

Revelation: The Triumph of the Lamb
Leaving Your First Love
Revelation 2:1-7

Text:

¹ “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

² “ ‘I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. ³ I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary. ⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵ Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. ⁶ Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.’

Introduction:

“West Coast churches face a variety of challenges,” says one commentator.¹ “Their environment is anything but friendly to vibrant Christian faith. Some churches, located in self-sufficient, affluent communities, are tempted to pursue personal peace and a comfortable lifestyle, relying on their financial resources for security. Others are stained by the scandals of sexual immorality. Some are stigmatized by their community as aloof and intolerant of other viewpoints. After all, the populace and politicians of the West Coast, finding it expedient to cultivate the favor of power-brokers in the distant capital, show their loyalty to the system through a civil religion unencumbered by personal convictions.”

“Some churches are experts in doctrinal precision, but amid the theological wars they have lost the capacity to care for hurting people. Others are unclear about where to draw the line that defines the essentials of the gospel as they adapt their message to the culture in order to reach out to or fit in with non-Christians. Some churches are all image and no reality, lacking spiritual vitality despite an impressive array of activities. And others are a tiny minority struggling to hold on in the midst of a community that ignores or despises them.”

“These West Coast churches sound stereotypically twenty-first-century Californian, don’t they? In fact, however, this is a sketch of the situation, strengths and weaknesses of West Coast churches in Asia Minor in the first century.”

- Laodicea was an affluent community, and Christians there were tempted to pursue personal peace and a comfortable lifestyle, relying on their financial lifestyle.
- Churches in Pergamum and Thyatira were stained by the scandal of sexual immorality in their midst and were unclear on where to draw the lines of the gospel. They tried

¹ Dennis E. Johnson, *The Triumph of the Lamb* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), p.65

desperately by any and all means to stay connected with non-Christians, to maintain a standing with powerful trade-guilds, and to fit in with the culture.

- The church of Smyrna apparently was stigmatized by outsiders.
- The Ephesian church was full of experts in doctrinal precision, for which Jesus commended them; but in the theological wars they had fought they had lost the capacity to love imperfect people.
- The church in Sardis was all image and no substance, lacking spiritual life despite an impressive array of activities.
- The Philadelphian church was a tiny minority struggling to hold on in the midst of a community that despised them.

Seven churches – different in so many ways from one another. Seven churches – similar in so many ways to the churches of our day. Seven churches – addressing the strengths and weaknesses of this church.

What one thing do all these churches need in order to fortify them against the enemy's attacks? What one thing do all these churches need in order to alert them to the enemy's strategies? What one thing do all these churches need in order to make them loyal to God and in love with Christ? What one thing do we need, church? We need to hear the voice of Jesus – the Savior of the body who watches over and walks with his church!

The voice of Jesus will comfort our weak and wounded hearts, diagnose our diseases, shatter our dreams of ease here and now, and call us forward to the consummation of his victory in the new Jerusalem. And his voice addresses us today in his letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor because each letter is what the Spirit says to all the churches. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Prayer

Rather than give you a long formal seminary type introduction to the seven letters, I will proceed in simply preaching their truths and interject the necessary items as we go. But from the outset I do want you to see that each of the letters follows the same form, structure or pattern. That is, they all open with the same address to the angel of each church – one of the seven angels that Jesus holds in his right hand. Then comes the command to write followed by a description of Jesus taken from the opening vision of chapter one. Jesus then gives a description of the churches life with the words, "I know," which entail both criticisms and commendations. These are followed up with a call to repentance that is coupled with threats and promises, then an individualizing of the message – "Though the whole church may be such-and-such, you as an individual must still give ear." And the last element is the promise for the overcomers – those who conquer.

Commendations:

Ephesus was a commendable church in many ways. In fact, Jesus notes at least four areas where the church was to be commended:

1. In the area of their labor – their hard work. He says, "I know your toil."
2. In the area of their perseverance. This was no flash-in-the-pan kind of hard work; it was an enduring work. They patiently endured their labor.
3. In the area of their discipline. This was a disciplined church. They did not bear with those who are evil. They did not tolerate sin. They dealt with it. In our pluralistic society that

sounds a bit harsh. Nevertheless I remind you that this is what Jesus says. He commends them. Now this does not mean that they hate everyone in the world who is nasty. It means that in the church they cannot stand for evil to be practiced among them. If anyone does, they are removed. This is a disciplined church.

As if the point is not made strong enough, it is emphasized in v. 6: “Yet this you have [in your favor]: you hate the work of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.” We don’t know who the Nicolaitans were and it doesn’t really matter for our purposes. There are religious practices; there are moral practices that Christ hates.

The only question becomes: what kind of practices today do you hate? If there are no practices that you hate there is something wrong with you. We must have a general and principled alignment with the mind of Christ such that if there is something that he hates then we do too. Otherwise we are less than faithful to God.

4. In the area of discernment. They were able to put so called apostles to the test. In that day the church was spreading so fast that there was a lack of qualified teachers so there were a lot of itinerate teachers – apostles (not apostles in the high sense. The word is used in many ways in the NT). Here it means a kind of roving preacher.

This church was smart enough to test them. Just because they could come in and speak well; just because they claimed to be orthodox; just because they claimed to be Christians, etc, they could test them. They were doctrinally astute. And listen, they were commended for it. That was fantastic.

5. There is a possible fifth area of commendation when he brings up their perseverance again and attaches the fact that they endure for the sake of his name. This was God-centered church that endured all things as from the hands of a loving and sovereign heavenly Father.

In summation: I think this was a diligent and hard-working church where doctrine and truth mattered. If you were to visit this church on any given Sunday you would hear the mantra: “This is a place where truth matters.” You might even find that as the title of their weekly publication. You might even find a banner on their wall – “God is our goal.”

I assure you that is no mystery as to how the church at Ephesus came to be such a doctrinally pure and elite church. You recall the very words of Paul the day he last left them don’t you? They are in Acts 20:29-30: “I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things...” Remember that? So Paul urged the elders at Ephesus to “pay careful attention to themselves and to all the flock (20:28) which they obviously did. Those words in Acts would have been written 30 years before John sent his letter to Ephesus.

After Paul’s departure from Ephesus he sent to them Timothy as their pastor. And Paul wrote to Timothy regarding his charge there in Ephesus: “...remain at Ephesus that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies...” (1 Tim. 1:3-4). So the Ephesians refused to tolerate any doctrinal deviance or deceit.

Criticism:

The one who holds the seven stars in his hand and who walks among the lampstands, however, finds a serious flaw in the hard-working, enduring, disciplined, doctrinally sound, truth-loving, and

God-centered church: “But I have this against you” (v.5), “that you have abandoned the love you had at first.”

Now I like this translation because it is clear and unequivocal. It is more clear than the traditional, “you have left your first love.” The word John uses is ἀφῆμι which means to utterly depart. It is used often in secular Greek when speaking of divorce so it is very strong imagery John uses here. “You have abandoned love.”

The question is: love for whom? Is John charging this doctrinally sound, truth-loving, God-centered church with abandoning its love for Christ? I don’t think so. I think he is charging them with leaving the very kind of love they had displayed early on – a love for people. The truth had taken precedent over people.

Do you remember what glowing things Paul said of the Ephesian church when he wrote to them in Ephesians 1? “For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers” (1:15-16). Even in 4:15 he charged the young church to speak the truth, yes! But speak the truth in love. Truth is spoken in the context of loving relationships. Truth is not spoken for its own sake. Truth flows out of love!

It appears that over the next thirty years a new generation of Christians had arisen who had held to truth at all costs – including at sake of love for people. William Mounce is quick to apply this axiom to the Ephesian church: “every virtue carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction.”

So the desire for pure doctrine carries with it the seeds of our destruction, for to love truth at the cost of people is too high a price to pay. Here is what Beasley-Murray says: “If the price paid by the Ephesians for the preservation of true Christianity was the loss of love, the price was too high, for Christianity without love is a perverted faith.”

It is possible to love a pure truth so tenaciously that you cannot love imperfect people.

Listen to me – Truth can become an idol!

The moment right doctrine becomes an end in itself – and not a means to other glorious ends – it has become an idol.

(I am going to pick just one example from my week to make John’s point)

Answer this question: Which ministry of our corporate gathering is most important: the teaching / preaching ministry or the nursery ministry? Which minister is more glorious: The teacher / preacher or the nursery worker? Which one serves the people?

You see, once you adopt the mindset that the teaching ministry is more important, you will cloud your vision of the importance of service roles. You will whine and complain when asked to serve others because it cannot be out of love. I believe with all of my heart that given the age of our church and the number of children in our church, one of the most urgent and necessary ministries in the nursery. I believe with all of my heart that one of the most powerful ways you can demonstrate love and serve the families of this church is by serving in the nursery. And I believe with all of my heart that one of the litmus tests for demonstrating our loss of love for the sake of truth is that we whine and complain that the nursery takes us away from teaching.

Now by way of application, I think two admonitions need to be given: (1) to those who presently serve in the nursery: Serve with all your might out of a love for those who graciously need the ministry. You must view your tour of duties as a gracious and loving serving of those you love. (2)

To those who do not presently serve in the nursery – for whatever reason – you need to examine the make-up and dynamic of this congregation. One swift glance around the room will reveal that one way in which you can serve the greatest number possible at once time is by doing a tour of duty in the nursery. This is not a tour of obligation-duty; but it is a tour of I can't-help-but-serve-duty. You can demonstrate a loving heart for more than 65% of this church by simply serving in the nursery. And the more hands we have serving, the less teaching anyone has to miss.

Call to Repent:

The Apostle Paul had glowing things to say about the Ephesians' love for one another – 30 years prior; but their existence now in John's day was anything but glorious. Jesus says in v.5, "Remember therefore from where you have fallen..." What heights they had fallen. They were not a glorious church. Do you hear the implications in that sentence? *The purity of your doctrine does not necessitate the measure of your glory – but the fervor of your love tells the real story!*

Church, as with the Ephesians, we must call it sin to hold to truth more than people. To be truth-driven and cold is theologically oxymoronic! Jesus says to Ephesus, "repent and do the works you did at first." He means, call it sin and love again!

Warning:

If we don't call it sin and love again, we will lose our light-bearing mission in this community. Look at what he says at the end of v5: "If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent." I don't think that means that he will shut us down, necessarily; but that he will at least shut us up. We will become fruitless and dead. Eventually, we will lose out status as a true church. And trust me, America and the world are full of "churches," so called, that are not really churches. Do you know what I mean? Jesus does not have to close our doors in order to extinguish our flame.

Does that make you quake?

Do you want us to be known as an evangelistic church?

Do you desire to see converts to Christianity because of our love?

Listen, if I could guarantee you that next week there would be fifty lost people in attendance at our service, would that excite you? Would that fire you up?

Listen to me – I guarantee you that next week we have the potential for fifty unbelievers to be here because we have 61 children 6th grade and under – 61 people who are born into the world as God-haters. Does that excite us to have that kind of evangelistic thrush every Sunday?

We should not have to pull-teeth in finding S.S. teachers and nursery workers, should we?

If we are going to love, we need to learn to love those who are not like us and who annoy us – why don't we start with our children?

If Jesus were to write a letter to the church at Sussex – this is what he would say, "You are a doctrinally pure church. You have a love for the truth. You have it all right on paper: 'God is your goal and man is your concern' but I have this against you: you don't love. You elevate teaching over service – witness how difficult it is to get cheerful participation in the children's ministries. Repent Lighthouse and love like you used to."

Call to Hear:

While the message was written to Ephesus as a whole – a congregation – change begins with each principle part. Therefore, the call to hear is individualized: Let the one who has ears to hear, hear what the Spirit says to the churches...and to the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life.

I am speaking to each of you individually? I am looking each one you in the eye as we speak personally: Do you love truth more than you love people? Have you fallen from a great height? Do you want us to lose our light-bearing mission in this community? Are you willing to repent? Do you want to love imperfect people?

Conclusion:

Lighthouse, if God really is our goal, then we cannot help but love. And if loving man really is our concern then we cannot help but speak truth.

God keep us from an either or heart. Unite our heart!