

Which Way, the Church?

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Introduction: Where is the church at Ephesus today?

A. **Ephesians 1:13** - "In Him you also trusted..."

1. Trusting in Jesus meant a new powerful way of life.

2. In the world trust is hard to do because men are not trustworthy.

B. **Acts 19:8-10** – The gospel is more than a message, it contains the power of God!

1. How could "just a message" work at Ephesus a center of idolatry?

2. **Acts 19:17-20** - They did not sell the books, they destroyed them!

C. These Christians had a beginning. They needed to learn about the battle ahead.

1. **Ephesians 1:17-19** – Because they have life they needed to grow!

2. Years later the Apostle John wrote: **Revelation 2:1-5**

3. We each face a danger, the danger of beginning and then stopping.

4. How long has this church been in existence? What would the Lord say to you?

I. Four Stages of Decay

A. Consider a business, from success to bankruptcy.

1. The Creative Stage

a. Everyone involved. b. Focus is not on what I can get out of it.

c. However small, you believe your work makes a difference. d. Great sacrifice, but great joy. e. You are not sensitive to others rather your heart is in the work, not in protecting your "rights" (opinions).

2. The Management Stage

a. Goals have changed; no longer is the success of the work at heart. The new goal is to keep and maintain the work based on what you now have. b. You look at others and their work to judge what is your "fair share." c. The "status-quo" is fine, you do not want to "rock the boat." d. You may glory in your past success, but the fact is you are past making the kind of sacrifices you once did. e. Those who seek to return to the past commitments are viewed with indifference, or worse, as a threat. f. This stage may be maintained indefinitely.

3. The Fault-Finding Stage

a. At this stage it is obvious that things have gone wrong. Rather than return to the past commitment, you look to blame others. b. At this point most teamwork ends, your goal is to justify yourself. c. Power struggles, gossip and backstabbing become a major problem. d. The real work is slowed to a crawl. This stage does not last long.

4. The Dividing Stage

a. Here the work stops, and people go their own way. b. Some will do almost anything to vent their anger and take "what is theirs." c. Some wonder, how did things get to this point?

5. It is possible at any point to reverse this trend.

II The Four Stages of a Local Church

A. What is your attitude?

1. Can you identify yourself as being in one of these four stages? (Be honest.)

2. When I speak of the church, I speak of the Christians who compose the church.

B. Where does this church belong?

1. The Creative Stage

- a. Do you remember when you first became a Christian?
- b. **Matthew 13:44, 45-46** - Sacrifice, but joy.
- c. **Hebrews 10:32-34** - Why does this memory bring joy?
- d. Some attitudes I have seen in new Christians:
 - i.) They can't wait to share their faith.
 - ii.) They are not worried by what they don't know, but are excited about learning.
 - iii.) They want to know what they can do, not "what can I get by with."
 - iv.) They are excited about others who are Christians and they want to encourage.

2. The Management Stage

- a. In fact, many churches and thus individual Christians may find themselves in this stage. **Mt 25:24-30** – Do you think "keeping house" for God will be acceptable?
- b. Some "goals" of the management stage:
 - i.) Glory in bank accounts, buildings, parking lots and physical things.
 - ii.) Glory in people but only as they represent "numbers" thus outward success. This growth is not a product of sacrifice.
- c. Attitudes of the management stage:
 - i.) When work is done, one looks to what others are doing so they can either glory or complain. **II Corinthians 10:12, 18**
 - ii.) Stubbornness against those who challenge them to return to a committed life. "We have been a faithful church for years!" **Revelation 2:2-3, 5**
 - iii.) "Minimums" become "maximums". "What can I do to get by?"
 - iv.) Fear replaces faith. People are more concerned about failing than aggressively seeking to do God's work.

3. The Fault-Finding Stage

- a. Sadly, many churches in time fall into this tragic stage where they "bite and devour" one another. **Galatians 5:15**
- b. By failing to do the work of the Lord with a pure heart, any Christian in time can fall to Satan's devices.
- c. Selfish, proud people cannot see their own faults but they are quick to attack others. **James 3:13-16**
- d. Attitudes of the fault-finding stage:
 - i.) Gossip and fault-finding as a way of exalting self.
 - ii.) Cliques and "power plays" are used so a few can get their way, either as "majority rule" or "minority rule".
 - iii.) People enlarge all problems while ignoring those who are serving God.
 - iv.) Very little thought is given to God's work.
 - ex. Barking dog tied to mower.

4. The Dividing Stage

- a. By this time the Lord's work is in shambles. Lost souls are the result. **Hebrews 12:15**
- b. The ugly fruits of division and the destruction of God's work should make us determined not to go down this path!

III. Lessons We Must Learn

A. There is no guarantee that the Lord's church will continue in this community.

B Let us be completely dedicated to God's work. **Luke 9:23-24**

- 1. Strengthen your faith in God, do not become complacent.
- 2. Note how these principles can apply to other relationships. ex. marriage

Conclusion: If the Lord returned today would I be ready'? **2 Corinthians 13:5**