

# On Being a Successful Church

## AN EXPOSITION OF REVELATION 2:1-7

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### Introduction

Revelation 2:1-7 describes a local church that had a lot in common with many churches today. The text is a message from Christ to the church at Ephesus, a major city in first-century Asia Minor. In many ways the church could be considered quite successful, yet Christ identified a significant flaw in its spiritual condition. Let's examine the church's successes and then contrast them with its failure.

### The Church's Successes

John Walvoord summarizes Christ's assessment of the successes of the Ephesian church:

He mentions their labor or toil, their patience or steadfastness, their abhorrence of those who were evil, and their ready detection of false teachers who claimed to be apostles but who were not. These remarkable characteristics are sorely needed in the church today where too often there is failure to serve the Lord patiently, and the tendency is to compromise both with moral and theological evil. The Ephesian church is therefore commended for abhorring that which is morally bad as well as that which is theologically in error. (55)

The church at Ephesus succeeded in four ways:

#### *It served tirelessly.*

"I know your works, your labor [. . .] and you have [. . .] labored for My name's sake and have not become weary" (vv 2, 3).

According to Alan Johnson, "The Ephesian Christians did not lack serious and sustained activity, even to the point of suffering for Christ's name" (12: 433). Similarly, our church is abuzz with activities of all kinds. But, as Christ pointed out to the Ephesians, constant spiritual busyness does not guarantee that a church is following His will.

#### *It persevered through adversity.*

"I know [. . .] your patience [. . .]; and you have persevered and have patience, [. . .] and have not become weary" (vv 2, 3).

Not only did the Ephesian church serve faithfully, it did so in the midst of adverse circumstances. Its members endured the difficulties of living for Christ. Walvoord explains: "In contrast to the fact that they could not bear those who were evil, he commends them for continuing to bear their proper burdens, repeating again the fact that they have patience, literally, that they 'keep on having patience' [. . .]. Likewise it is noted that their labor is motivated as work 'for my name's sake' and that they have not fainted or grown weary" (55).

Our church has persevered through some difficult times, and has continued to do God's work despite opposition. Yet, this is not a complete measure of the spiritual condition of the church.

***It remained pure in a wicked environment.***

“I know [ . . . ] that you cannot bear those who are evil. [ . . . ] But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate” (vv 2, 6).

The church at Ephesus went a step further: It kept itself pure in spite of being immersed in an immoral society. This fact was not overlooked by the Lord, as Johnson observes: “Christ also knows that [ . . . ] the Ephesians [ . . . ] ‘cannot tolerate wicked men’” (12: 433). Likewise, our church upholds standards of holiness and moral decency. However, this feature is insufficient as a distinctive mark of the church.

***It rejected doctrinal error.***

“And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars [ . . . ]” (v 2).

The Ephesian church was theologically orthodox. According to Johnson, “Christ also knows that doctrinal discrimination accompanies the toil and patience of the Ephesians.” They have rejected “false brethren who ‘claim to be apostles but are not’” (12: 433).

We face similar heresies in our contemporary theological landscape. Many cults and some evangelical churches claim to be apostolic in character. Our church rejects this false belief. Yet, even this is not a true test of ecclesiastical fidelity.

**The Church’s Failure**

***It forsook its former devotion to the Lord.***

“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” (vv 4-5).

The church at Ephesus was commended for possessing these four positive traits, yet it failed on the more important count of love. Johnson comments: “The speaker’s verdict shows [ . . . ] that however much had been gained at Ephesus by resisting the false apostles, not all was well there. They had ‘forsaken,’ or ‘let go’ (*aphiemi*), their ‘first love.’ This was a serious defect. If uncorrected, it would result in their loss of light bearing (v.5)” (12: 434).

I fear that, despite persistent service and separation from moral and theological error, our church may be in the same condition as the church at Ephesus. We must ask, then, what steps can be taken to remedy this problem. Johnson answers this question:

The imperatives are instructive: “Remember. . . . Repent . . . do.” The Ephesians are called on to reflect on their earlier works of fervent love [ . . . ], to look in comparison at the present situation, to ponder how far they have fallen from their former devotion and enthusiasm, to humbly “repent” [ . . . ] before God, and to do the former works motivated by love. These imperatives are all part of a single action designed to keep the Ephesians from the judgment of Christ, which would effectively remove them as his representatives in the world. (12: 434).

## **Conclusion**

Let us endeavor to maintain or regain the fervor of our love for Christ, His Word, and His church. The lyrics of the song “First Love,” sung by Avalon, are a fitting prayer: “Tell me when did I lose my first love? / Where did the fire and passion go? / Burn in me Your holy fire / Give me back my lost desire / And restore in me the love I felt for You.”

## **Works Cited**

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