the apostles was quite different from that acknowledged in the churches of the present day; for now, under the name of "Christian Spiritualism," divination, or consulting with "familiar spirits," carried on within the church, and many of the most imminent ministers of the land are in the habit of constantly consulting those who practice witchcraft, or mediums. Not many are aware, and very few are willing to be convinced of the fact that under the working of the "mystery of iniquity," many of the practices of the old pagan worship are grafted into the Christian faith, and their influence is largely felt even to the present day. This idea of the spirits of the dead being in Heaven, becoming our guardian angels, with whom we may hold intercourse through some medium, or necromancer, is increasing in popularity, instead of its being avoided as the Lord commanded. That they will continue until the coming of the Lord, and that they are still abominable in his sight, see 2 Thess. 2:1-12; Rev. 16:12-15; 21:8.

The value of the books which were burned is variously estimated, it not been known what currency was referred to. It was \$4 million. "To what purpose was this waste?" (Matt. 26:8) Judas would have suggested that they should be sold, and the proceeds given to the poor. In modern churches they might have been put up for "a yard sale," and thus much money brought into the church treasury. But they were connected with a work of iniquity; a work which the Lord abhorred, and their possessors proved the thoroughness of their conversion by destroying them. And these converts were not ashamed to destroy the property which was valued so highly by the world. They "burned them before all." There is power in the truth

when preached in its purity, to separate men from the works and workers of iniquity.

The reason the Ephesian's conversion was real and practical is because of what Paul taught them. "Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to the adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will." Ephesians 1:4, 5.

"Good pleasure of His will" is a nice way of saying that this is what God has fun doing! He loves to save lost, hopeless, ruined human beings, young and old. If you would like to enjoy a fulfilled life, get busy being involved with Him in doing that same work.

"Predestined" is a word that means just what it says; let's not try to argue it away. It's simple, honest truth that God has long ago decided to save *every* human being; He gave every one of us a page in His Book of Life.

He has invited everyone to a place of honor at His banquet table; the place mat with your name on it is there. His banquet is not a helter-skelter fast-food kind of picnic. It's a seven-course dinner in highest honor, with all the trappings extravagantly laid out. Your presence is seriously planned. "This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires *all men* to be saved" (1 Tim. 2:3, 4).

But Jesus has had to tell the truth: many who have been invited whose names are engraved on the invitations choose not to accept (see Matt. 22:2-8). That's the only reason any human being will not be saved at last!

God has never "predestined" anyone to be lost. That would be a vicious distortion of the truth about a God of love. His divine foreknowledge must never be confused with an awful predestination to damnation.

We used to drive on one-track roads around steep precipices in the Smoky Mountains. The mountain people had a law that you must drive one way only during certain hours in order to avoid collisions. If I were on a mountaintop and saw someone breaking the law driving the wrong way at the wrong time, I would see a collision coming. Did I "predestinate" it simply because I couldn't help being in a position to foresee it? God can't help it that He has infinite foreknowledge; but if He wishes He can do something we can't do—lay that super-knowledge aside so He can love everybody with all His heart.

“Adoption as sons” has to be automatic for everyone who chooses to believe in Jesus because He became our Brother in the flesh when He became one of the human family. Jesus never brings any of us home to His Father’s house as a temporary guest; *we’re all adopted*.

And it’s useless to speculate, “Can the Father love His natural Son a wee bit more than He can love us adopted ones?” He *gave* His own Son to die our second death, all for the adopted ones. It was an exact equivalence; the only “difficult” thing in being saved eternally is learning to believe how good the good news is.

It may be a thought too big for you to begin to grasp, but you must choose to grasp it or you can never be happy: the Father “chose” you individually and personally to be “holy and without blame before Him.” That’s your true predestination! It will be true forever unless you interpose a contrary, negative, rebellious will against it.

“The sinner may resist this love, may refuse to be drawn to Christ; but if he does not resist he will be drawn to Jesus, . . . to the foot of the cross in repentance for his sins, which have caused the sufferings of God’s dear Son.”<sup>1</sup>

“Holy-and-without-blame” leads us to the story of the 144,000 who finally before the end of time stand “without fault before the throne of God” (Rev. 14:5). Someone objects: “That’s the heresy of perfectionism!” *No, it’s not*. It’s simply the natural result of a heart-appreciation for the *objective* gospel being demonstrated *subjectively* in the lives of those who believe it. The fact that it’s never happened yet for 6000 years in a *corporate body* of people does not mean it never will happen. A fourth angel finally comes “down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth [is to be] lightened with his glory.” He cries “mightily with a loud voice, ‘Babylon the great is fallen.’ . . . And I heard another voice from heaven saying, ‘Come out of her, My people’” (Rev. 18:1-4).

The “mighty” part of the message is not physical decibels; it’s the power of the finally clarified truth of “the everlasting gospel,” “the third angel’s message in verity.” God’s people will be ashamed that they didn’t “hear” that “Voice from heaven” decades, now centuries, before. It had sounded, only to be greeted by deaf ears.

The Ephesians were taught by Paul that “God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” John 3:16.

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 27.

This does not mean to imply that Christ was arbitrarily sent by the Father. The Father and the Son are one, and therefore the love of God and the love of Christ are the same. The Father did not send the Son as one would send another on an unpleasant errand; neither did the Son go of Himself, in order to appease the wrath of God, as if His wounded feelings demanded a sacrifice. The Son is in the Father, and the Father is in the Son (John 14:10), and therefore the sacrifice of one is the sacrifice of the other. "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself." 2 Cor. 5:19.

It is even plainly stated that God gave Himself for man. To the elders of the church at Ephesus, the Apostle Paul said to the elders of the church: "The Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood." Acts 20:28. How could He shed His blood for man? we ask. Only God knows, and He cannot explain it to men, for no human mind could understand it. Only Divinity can comprehend Divinity. The death of Divinity for the life of humanity, is "the mystery of God."

When A. J. Gordon was pastor of a church in Boston, he met a young boy in front of the sanctuary carrying a rusty cage in which several birds fluttered nervously. Gordon inquired, "Son, where did you get those birds?" The boy replied, "I trapped them out in the field." "What are you going to do with them?" "I'm going to play with them, and then I guess I'll just feed them to an old cat we have at home." When Gordon offered to buy them, the lad exclaimed, "Mister, you don't want them, they're just little old wild birds and can't sing very well." Gordon replied, "I'll give you \$2 for the cage and the birds." "Okay, it's a deal, but you're making a bad bargain." The exchange was made and the boy went away whistling, happy with his shiny coins. Gordon walked around to the back of the church property, opened the door of the small wire coop, and let the struggling creatures soar into the blue. That Sabbath he took the empty cage into the pulpit and used it to illustrate his sermon about Christ's coming to seek and to save the lost—paying for them with His own precious blood. "That boy told me the birds were not songsters," said Gordon, "but when I released them and they winged their way heavenward, it seemed to me they were singing, 'Redeemed, redeemed, redeemed!'" You and I have been held captive to sin, but Christ has purchased our pardon and set us at liberty. When a person has this life-changing experience, he will want to sing, "Redeemed, redeemed, redeemed! By the blood of the Lamb."

The Lord says to man, "I, even I, am He that blotteth out thy transgressions for Mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins." Isa. 43:25. There was nothing about man that was of any value, nevertheless God loved him, and love always clothes the object of affection with the qualities that it delights in. Moreover love can never be satisfied except with the possession of its object. We often hear about one who loves another so much that it seems as though he could not live without the loved one; but God actually had such love. He could not live without man, so great was His love, and so He died for him. "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us!"

"The Lord hath appeared of old unto Me, saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee." Jer. 31:3. That is love that will not easily be repulsed. "I have spread out My hands all the day unto a rebellious people." Isa. 65:2. Though often rejected, He still woos sinful men, seeking to draw them to Himself. There is a void in the heart of God that can be filled only with the love of man. The lover in fancy clothes the object of his affection with all charms and graces, but the Lord does so really to His people, for whom He gave Himself. His love will transform them, and clothe them with the beauty of His own righteousness. "So shall the King greatly desire thy beauty." Ps. 45:11. "He will save, He will rejoice over thee with joy; He will rest in His love, He will joy over thee with singing." Zeph. 3:17.

Paul in his address to the elders of the church at Ephesus, said: "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them." Acts 20:28-30. From this we know that very early in the history of the Christian church, men who were pastors in the church began to teach heresies.

The inspired apostles knew that there would be not only imperfect, erring members in the church, but also false teachers, who, like Judas, would deny the Lord that bought them. Among the elders of the church, there were to arise unprincipled men who would bring in "damnable heresies." We need not be surprised, therefore, when we find the professed church, soon after the days of the apostles, largely filled with the abominations of heathendom.



Even in the days of the apostles, while their straight testimony was being delivered, this spirit of corruption crept into the church. To the Thessalonians Paul wrote that long before Christ's second advent there would come a "falling away," and that the "man of sin" would be revealed, sitting in the temple of God, virtually professing to be God, and opposing all that pertains to God and his true worship, and then he added that "the mystery of iniquity doth already work." 2 Thess. 2:3-7. Paul knew that even in the churches of his own planting there were elements of corruption that would eventually contaminate the whole body.

Like a brilliant star shining in a dark sky, the story of the early church thrills hearts in all ages. The Good News triumphed everywhere. Hard, proud, world-loving hearts were subdued by its power. There was no need to urge the believers to work for their friends and neighbors. The love of Christ constrained them. They would not resist. Each saw in his brother a reflection of the beauty of Christ. Hearts were bound together as with a golden chain.

But gradually there came a change. Many lost that first love. Jesus said to the church at Ephesus: "Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love." Rev. 2:4. They began to forget what it cost the Lord to save them. Mist and clouds covered the cross, obscuring its radiance. The church lost the very idea of what Christ's love means.

Love had been the power of the gospel. Just as an engine sputters and dies when the fuel is gone, so the soul-saving ministry of the early believers stopped when they left their first love.

The word John uses is *agape*, which is like sunshine in that it has within it all the colors of gospel truth. This love, which the early church "left," was new to the ancient world. It was something very unearthly which came from heaven.

The pagan Greeks thought they had discovered what love is when the beautiful Alcestis was willing to die for "a good man," her noble and handsome lover, Admetus. But the apostles said, No, that is not the real thing: "God shows His *agape* for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:7, 8, RSV). This love for enemies turned the ancient world upside down (see Acts 17:6).

Leaving that first *agape* prepared the way for the corruption of Christianity. It was like substituting a candle for sunlight, the beginning of the "falling away" foretold by Paul (2 Thessalonians 2:3-

7). What can be more important than finding that which was left by the early church?

John was the father of an 8-year-old boy. John was very fortunate during those times, because he had a job. John loved his son very much. He was the apple of his eye. John's son was a normal little boy who constantly wanted to go to work with his father. John decided he would take his boy to work with him one day. John was bridge conductor across the Mississippi River. John was in charge of raising and lowering the bridge so that boats could get through and trains could pass. John's son was so amazed at the gears and all the things that went along with his father's job. They had brought their lunch to work with them that day and decided to eat their lunch on the bank of the river. John and his son were eating lunch and John had realized that in about 3 minutes the Memphis *Belle* carrying 300 passengers was getting ready to cross the bridge, but the bridge was not lowered. John didn't want to alarm his son so he patted him on the shoulder and told him to sit right there and he would be right back. John hustled up the stairs, he grabbed the lever to lower the bridge when he realized that somehow his son had climbed to the bridge and had fallen in between the gears of the bridge. John could hear the train coming carrying the 300 passengers. In his mind he started going over ways he could get his son from the gears and still lower the bridge, but he knew he had to make a choice. John lowered the bridge just in time for the train to pass crushing his son in between the gears. John looked at the train passing by and saw a man reading his newspaper a woman drinking her tea and another talking to his wife. John screamed at the top of his lungs "Hey, Don't you know what I've just done for you!" They didn't hear him so he screamed again, "Hey, Don't you know what I've just done for you!" But again they just went along with their lives not ever realizing what John had done for them.

God is asking us the same question "Don't you know what I've done for you. I sent my only son to this earth for you. He died a terrible death so that you could spend eternity with me. Why are you going on with your busy meaningless live not serving me, and some of you have not even accepted me as your savior. I love you so much.