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PKBedwell@hotmail.com

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EPHESUS – SERIES ONE

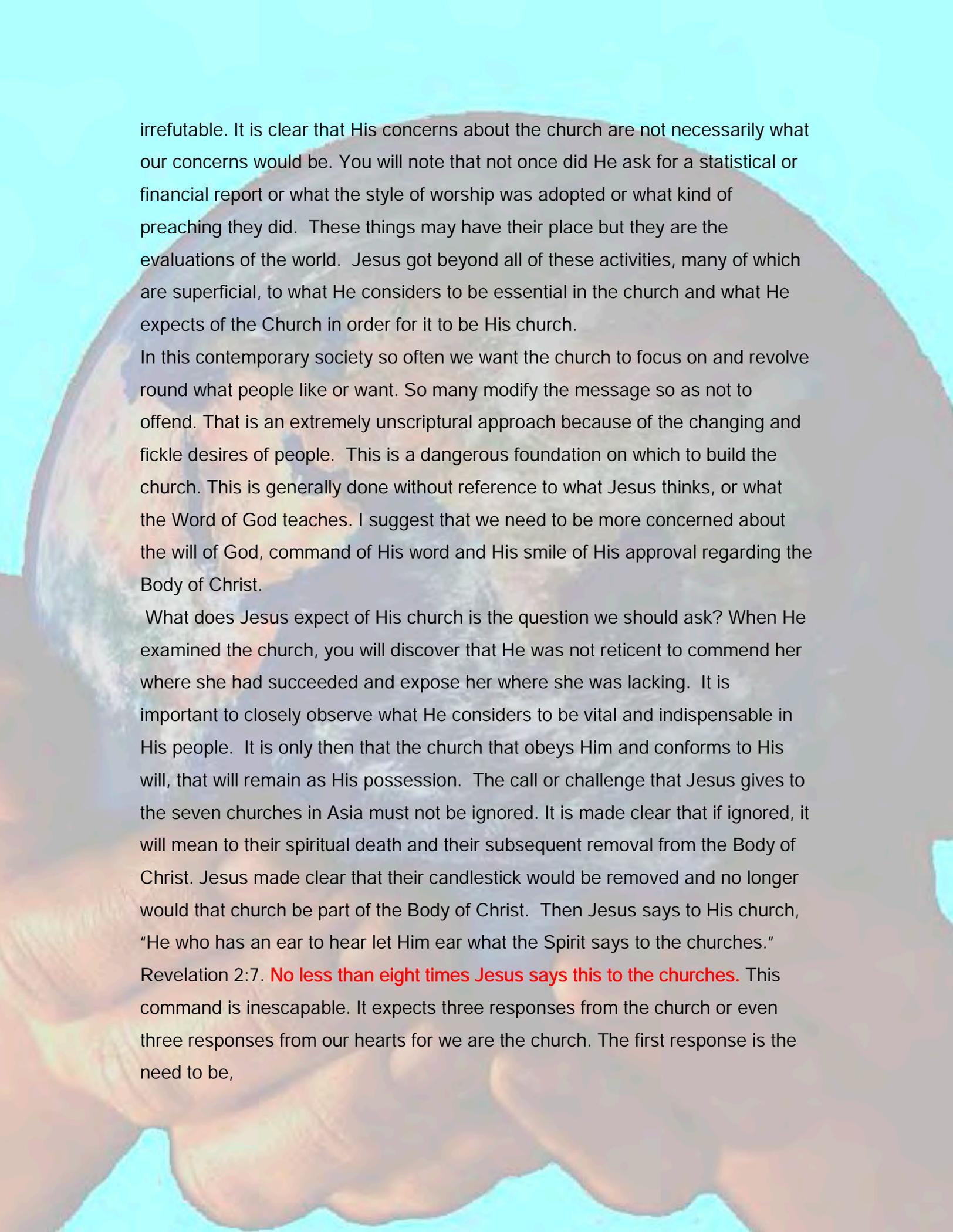
“WHAT JESUS THINKS OF THE CHURCH”

ZEALOUS BUT LOVELESS

Scripture Reading – Revelation 2:1-7

Introduction

I have a book in my library a book by John Stott entitled “What Jesus thinks of His church.” It is a thought provoking title. It struck me that His is the opinion that counts, for He is the head of his church and therefore it is His evaluation of the condition His church that is vital. What also struck me is that His assessment of what the church is all about is something that needs to be brought to our attention. His priorities are non-debatable. His assessment of His church is



irrefutable. It is clear that His concerns about the church are not necessarily what our concerns would be. You will note that not once did He ask for a statistical or financial report or what the style of worship was adopted or what kind of preaching they did. These things may have their place but they are the evaluations of the world. Jesus got beyond all of these activities, many of which are superficial, to what He considers to be essential in the church and what He expects of the Church in order for it to be His church.

In this contemporary society so often we want the church to focus on and revolve round what people like or want. So many modify the message so as not to offend. That is an extremely unscriptural approach because of the changing and fickle desires of people. This is a dangerous foundation on which to build the church. This is generally done without reference to what Jesus thinks, or what the Word of God teaches. I suggest that we need to be more concerned about the will of God, command of His word and His smile of His approval regarding the Body of Christ.

What does Jesus expect of His church is the question we should ask? When He examined the church, you will discover that He was not reticent to commend her where she had succeeded and expose her where she was lacking. It is important to closely observe what He considers to be vital and indispensable in His people. It is only then that the church that obeys Him and conforms to His will, that will remain as His possession. The call or challenge that Jesus gives to the seven churches in Asia must not be ignored. It is made clear that if ignored, it will mean to their spiritual death and their subsequent removal from the Body of Christ. Jesus made clear that their candlestick would be removed and no longer would that church be part of the Body of Christ. Then Jesus says to His church, "He who has an ear to hear let Him ear what the Spirit says to the churches." Revelation 2:7. **No less than eight times Jesus says this to the churches.** This command is inescapable. It expects three responses from the church or even three responses from our hearts for we are the church. The first response is the need to be,

a. **Open to the voice of the Spirit. Revelation 2:7. "He who has an ear to hear let him hear."** It is also a call for,

b. **A sensitivity to the voice of the Spirit. Revelation 2:7. This sensitivity is expressed in the words "...let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."** It is a challenge to,

c. **Obedience to the voice of the Spirit. Revelation 2:7. The command which is given to the churches implies the immediate need for obedience.** But is what the Spirit said to the churches so long ago really relevant for our day? Does it apply to and me. It is James Stewart who points out that "John wrote to the seven churches in Asia, not because there were only seven (for actually there were far more), not because these seven lay geographically in a circle, but because the number seven is symbolical – it is the number signifying perfection or totality. - so that in writing to these seven churches, he writes to the Body of the Church, the church universal, to all congregations of Christian people scattered everywhere throughout the world – The seven churches represent the church universal. We are ourselves are part of this. This message is a message with our personal address on it. What he says to the churches He is saying to us. The church in Ephesus is the only church in the New Testament to which two apostles wrote or addressed letters. The Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus which was at that time the climactic church or the church at the height of its health. John Phillips tells "Of all the truths revealed through Paul, none excel the truths revealed in the letter to the Ephesians. There are two notable prayers in this letter. In the first, Paul prays that they might have more light and in the second he prays that they might have more love." The letter to the Ephesian church speaks more about love than any another letter he wrote, excepting his first letter to the Corinthians. But when John wrote to Ephesus it had deteriorated from the climactic church to the crisis church of the day." Revelation 2:4. (Phillips). The words of Jesus are serious and meant to be convicting. "I hold this against you: you have forsaken your first love." John Phillips commented, "The furnace was still there, but fire had gone out. There was still a measure of warmth, but the

coals no longer had a bright, red luster; that had merely a dull and dying glow." This was Christ's assessment of this church. The body of believers at Ephesus was part of the total church of which He is the head. In the first chapter verse 16, John says of Jesus that in His right Hand He held the seven stars – the symbol of the seven churches. This means the total church which is the Body of Christ. The word hold denotes a firm grip. He holds His church with a firm grip in His Hand. Here is the picture of the Sovereign Lord holding the seven stars in His right Hand, asserting his sovereign control. "He not only has sovereign control but manifests His Sovereign Presence." (Leith Samuel Keswick 1963 p.45) John tells us that He is the one who walks among the seven churches. This means the total church, the Body of Christ, each individual. It is to every member of His church that He says, "He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Even if we don't like what He is saying. Even if His message is unpalatable, even if it offends us, the Divine directive is unshakably firm "let Him hear what the Spirit says and let him obey and let him repent. It is important to recognize that Jesus commends the church at Ephesus on

1. THEIR ACTIVITY AND ENERGY. Revelation 2:2-3.

"I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance." Each letter that is written to the seven churches is introduced with the words "I KNOW." It refers to the absolute knowledge of the sovereign Lord, who stands in the midst of His churches with eyes like blazing fire. He knows every sham, all hypocrisy, and all ulterior motives behind apparent noble deeds. So when the Son of God says to the church "I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance," you will know that it is commendation indeed. Now what is it that Jesus commends the church on? Firstly He says,

a. "I know your deeds." Revelation 2:2. Barclay tells us that a more correct translation would be "I know your works, by that I mean your labor and your patience." Both labor and patience are magnificent qualities in the service of Christ. The word for labor means "toil which exhausts." Diligent labor or according Archbishop R.C. Trench stresses the idea of "labor unto weariness."

Or "strenuous and exhausting labor. It is not simply work but hard work. This church was giving itself totally or beyond what was expected of her to the work of Jesus Christ. This had not passed unnoticed by the Lord Jesus Christ and commends her on it. "I know your deeds. I know the exhaustion that comes from hard work. Yet I hold this against you. You have forsaken your first love." Revelation. 2:4. Here we are seeing what Jesus considers to be of top priority in His church. You see, active energy is not necessarily the evidence of aggressive spirituality. It may be commendable. It may be impressive, and even Jesus highlighted it, but at times it can become a camouflage of a sad deficiency in the spiritual life of the church and the Christian. This was true of the church at Ephesus. They were sincerely and conscientiously diligent in their labor for Christ. But it was not enough. Jesus, you recall, was visiting the home of Mary and Martha. Mary sat at the feet of Jesus listening to what He had to say, while Martha was busy preparing the meal. The scripture says she was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She became irritable and frustrated. She said "Lord don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself. Tell her to help me. Jesus said to her, "Martha! Martha! "You are worried and bothered about providing so many things. Only a few things are really needed, perhaps only one. Mary has chosen the best part and you must not tear it away from her." Luke 10:42. It was not that the activity and energy expended by Martha was wrong. It was that her priorities were out of focus. While Martha gave attention to things, Mary gave her attention to a person and that person was the Lord Jesus Christ. That was one of the problems at Ephesus. It was busy about many things but they had lost their first love for the Lord Jesus Christ. Secondly He also says,

b. I Know your Determination. Revelation 2:2-3. "I know your perseverance."

Jesus elaborates on this in verse 3. "You have persevered and endured hardships for my name and have not grown weary." The word perseverance has the central idea of patience and one has pointed out (Barclay) that it is "not the patience which sits down and passively bears things, the patience which allows a

tide of troubles to sweep over its bowed head. The word would be better translated triumphant fortitude – victorious – courage. Someone once said who was suffering terribly “suffering colors life doesn’t it? Back came the reply, “Yes but I propose to choose the color.” When Beethoven’s terrible deafness descended upon him, blotting out the world of beautiful sounds which to a musician is everything. He said, “I will take life by the throat.” What a magnificent response to the cruel deal that life handed out to him. While it appeared that life had taken Him by the throat, he was determined to turn the tables and take life by the throat. That is triumphant fortitude.

William Barclay’s father went to see a girl who had a long illness and who was quite helpless. She would never walk again and all that she had to look forward to was a slow long lingering death. He took with him a little book of Christian comfort, a book radiant with certainty and joy. He gave to her saying “I thought that you might like to have this book. A book that would inspire her and give her encouragement. She took it and looked at it and smiled. She paused a moment and said shyly – I wrote it. Barclay went on to say that this is NOT simply the patience which accepts and submits, although such acceptance and submission are a necessary beginning. This kind of patience has been called, “masculine constancy under trial.” It is this triumphant fortitude which can transform suffering into glory. Is this not what Jesus did with the cross? That which was the instrument of shame, degradation and humiliation, Jesus took and transformed it into power, and triumph. By the touch of His power He turned the object of shame into object of radiant glory and the light of hope and salvation to the world. The object of defeat became the object of victory. Jesus commends the church at Ephesus on her triumphant fortitude. “I know your perseverance” This fortitude of the church at Ephesus was epitomized in her determination. She was an example in perseverance. Not only does Jesus commend her activity and energy, but also her

2. FIDILETY AND ORTHODOXY. Revelation 2:2-3.

"I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be Apostles but are not, and found them false." Jesus commended the church on two principles to which they firmly held. The first is,

a. Their Fidelity to the Purity of the Church. The church was committed to this principle. It had been faithful to ensure and preserve the holiness of the church by rejecting the infiltration of wicked men and their influence into the leadership responsibilities of the church at Ephesus. Jesus said that they had not "tolerated wicked men who were intent on defiling the church." This does not mean that they rejected sinners. They rejected the wickedness of men. They did not tolerate sin or impurity in the church, and would not tolerate those who sought to bring it in. Ephesus was a wicked city which pervaded the society, and they refused to let wicked men corrupt the church. This has to do with a Christian standard of the gospel being maintained in the membership and leadership in the Body Christ. It had to do with individuals who are really concerned about the welfare of the church. Vance Havner said that the church at Ephesus knew that they were as "sheep among wolves, but they were also on guard against wolves among the sheep." One has pointed out that "no man who is unscrupulous in business, impure in his conversation, known as living in immorality, habitually intoxicated, given to fits of rage, convicted of lying would have lasted in the Ephesian fellowship." The high standards of discipline were maintained in order for the church to have credibility in the world of sin. Young Timothy who was stationed at Ephesus received two letters from Paul who set down the standards for leadership in the church of Jesus Christ. Leith Samuel observed in his own words "I wonder how many church officers to day would have to resign if the standards of the Pastoral Epistles were enforced; how many deacons would feel "I can't make it, "This is beyond me!" How many ministers would feel, "Sorry: I'm disqualified." The New Testament is extremely stringent about the purity of the character of the church. The holiness of the church was bought at infinite cost. Paul writes that "Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her to make her holy cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present

her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any blemish, but holy and blameless." If Christ went to the extreme of an agonizing humiliating death on the Cross to purify His church, and if He was willing to become sin that the church might become the righteousness of God, then it is the unavoidable responsibility of the church to guard that purity and to project the genuine holiness of God to our world. More than anything we are to shine as lights in the darkness. That is the church's responsibility and that is her task. To do this the church must be pure and holy. Jesus commended the church at Ephesus to their fidelity to the purity of the church. But he also commends them on their

b. Fidelity to the Orthodoxy or teaching of the Church. Revelation 2:2-3. Jesus focuses on this vital attitude at Ephesus. Paul had warned the elders of the church that the invasion of these false prophets would take place. On one occasion in his charge to them he said "I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from your own selves will arise men speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them... And now they had come (Stott. P. 25) False prophets were spreading their destructive teaching among the people. In verse 6 Jesus said "You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." These people were seeking to corrupt the people of God. **These people were known as Antinomians . They taught that the Christian is freed from the law, and that he can do exactly what he pleases and they taught that that it did not matter how you behaved so long as you believed sound evangelical doctrine"** They perverted the teaching of Paul and turned Christian liberty into license.(Barclay P27). They were people who indulged in idol feasts and the fornication that went so often with these feasts." (Leith Samuel P.46 Keswick 1963.) Jesus said "You have tested those who claim to be Apostles, but are not and found them false." The church had been visited by self-styled and even self appointed apostles. At first they listened to them, and then they tested the spirits to see if they be of God. The conclusion of the church was that they were not, and they rejected the teaching of these Nicolaitans. Jesus noticed this and commended them on their faithfulness to the truth. **One wrote**

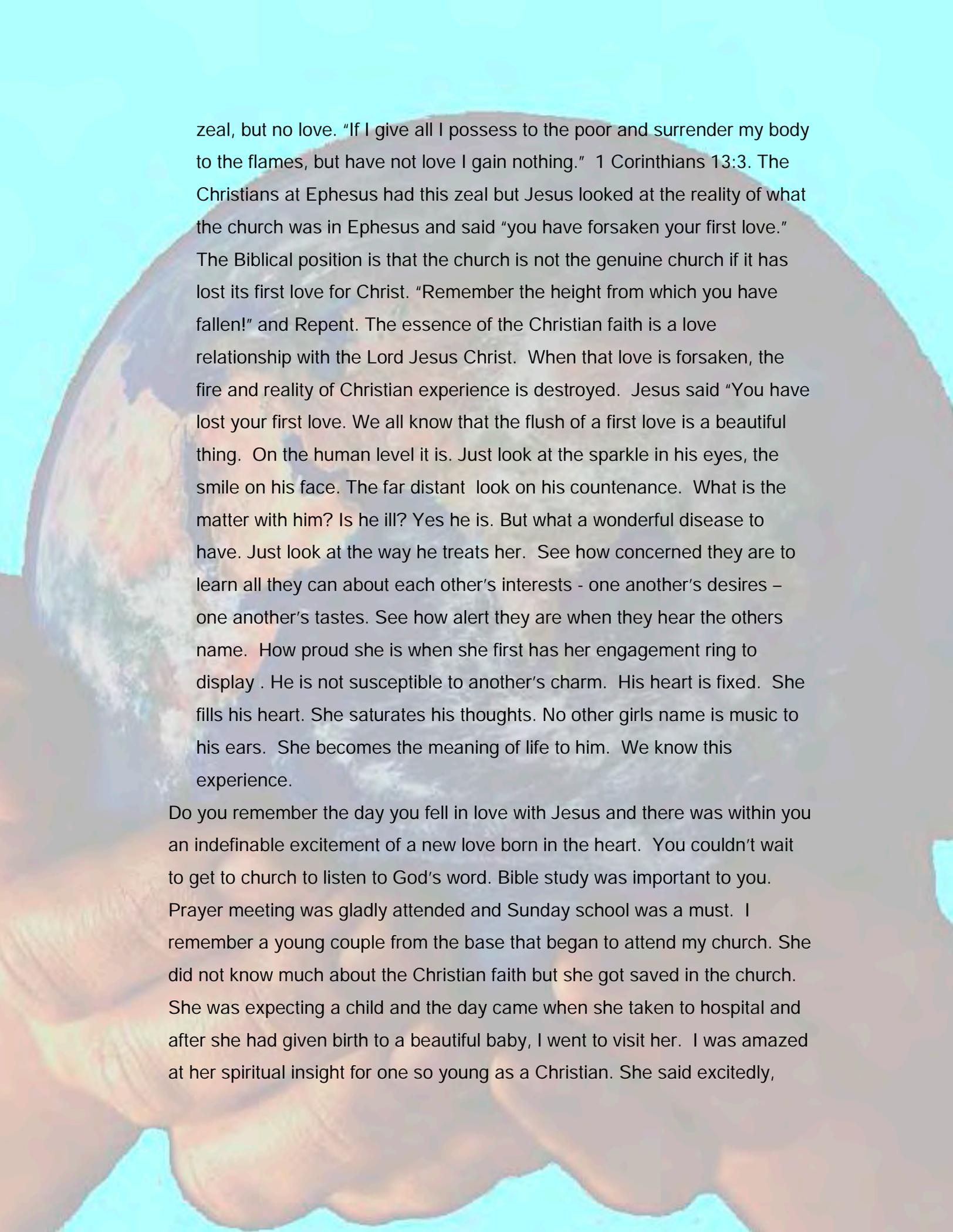
well that "a deposit of faith had been entrusted to this company of believers not for them to add to, but for them to adhere to.." (Leith Samuel) This deposit of faith was not to be changed. It was not to be expanded but obeyed. And Jesus commended them for it. They were faithful to the orthodoxy and teaching of the Church. Furthermore not only do we see their fidelity and orthodoxy at Ephesus, but also their

3. DEFFICIENCY AND APOSTOSY. Revelation 2:4-5.

The solemn words of Jesus in verses 4-5 indicate that all was not well in the Church at Ephesus. "I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember from where you have fallen! Repent and do the first things."

"Do you mean to say that we can have energized activity. Perform well in the church. Could it be that fidelity to the purity of the church is still insufficient in the eyes of Christ? "Does it mean all of this?" It certainly does mean that. All of this is based on human energy and determination. It is Christianity on the horizontal level. Study all of this and you will discover that a love for God may not be genuine in all of these activities as commendable as they are. To commit oneself to the church is not the same as commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ. To hate error or evil is not necessarily the same as love for Christ. Activity, service, busyness, duty great plans are no substitute for love for Christ. But this is what happened in the church at Ephesus. That is why "Jesus said, "I hold it against you..... you have fallen." There are basically two things that Jesus underlines in His complaint against this church. Firstly He points out that there was,

- a. **Something Lost. Revelation 2:4. Jesus said, "You have forsaken your first love." This means a lost relationship.** It literally means that church had abandoned its first love. Yet outwardly the church continued as though nothing had happened. The pious religious face was there. The spectator would say what a great church Ephesus is. So devoted – so active – so orthodox – so holy. But Jesus was not deceived by all this parade of piety nor the merit points of their activity. Paul writing to the Corinthian church told us that it possible for the church to have plenty of



zeal, but no love. "If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love I gain nothing." 1 Corinthians 13:3. The Christians at Ephesus had this zeal but Jesus looked at the reality of what the church was in Ephesus and said "you have forsaken your first love." The Biblical position is that the church is not the genuine church if it has lost its first love for Christ. "Remember the height from which you have fallen!" and Repent. The essence of the Christian faith is a love relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. When that love is forsaken, the fire and reality of Christian experience is destroyed. Jesus said "You have lost your first love. We all know that the flush of a first love is a beautiful thing. On the human level it is. Just look at the sparkle in his eyes, the smile on his face. The far distant look on his countenance. What is the matter with him? Is he ill? Yes he is. But what a wonderful disease to have. Just look at the way he treats her. See how concerned they are to learn all they can about each other's interests - one another's desires - one another's tastes. See how alert they are when they hear the others name. How proud she is when she first has her engagement ring to display. He is not susceptible to another's charm. His heart is fixed. She fills his heart. She saturates his thoughts. No other girls name is music to his ears. She becomes the meaning of life to him. We know this experience.

Do you remember the day you fell in love with Jesus and there was within you an indefinable excitement of a new love born in the heart. You couldn't wait to get to church to listen to God's word. Bible study was important to you. Prayer meeting was gladly attended and Sunday school was a must. I remember a young couple from the base that began to attend my church. She did not know much about the Christian faith but she got saved in the church. She was expecting a child and the day came when she taken to hospital and after she had given birth to a beautiful baby, I went to visit her. I was amazed at her spiritual insight for one so young as a Christian. She said excitedly,

"Pastor I hope that I will get out of here before the weekend, because I can't wait to get into church." It was the joy of someone in love with the Lord Jesus Christ. That is what love does. It is a love that is focused on the Lord Jesus Christ. Do you still have that fresh energetic passionate love for Him? This kind of love is exciting and wonderful. But the issue is not how it was in the first flush of those beginning days with Jesus. The question is "how is it with your love now?" Is your love for Him still first priority or has it been forsaken with the passage of time, and in the busyness of life? Something was lost in the Church at Ephesus. And because it was, Jesus went on to strongly point out, that not only was something lost but,

b. Something was needed. Revelation 2:4-5. What was needed was a time of restoration and returning to a first love for the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus underlines the two main steps in that process. The first is,

i. Reflection. Revelation 2:5. "Remember the height from which you have fallen." The important word here is "REMEMBER." The challenge is significant. Reflect on the place from which you have fallen. Look back on what your love once was. Remember its fire and passion for the Lord Jesus Christ. Remember its motivating power to service. Remember its living energy. Remember the joy of its presence. Remember the urgency in service for Him. What is needed is to reflect on what the condition of your love for Jesus is today. The second step here is

ii. Repentance. Revelation 2:5. Repent is in the Aorist tense in the Greek and it means a decisive break with evil. Is it possible that you have fallen and you may resolve to admit it. But Jesus does not say admit it. (John Stott) Jesus does not advocate that these Christians stimulate or create an emotional experience. He does not urge them to feel bad about their sins. It is not what they feel about them, so much as what they do about them. They must not wait till they feel sorry. The fact is they had sinned and must resolutely and completely turn from them. That is why He says repent. Recognize the seriousness of this. Think about the fact that at one time your love for Jesus rose in grateful praise and

intense passion to Him. Where is it now? Realize the awfulness of that fall from love. Recognize it as sin. Confess it as sin. Turn from it as sin. Repent! Activity is no substitute for love. Service is no substitute for love. Duty is no substitute for love. They had lost their love. They had sinned and the message from the living Christ was remember the height from which they have fallen. Repent! It was urgent that they do this, for Jesus said if you do not repent, "I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place." One has said that if there is no love there can be no light. "The church can appear to go on." It can look as though it is healthy and aggressive. But it is all for nothing if love for Christ is lacking. The Christian can give the impression that love is still predominant in his life, but there will be no inner power, joy and no light. The candlestick will be removed. The clear message for the Church in Ephesus is Repent! But the church is also commanded to do the things they had done first. (Rev. 2:5) Having forsaken their first love they must go back to it. "By the grace of God it is in their power to do so." (Stott P. 32)

Conclusion

John Stott gets it right when he says, "They have fallen from the heights of love; let them take them by storm again. They have lost what they once had; they must recapture it." The way back starts with repentance. Repent and come back and do the first things. As it we sit in presence of God, I ask the crucial question "Is Jesus your first love?" Your profession of faith is like ashes on a rusty altar if He is not - and your commitment to an evangelical faith is meaningless if He is not. That you profess to know the Word of does not help if He is not. If He was standing face to face with you this morning, could you honestly look into His eyes and say "Jesus you are my first love" for that is all that matters. He knows the truth. These are moments that we are alone with him, and so there is only room for honesty, transparency and reality. The message of Jesus to each of us is clear IF "You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first." Revelation 2:4-5.

