

The Ephesian Struggle

In **Acts 19**, Paul preached in Ephesus for more than two years. He had great success, not only in Ephesus, but the surrounding region (**Acts 19:10**). Even some of the Jews tried to get in on the action and started trying to cast out demons in the name of Jesus. But the demons attacked the sons of Sceva leaving no doubt that Paul and his teaching were the real deal; everything else was merely a mediocre copy (**Acts 19:11-16**). Many believed, confessed their sinful practices, and repented, casting the tools of their magical trades into the fire. These were Christians on fire for the Lord. They didn't want anything to separate them from Him.

However, by **Revelation 2:1-7** (some would suggest that was a mere 15 years, others claim it is about 40), the Ephesian church faced a struggle. But it is an odd struggle. In fact, I think for us it is hard to pin down. They kept on working hard in the face of opposition. They refused to listen to just anyone of seeming authority. They made sure what was taught was really from God. They did not grow weary in doing good even though they had to bear with opposition to the good they were doing. And they bore up for the sake of Jesus' name, not for their own sakes. They opposed false teachers and despised the work that came from their teaching just as God does.

From all outward appearances, the church at Ephesus was faithful, sound, and strong. Yet, Jesus warned that He was close to removing their lampstand. I struggle with that. Sure, I can name their problem. They had left their first love (**Revelation 2:4**). But I struggle to define exactly what that means. I don't think I'm the only one. I believe the reason I struggle so much with this problem is because my idea of a strong congregation equals the rest of the letter about Ephesus. When a congregation today acts like Ephesus did, I believe they have made it. And so, I simply can't fathom the problem. That in itself is a problem.

Something wasn't working. And Jesus claimed it had to do with love. They had left their first love. Or as the ESV translates it, they had left the love they had at first. This is similar to the rebuke God gave Judah through Jeremiah in **Jeremiah 2:2-3**. There was a time when Judah followed God as a bride would a husband. The service Judah rendered was from love and devotion to God Himself. But their devotion changed. It moved from devotion to God, to devotion to their own acts of devotion. This is the difference between relationship and ritual. Certainly, they were going to follow the rules, but that is all. Sadly, **Jeremiah 2:4-8** demonstrated where this inevitably leads. Once religion becomes rule keeping, it will shortly become rule debating. Rule debating becomes rule discarding. The Jews moved from relationship to ritual to rebellion. The Ephesians would do the same if they did not repent.

I do not fear misunderstanding the Ephesian struggle, but repeating it. Recently, I saw a chart that helped me define the Ephesian struggle. I fear that I have often been smack in the middle of the same struggle. The chart contrasts personalized Christianity and a depersonalized one. That fits right into the Ephesian struggle. The Ephesians had dedication to the law, but lacked devotion to the Lord. They no longer followed Jesus as a bride, but had removed the Person from their religion. Therefore they had form, but no foundation.

Consider the chart. I have modified it to make the point more clear and be a little more biblically accurate. Do you see the same connection to Ephesus and much of modern Christianity that I see?

	Depersonalized Christianity	Personalized Christianity
<i>Faith</i>	Accepting contractual propositions	Committing one's self to a person
<i>Christian Life</i>	Keeping contractual obligations	Pleasing the Lord, a Person
<i>Sin</i>	Violating a contract rule	Betraying a relationship
<i>Repentance</i>	Change based on contractual obligations	Change based on sorrow for personal betrayal
<i>Forgiveness</i>	Canceling contractual consequences	Renewing and restoring fellowship
<i>Adapted and modified from James Sire, <u>The Universe Next Door</u>, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, 2009, p. 135.</i>		

Depersonalized Christianity is very much concerned with rules and teaching. It continues to maintain the faith. But surely we can see that such Christianity is dead orthodoxy. Mature Christianity must have both sides of this chart. Yes, there are rules, but the rules serve the relationship. If we want to avoid the pitfall of the Jews in **Jeremiah 2** and the church in Ephesus, we must keep our Christianity personal. We must follow Jesus as a bride, not simply try

to impress Him with our rule-keeping. (Doesn't this call to mind the contrast of Simon the Pharisee and the sinful woman of **Luke 7:36-50**?)

Certainly, we must not fall prey to the meaningless mantras of "preach the Man, not the plan" and "declare the Christ, not the church." But we must not run headlong into the opposite error of "preach the plan, not the Man" and "declare the church, not the Christ."