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### **III. THE ORIGIN OF THE CHURCH'S DEGRADATION**

Although the church in Ephesus had so many virtues, it was degraded because it had left its first love. In verse 4 the Lord said, "But I have this against you, that you have left your first love." The Greek word for first is the same as the word translated best in Luke 15:22. Our first love toward the Lord must be the best love for Him. The church in Ephesus had left this best love toward the Lord.

The church as the Body of Christ (Eph. 1:23) is a matter of life; as the new man (Eph. 2:15), it is a matter of the Person of Christ; and as the Bride of Christ (John 3:29), it is a matter of love. The first epistle to the Ephesians tells us that for the church life we need to be strengthened in our inner man that Christ may make His home in our hearts, that we, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge, that we may be filled with all the fullness of God (Eph. 3:16-19); and that it is for the church life that grace is with all them who love the Lord Jesus (Eph. 6:24). Now the second epistle to the Ephesians reveals that the degradation of the church begins with our leaving the first love toward the Lord. Nothing but love can keep us in a proper relationship with the Lord. The church in Ephesus had good works, labored for the Lord, endured suffering, and tried the false apostles, but she left her first love toward the Lord. Leaving the first love is the source of all the degradation in the following stages of the church.

We in the local churches today must be warned of the possibility of losing our first love for the Lord. We may work and labor for the Lord and we may be pure doctrinally and correct scripturally, yet not have the first love for the Lord. Perhaps in the coming years we shall not love Him as much as we do now. Beware of this. It is better to lose some of our work than to fail in our love for the Lord. Our love for Him must be the first love. We all must say, "Lord, I love You. I do not love the works I do for You, and I do not appreciate the labor I spend for You. Lord, I love You. If my labor for You frustrates me from loving You, I will cease laboring." Do not allow anything to separate you from the love of the Lord. We must take care of the first love and constantly love the Lord.

I can never forget a short paragraph concerning John Nelson Darby. This paragraph reveals that when Darby was very old he was traveling and stayed in a hotel for the night. As he was going to bed, he prayed in a simple way, saying, "Lord Jesus, I still love You." It is precious for an old saint to say this. John Nelson Darby began to love the Lord during his youth. After more than sixty years, he still loved Him. We all must daily tell the Lord, "Lord Jesus, I still

love You. I may change in everything else, Lord, but I would never change in loving You. Rather, I want my love for You to increase all the time." I read this paragraph about Darby more than twenty years ago, and I cannot tell you the help it has rendered me throughout the years.

We must constantly say, "Lord Jesus, I still love You." Once we have fallen from our first love, our degradation has begun. We may remain the same in everything else—in work, labor, and in other things—but we are degraded because we have left our first love. Eventually, the church at Ephesus had more work but less love. Today, we all must say that we want more love and less work. If we would do any work, it must be out of our love for the Lord. Love should motivate everything we do for the Lord. If we cannot do a certain thing because we love Him, we should not do it. Our work should simply be an expression of our love for Him. We must be like this; otherwise, we shall not be kept in His presence.

### **IV. THE CONSEQUENCE OF THE CHURCH'S DEGRADATION**

In verse 5 we see the consequence of the church's degradation: "Remember therefore whence you have fallen and repent and do the first works; but if not, I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place, unless you repent." The consequence of the church's degradation is losing the testimony. To lose the testimony simply means to have the lampstand removed. If we leave our first love toward the Lord and do not repent, we shall lose the testimony of the Lord and the lampstand will be removed from us. Years ago, the testimony with the Brethren was quite bright, but it is not so today. There is no doubt that the lampstand has been removed from most of the so-called Brethren assemblies. When you enter into their assemblies, you do not sense any shining there. There is no light, no testimony. We must be careful and constantly on the alert to avoid this consequence. Do not think that because we are the local churches as the lampstands and are the testimony of Jesus that we cannot lose our testimony. The day we lose our first love toward the Lord will be the day we lose the testimony. On that day, the lampstand will be removed.

### **V. THE SPIRIT'S SPEAKING**

The first part of 2:7 says, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." At the beginning of each of the seven epistles in chapters two and three, it is the Lord who speaks (2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). But at the end of all seven epistles it is the Spirit speaking to the churches (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Once again, this proves that the speaking Christ is the Spirit. Whatever Christ speaks,

that is the speaking of the Spirit. No one can argue with this. Who was speaking to the church in Ephesus? Christ, the Son of Man holding the messengers in His right hand and walking in the midst of the churches. As verse 7 indicates, the speaker eventually is the Spirit. This proves that Christ is the speaking Spirit. This not only indicates that the Spirit is the Lord and the Lord is the Spirit; it also emphasizes the vital importance of the Spirit in the darkness of the church's degradation as indicated by the sevenfold intensified Spirit in 1:4. The same emphasis is also seen in 14:13 and 22:17. It is foolish to say that Christ today is not the speaking Spirit, and it is ridiculous to separate the speaking Spirit from Christ. The two are one.

If the speaker were only Christ without being the speaking Spirit, He could never speak some words into our spirit, and His speaking would not be very subjective and touching. But, as our experience testifies, if, as we read these epistles, we are open in our spirit to Him, the Spirit will immediately speak something of Christ into us. Because the speaker is not the objective Christ but the subjective Spirit, He speaks not only in the black and white letters of the Bible, but also in our spirit. Once we hear His speaking, something indelible is wrought into us, and nothing can take it away. Our Christ today is the speaking Spirit. I rejoice over this fact and I boldly proclaim it.

#### **A. To the Churches**

On the one hand, each of the seven epistles is the word of the Lord to a particular church; but, on the other hand, it is the word of the Spirit to all of the churches. Every church should not only give heed to the epistle written to her particularly, but also to all the epistles written to the other churches. This implies that all the churches, as the Lord's testimony in the Spirit, should be the same. Since the Spirit today is speaking to the churches, we must be in the churches to be rightly positioned to hear the Spirit's speaking. How else can we hear what the Spirit is saying?

The Spirit is speaking to the churches, not to any religion, denomination, or group of seeking Christians. This is the reason that not many Christians can hear the speaking of the Spirit. The Spirit does not even speak just to one church, but to the churches. ... When we are in the church and among the churches, we have the right position and the right angle to hear the Spirit's speaking.

#### **B. Requiring a Proper Ear to Hear**

In spiritual things, seeing depends upon hearing. The writer of this book firstly heard the voice (1:10) and then saw the vision (1:12). If our ears are heavy and cannot hear, then we cannot see (Isa. 6:9-10). The Jews would not hear the word of the Lord, so they could not see what the Lord was doing (Matt. 13:15; Acts 28:27). The Lord always wants to open our ears to hear His voice (Job 33:14-16; Isa. 50:4-5; Exo. 21:6) that we may see things according to His economy. The heavy ears need to be circumcised (Jer. 6:10; Acts 7:51). The sinner's ears need to be cleansed with the redeeming blood and anointed with the Spirit (Lev. 14:14, 17, 28). To serve the Lord as priests also requires our ears

to be cleansed with the redeeming blood (Exo. 29:20; Lev. 8:23-24). In this book, as the Spirit is speaking to the churches, we all need an opened, circumcised, cleansed, and anointed ear to hear the Spirit's speaking.

Although our angle and position may be right, we still may not have the proper ear to hear. Chapter one emphasizes seeing and chapters two and three emphasize hearing. We need to both see and hear. Among our physical senses, which is more important—seeing or hearing? Suppose you had the choice of losing either your sight or your hearing. Which would you choose? We may say that seeing is more important than hearing, but hearing is deeper than seeing. Thus, we must tell the Lord, "Lord, I need to both see and hear. Have mercy on me, Lord, and grant me eyes to see and ears to hear." We may have to struggle with the Lord, telling Him that we must be able to both see and hear.

Hearing is more intimate than seeing. Our closest friends will speak intimately to us. If you lose your hearing organ, you will be unable to enjoy this intimacy with your loved ones. In chapter one, John saw; in chapters two and three, he heard. We need to see the church life and we need to hear the intimate contents of the church life. To see the church is one thing, and to hear the intimate contents of the church life is another. Although many of us have seen the church, not many have heard the intimate contents of the church life. Hence, we need an ear to hear. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

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#### ***Burdens for Church Prayers***

- Pray for the blending and one accord among the saints.
- May the Lord raise up many brothers to bear the testimony together.
- Pray for the burden to raise up next generation for building up of the body of Christ.
- Pray for YP that they will be companions with one another to pursue the Lord together.
- Pray for the English-speaking testimony and gospel preaching on West Valley College campus.
- For GOW training: Vital groups be raised up, attending prayer meeting, prophesying on Lord's day by daily enjoying His word and pursue the truth.

#### ***Announcement***

- Morning Revival: ITERO Message 1.
- Prayer meeting 5/8 Tue at meeting hall.
- GOW 6<sup>th</sup> term 4-day intensified training, 6/1~4, at Pleasanton meeting hall, register with the brothers in small group to be trained by His grace and practice steadfastly unto Zion/overcomers. Deadline 5/20.
- YP Bible Study: John Correspondence course.
- Audio and outlines of the messages from Parents and Children/YP Serving Ones Conference are available at <http://thechurchinsanjose.org/archives>.
- 2012 International Memorial Day Conference to be held in Bellevue, WA on May 25-28.
- Bible Camp 6/18~22, SST for YP 7/22~27, please sanctify these times.