

THE CHURCH AWAKENING AN URGENT CALL FOR RENEWAL STUDY EIGHT

The Church on a Long Drift

Acts 19:1–41; 20:28–31; Revelation 2:1–4

It is a proven fact that things go from pristine and pure to weak and poor, from strong and good to bad and worse . . . never with a lot of announcement and often without people even knowing it's happening.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

In his book, *The Church Awakening: An Urgent Call for Renewal*, Pastor Church Swindoll illustrates what can happen when a church drifts from its scriptural center.

I can always tell when my truck's tires need balancing and rotating. When I lift my hands off the steering wheel, the vehicle slowly drifts to one side. The thought struck me one day that this is what the church's ministry is like. The world, the flesh, and the devil have irreparably thrown our churches off balance. We cannot for one moment take our hands off the wheel or our eyes off the road. If we do, it's just a matter of time until we drift off into the ditch of destruction. Only with our hands on the Scriptures and our eyes on the Lord can we restrain the drift.¹

The apostle Paul warned the leaders of the church of Ephesus to keep alert as they guided the church. Tragically, within a matter of years, a long spiritual drift occurred in the hearts of the church members. Let's examine how the church ended up in the spiritual ditch and learn from their example to keep our churches on track.



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Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

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PREPARE YOUR HEART

If leaders drift spiritually, it's not long before the whole church loses its way. Use the space below to write a prayer for your church's leaders, that their hearts will remain fully devoted to Christ as they guide your church's ministries. Then pray for yourself to receive God's truth through His Word.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

The church at Ephesus was founded when Paul took his friends, Priscilla and Aquila, with him from Corinth to Ephesus (Acts 18:18–19). Paul then left Ephesus, promising, “I will come back later, God willing” (18:21). Staying in Ephesus, Priscilla and Aquila mentored the young teacher, Apollos (18:24–28). In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul mentioned that the believers were meeting in Priscilla and Aquila's home, which gives us a clue about how the church functioned and the close fellowship of its members.

The leaders built the church on a solid biblical foundation. Apollos “knew the Scriptures well” (18:24), and under Priscilla and Aquila's guiding hand, he proved to be a capable Bible teacher. After Apollos transitioned his ministry to Corinth, Paul returned to find a core group of disciples and a church hungry for the Word.



Observation: The Growth and Testing of the Ephesian Church

When observing a narrative section of Scriptures, notice the sequence of events, often marked by transition words such as “so,” “then,” “when,” and “afterward.” Also look for time stamps, such as, “This went on for the next two years” (Acts 19:10) and “about that time” (19:23).

With these tips in mind, read *Acts 19–20* and summarize the key events in Ephesus as grouped under the following headings.



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Growth of the Ephesian Church—Acts 19:8–20

Paul saw the strategic potential of Ephesus as a gateway city for the gospel, staying there for about two years during his third missionary journey and witnessing the powerful impact of the church's influence.

Teaching—*Acts 19:8–10*. Describe Paul's Bible-teaching ministry. Find "the province of Asia" on a [map](#) of the region (19:10). How far did Paul's teaching reach?

Miracles—*Acts 19:11–20*. Note the results of Paul's miracles and how they spread the message of the Lord. Write down your observations in the space below.

The church at Ephesus was well-taught, but during the process of time, the enemy attacked. Not only is he strong, he is insidious and invisible. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



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Testing of the Ephesian Church—Acts 19:23–20:1

The believers in Ephesus lived in a city renowned for its paganism. The temple of the goddess Artemis stood as the city's crown jewel controlling the spiritual climate of the entire region and driving the economy of Ephesus. What did Paul do and say to upset the idol-worshipping industry (*Acts 19:23–31*)?

Summarize the hysteria of the rioters and how the incident resolved (*19:32–41*).

After the riots calmed, Paul gathered the believers together to encourage them. “Then he said good-bye and left for Macedonia” (20:1). Later, Paul had a final meeting with the leaders of the church when he stopped by on his way to Jerusalem.

Paul's Final Exhortation—Acts 20:13–38

The meeting took place at Miletus. What was the focus of Paul's exhortation to the leaders, according to *Acts 20:28–32*? What main threat to the health of the church was Paul *most* concerned about?



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In his final letter, 2 Timothy, Paul warned the church’s pastor, Timothy, to “carefully guard the precious truth that has been entrusted to you” (2 Timothy 1:14). Did Timothy and the church leaders do a good job guarding the truth? Yes, they did!

The “vicious wolves” would be cults, heretics, smooth-talking false teachers—people who are driven by secular goals, who have their own agenda, not the agenda of the living God. Be on guard! —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: The Drift from Devotion to Christ

In the years that followed, the church leaders fortified the church’s doctrinal walls against invaders and protected the church against heresy. In the book of Revelation, John recorded “a revelation from Jesus Christ” (Revelation 1:1), in which the Lord issued messages to seven churches, including the church at Ephesus. What did the Lord *commend*, according to [Revelation 2:2–3](#)?

Without realizing it, however, the leaders allowed the church to drift spiritually. What *correction* did the Lord give the Ephesian church in [2:4–5](#)?



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The New American Standard Bible translates the phrase in Revelation 2:4, “you have left your first love.” Look in your Bible study resources, including online commentaries such as *Constable’s Notes* in netbible.org, and explain what this phrase means.

While erecting walls against heretics, they had also walled off their affections toward the Lord. All that remained was teaching without worship, doctrine without love. What characteristics might a church have that is strong on doctrine but weak on devotion?

What pitfalls can we fall into if our walk with Christ is all religious duty with little relational affection toward the Lord or others?

The members of the church at Ephesus were busy, they were impressive, they were orthodox . . . but they had left their first love. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



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Correlation: Getting Back on Track

What can restore our first love for Christ? By his example, Paul helps us stir our love for the Lord. The apostle was contrasting his ministry with the flashy ministry of false teachers. What did these phony ministers brag about, according to *2 Corinthians 5:12*?

Their ministry put on a good show to stir up a crowd. Paul, on the other hand, was motivated by a purer purpose: “Christ’s love controls us” (*2 Corinthians 5:14*). The love of Christ—not power, influence, or prestige—drove everything Paul did. What does it mean for the love of Christ to control a person?

Imagine a church in which the leaders were controlled by the love of Christ. In what ways would their spiritual devotion be evident in the ministries of the church?

When we fully experience the love of Christ, love *for* Christ overflows in everything we do. As we conclude, let’s explore ways we can kindle, or rekindle, our devotion for Him.



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Application: Restoring Our First Love

The church at Ephesus didn't realize how far they had drifted. They were on track doctrinally, but they had lost sight of Jesus, the one to whom their doctrines pointed. The first step in restoring your first love is to fully embrace Christ's love for you.

Paul prayed that the Ephesians would understand “how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is” and “experience the love of Christ” (Ephesians 3:18, 19). Take a moment in prayerful meditation to ask the Lord to show you His love and to help you experience it deep in your soul. Write down your prayer here.

The second step is to return Christ's love to Him in the form of gratitude and praise. In the space below, write a letter to your Savior, expressing your heart toward Him.



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Finally, show others the love you receive from Christ. Let it fill you and control everything you do. What would it look like for Christ to love others through you today?

Don't allow the busyness of church life to distract your attention from the true purpose of the church—to experience the love of Christ, to love Him in return, and to show His love to the world. Stay devoted to Jesus, and your heart will never drift!



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, help me to do all I do in the name of Christ, for the love of Christ, in the power of Christ, with a heart completely devoted to Him. In His name I pray, amen.

ENDNOTE

1. Charles R. Swindoll, *The Church Awakening: An Urgent Call for Renewal* (New York: Faith Words, 2010), 213.

