

## **The Church at Ephesus as a Case Study in Safeguarding the Institution From Worldview Drift**

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Christopher Cone, Th.D, Ph.D, Ph.D [www.drcone.com](http://www.drcone.com)

Chief Academic Officer, Southern California Seminary ([www.socalsem.edu](http://www.socalsem.edu))

### *Introduction*

The demise of the church at Ephesus illustrates how difficult it is to safeguard the worldview core of an institution. The church there had every advantage, including the personal ministries of Paul and Timothy. Yet, within thirty years that church had abandoned the first principles of their worldview: the church left its first love. As educational leaders we need to be aware of how rapidly and why worldview drift can take place. Here we examine the Ephesus model and demise in order to uncover steps that we as educational leaders can take to safeguard the mission and worldview core of the institutions with which we have been entrusted. First we need to understand the problem.

### *Understanding the Problem*

Friederich Nietzsche once famously said that God was dead, and that we have killed Him.<sup>1</sup> In his story Nietzsche was communicating that we have created a narrative using tools of science and discovery, and in that narrative God is simply no longer necessary. Nietzsche described churches as the sepulchers – the graves of God. He viewed the churches as the last place where God was memorialized – God’s final resting place. From that perspective, involvement in faith based activity would be little more than a celebration of the irrelevant, the impotent, and the failed past.

Similarly, Christopher Hitchens mused that religion was simply humanity’s first crack at trying to figure things out, and once we advance past those embarrassingly ignorant conclusions we can move on to things that actually have some connection to reality.<sup>2</sup> Bill Nye warned against Christianity on economic grounds. He asked how we could expect to excel economically if we as a country continued to educate our children in anti-scientific myths – like the one that recounts how God created the world in six days.<sup>3</sup> Others have questioned not only the wisdom of a Biblical worldview, but even the sanity of it. Bill Maher, for example, has mocked that Christianity – and belief systems like it– are symptoms of mental illness.<sup>4</sup>

This is the society in which we now live – appropriately described by some as *post-Christian*. As we have applied Nietzsche’s declaration of independence from God, we grow increasingly uncomfortable with the things of God. This generation largely views the things of God as inconsequential at best and sinister at worst.

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<sup>1</sup> Friederich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1882, 1887) para. 125; Walter Kaufmann ed. (New York: Vintage, 1974), 181-82.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Nonbeliever* (Philadelphia, PA: DaCapo Press, 2007), xvii.

<sup>3</sup> Bill Nye, *Undeniable: Evolution and the Science of Creation* (New York, NY: St. Martins Press, 2014), 11-21.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.celebatheists.com/wiki/Bill\\_Maher](http://www.celebatheists.com/wiki/Bill_Maher).

These secular conclusions have had dramatic impact on the perceived relevance of faith expression in general, and according to the Barna Group, among those aged thirty and under in America, only twenty percent believe church attendance is important, compared with forty-nine percent of all adults who still believe that church is at least somewhat valuable.<sup>5</sup> The trajectory especially among younger people – is sharply secular. This climate is especially uncomfortable for leaders of Christian institutions who face the daily tug of war between increasing the constituency and maintaining core Biblical values. When the culture and the dollars are running away from Christianity, how can leaders of Christian institutions maintain a Biblical focus without financially ruining the schools over which they preside?

In 2013, Valley Forge Christian College was ranked by Forbes as having the second worst return on investment for students. Commenting on that ranking, Forbes' Susan Adams observed that, "Not surprisingly for a Christian school, students tend to earn degrees in religious studies, which don't lead to the most lucrative careers."<sup>6</sup> Valley Forge Christian College's strategy, in part, to overcome that reputation was to move toward a university model, changing the name to the Valley Forge University. Valley Forge's President, Dr. Don Meyer explained why the name Valley Forge University was chosen over Valley Forge Christian University: "Other names were discussed including Valley Forge Christian University. Unfortunately, the name Christian is not welcomed in some places in the world and even now, we have some alumni requesting their degrees without that name."<sup>7</sup>

Valley Forge is not an exceptional case. More and more Christian institutions are moving to the university model with neutral labeling, in order to help shore up the return on investment deficiency. Accredited education is very expensive, and as Susan Adams recognized, expensive Christian educations don't typically provide requisite financial returns. Shrewd leaders are recognizing that they have to deal with this challenge head on, that increased financial pressures make it more and more difficult to retain core values. Now, this is not intended as a critique of the university model nor of neutral branding – in fact, those moves can be very helpful, and are advisable in many cases. But these moves do illustrate the very real pressure to advance beyond traditional operations in order to sustain financial viability, and accompanying that pressure are increased opportunities for worldview drift.

So the question remains an important one: What strategies can leaders of Christian institutions employ in order to ensure that, even as they seek to wisely adapt to the needs of the day, they keep their institutions steadily grounded in a Biblical worldview? To answer the question, we turn to the first-century church at

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<sup>5</sup> The Barna Group, "Americans Divided on the Importance of Church" at <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/661-americans-divided-on-the-importance-of-church#.Vi8Xoq6rTeR>.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Adams, "The 25 Colleges With the Worst Return on Investment", Forbes, at <http://www.forbes.com/sites/susanadams/2013/08/09/the-25-colleges-with-the-worst-return-on-investment/>.

<sup>7</sup> "New Name, Same Mission" at <http://www.valleyforge.edu/about/new-name-same-mission>.

Ephesus, to consider the early lifecycle of that church and the roots of its demise, and to extract some important principles for how leaders can help guard their institutions from worldview drift.

*A Case Study: The Church at Ephesus*

We are first introduced to the city of Ephesus in Acts 18, where Paul entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews:

They came to Ephesus, and he left them there. Now he himself entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews (Acts 18:19).<sup>8</sup>

On a later visit to Ephesus, Paul found some disciples there.

It happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus, and found some disciples (Acts 19:1).

In addition to teaching them, he made a practice of entering the synagogue for three months, where he proclaimed, reasoned, and persuaded regarding the kingdom of God.

And he entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading *them* about the kingdom of God (Acts 19:8).

Some responded very harshly, causing Paul to move away from the synagogue with those who became disciples, taking up reasoning with them at the school of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9) for a duration of two years (Acts 19:10).

But when some were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the people, he withdrew from them and took away the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. This took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks (Acts 19:9-10).

During this time, God worked miracles through Paul, causing many to magnify Christ (Acts 19:11, 17).

God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul...This became known to all, both Jews and Greeks, who lived in Ephesus; and fear fell upon them all and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified (Acts 19:11, 17).

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<sup>8</sup> All Bible references are from *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update* (LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995).

God used Paul mightily to persuade many to turn to the Lord from idols (Acts 19:26).

You see and hear that not only in Ephesus, but in almost all of Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away a considerable number of people, saying that gods made with hands are no gods *at all* (Acts 19:26).

This large-scale conversion caused a significant disturbance there. Ephesus, a key port city in Asia Minor, was noted for its commerce related to the worship of Artemis (or Diana in Latin), the premiere goddess in Ephesian culture (Acts 19:18-20:1). Paul's ministry created economic turmoil, but resulted in a powerful advance of the gospel (Acts 19:20).

So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing (Acts 19:20).

Writing to the Corinthians from Ephesus, he observes that he had many battles at Ephesus, but at that present time the climate was ripe for the gospel – a wide door had opened for service there, still there were many adversaries.

If from human motives I fought with wild beasts at Ephesus, what does it profit me...But I will remain in Ephesus until Pentecost; for a wide door for effective *service* has opened to me, and there are many adversaries (1 Cor 15:32, 16:8-9).

Later, Paul sailed past Ephesus on his way to Jerusalem.

For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus so that he would not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hurrying to be in Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost (Acts 20:16).

He called the elders of the church at Ephesus, and offered them a farewell of sorts, charging them with these words:

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood (Acts 20:28).

This exhortation was very similar to his later warning to Timothy while Timothy was ministering in Ephesus at Paul's direction (1 Tim 1:3):

As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus so that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines...Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching. Persevere in these things... (1 Tim 1:3, 4:16).

Timothy was to fulfill in Ephesus a key leadership role, but his first responsibility was to guard himself. Later, Paul sent Tychicus to Ephesus (2 Tim 4:12), perhaps as a follow-up to an earlier visit in which he may have delivered Paul's letter to the Ephesians (Eph 6:21). In that letter Paul wrote to the Ephesian church, addressing specifically the faithful in Christ Jesus (Eph 1:1). The letter gives indication that conditions in the church were encouraging, as Paul offered no correction, only encouragement, teaching, and exhortation.

The final direct Biblical references to Ephesus arrive roughly less than thirty years later, as John is told to write the book of Revelation and to send it to Ephesus and six other churches (Rev 1:11). That book contains a section specifically addressed to the church at Ephesus:

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this: ‘I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them *to be* false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. ‘But I have *this* against you, that you have left your first love. ‘Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent. ‘Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate (Rev 2:1-6).

The message includes a commendation for the church's deeds, toil, perseverance, discernment, and hatred of the same deeds that God hates. Sadly, they are indicted for a critical error: they had fallen from a lofty place, having left their first love. The Greek word translated *left* is *aphekes*, and is literally to *quit* or *give up*. The glorious Ephesian church closes out their Biblical history having abandoned their first love, and being given a stern mandate to repent – to change their minds, and remember from whence they had fallen. They started with a roar, and finished with a whimper.

It seems that the church at Ephesus had maintained a focus on doctrinal soundness, yet when we examine the *expected result* of doctrinal soundness, we might reconsider:

“But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith (1 Tim 1:5).

*Love* is the predicate nominative, and the other three traits are describing the love: from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from a sincere faith. The goal of sound instruction is, simply, love – the right kind of love. We understand that our order of priority in expressing love is for the Lord first, and then for each other. The result of sound teaching is love for Him and love for people.

And He said to him, “‘YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.’ “This is the great and

foremost commandment. “The second is like it, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’ “On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets” (Mt 22:37-40).

Keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life (Jude 21).

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God...Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us (1 Jn 4:7, 11-12).

The threat we face, then, is not losing truth for truth’s sake, but losing truth and in the process losing our love for Him. That is the very essence of idolatry. John warns believers of idolatry, saying,

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world the love of the Father is not in him (1 Jn 2:15).

His warning is clear, that believers can fall into the trap of loving the wrong things, and in so doing failing to love the Father. John is certainly not suggesting we should not love the people in the world, after all, he was present when Jesus exhorted his listeners to love their neighbor (in the story of the good Samaritan, Lk 10:29-37). John also records that God loved the whole world (Jn 3:16), and that Christ died for the whole world (1 Jn 2:2[compare with Rom 5:8]). On the contrary, John is cautioning against the world system – the course of this world (e.g., Eph 2:2), and the things in that system that lead us astray – the lust of the flesh and the eyes and the boastful pride of life (1 Jn 2:16).

For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world (1 Jn 2:16).

If we are loving these things, then we are not actively loving the Father, and what a heartbreaking thing that is, for a child not to love their father who loves them. Holding fast to the Biblical worldview is not about maintaining tradition nor even simply about upholding the institution’s mission. The case study of the church at Ephesus underscores that the stakes are higher than all that.

#### *Principles for Longevity From the Ephesus Case Study*

In considering some principles we can absorb from the failure at Ephesus, we realize that there is perhaps no church in the New Testament so advantaged as was the church at Ephesus. While we are not told specifically what factors led to their failure, we see clearly that within less than one generation they had walked away from what should have been their highest priority. The church at Ephesus offers a cautionary tale that all who would be involved in Christian leadership should carefully consider. In particular, there are seven key facts of the narrative that can

help us assess how we can avoid the Ephesian error in our own institutions. First, the church at Ephesus was surrounded by and under constant threat of idolatry (1 Cor 16:8). Second, leaders were warned of present dangers (Acts 20:28, 1 Cor 16:8, 1 Tim 1:3). Third, the Ephesians had every advantage with excellent teaching and ministry, including by Paul, Timothy, and Tychicus (2 Tim 4:12), yet they were not too mature to fail. Fourth, leaders were given precise instructions for how to avoid the danger (Acts 20:28, 1 Tim 4:16). Fifth, leaders were warned to guard themselves *first* (Acts 20:28, 1 Tim 4:16). Sixth, leaders were warned to guard the flock (Acts 20:28). Seventh, the Ephesians ultimately left their first love (Rev 2:4). From these facts, we can ask some key questions facing leaders of Christian institutions. How we answer these questions tells us much about where we are on the continuum between faithfulness and failure.

First, what pressures and threats would cause us to quit our first love? If our institutions were to fail, what went wrong? If we can offer an objective post-mortem analysis before the failure takes place, then we have a much greater opportunity to avoid the tragic failure. This is one of the obvious advantages of a SWOT analysis.

Second, how are we warned of the present dangers? How does the Bible specifically warn us in light of the pressures and threats we face? Are there leaders or anyone in our institutions who are raising concerns? Are we listening?

Third, what advantages do our institutions have, and how have these advantages insulated the institutions from the looming specter of idolatry? Are these advantages making us complacent? If so, how?

Fourth, what specific instructions are we given for responding to the present dangers, and how can we apply those? For example, fiscal responsibility is a virtuous and necessary pursuit, but is there a danger of focusing too much on financial gain? If so, how does the warning of 1 Timothy 6:6-11 impact our fiscal policies – especially in light of the 1 Timothy 3:3 qualifications for leadership in the church?

Fifth, are we as leaders guarding ourselves first? Are we modeling what our institutions are trying to produce? Are we focusing on our own personal spiritual integrity and growth?

Sixth, are we as leaders guarding the flock? Are we protecting our constituency by making the right hires and retaining people who are committed to the same worldview core? Are we committed to academic models and student services that encourage quality spiritual life? Are we encouraging discipleship at every level?

Finally, are we moving closer to or further from our first love? In short, we need to have the right priorities, and not focus solely on the mere survival of our institutions. These institutions exist for a reason, and not simply to continue to exist. Self-defense is not our highest calling.

The Ephesian failure invites us to consider ultimately whether or not we are willing to encounter failure in other areas (financial, popularity, respect in the academic community, etc.) in order to maintain faithfulness in what matters to God (Jn 12:25). If we are unwilling to fail in unimportant ways, we *will* fail where it matters most. So let's ask the seven questions we glean from the Ephesian failure,

and honestly consider appropriate steps to guard ourselves and our institutions from leaving our first love.