

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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EPHESUS: THE CHURCH FIRST IN DOCTRINE BUT NOT IN LOVE (Part 2)

“Love” -- there is really no other word like it. Think of the various ways we throw this word around. The Bible is much more circumspect in its usage of the words for love. In the Bible the word is not primarily laden with emotional overtones. It has more to do with loyalty than feelings and, therefore, comes under the control of the will rather than the emotions. “Genuine love,” notes Stott, “longs to enrich its object, not to possess it.”¹ Christ calls the Church of Ephesus to task because she had abandoned the love she had at the first. By way of review, “This *first love* was a height from which the church had fallen and to which it must return if its lampstand was not to be removed (2:5). Is Jesus rebuking their loss of love for himself, a waning of the devotion that characterizes new converts? In Jeremiah 2:2-3 the Lord reminds Israel of their honeymoon in the wilderness, calling his bride to the exclusive love she had for him then. But Jesus’ rebuke to Ephesus is not like Jeremiah’s accusation against Israel, for Jeremiah contrasts Israel’s early love for the Lord to her later adultery with idols (Jer. 2:4-13). Idolatry is not the Ephesian church’s problem. In other churches Jesus will identify classic symptoms of declining love for himself: idolatry (= adultery), lukewarm self-reliance, and tolerance of error. He finds none of these symptoms in Ephesus. It is therefore more likely that the first love lost in Ephesus was love for other people. The noun *love* appears in Revelation only here and in Jesus’ commendation of the church at Thyatira, where one pair of qualities, *love and faith*, is made concrete in a second pair, *service and perseverance* (Rev. 2:19). As perseverance under persecution demonstrates faith, so service shows love. Jesus had predicted that persecution would tempt people to apostatize, to betray others, or to withdraw from others in suspicious hatred; and that false teaching would mislead others. Attacked on all sides, *most people’s love will grow cold* (Matt. 24:10-12). An embattled church, surrounded by enemies, can turn inward in self-protection and suspicion.”²

- I. **CHRIST’S COUNSEL AND WARNING.** The Lord does not simply point out the problem; He gives the solution in three specific commands.
- A. **Remember.** The term is *mnēmoneue*, present tense; it denotes the continual ongoing act of calling to mind, rehearsing before the mind. Paul had exhorted the Ephesians in the use of their memories (cf. Ephesians 2:11). To look back in gratitude for what God has done for us is something the Christian ought to do constantly. Here, the exhortation is to look back to the heights from which they had fallen. They are called upon to remember and compare the way things were as opposed to the way things are.
- B. **Repent.** Again, the word stresses the function of the mind, *metanoēson*, literally to change the mind. This word is in the aorist, to do it once and for all. They are to be constantly remembering but repenting once and for all. Christ is calling for a change of attitude. “He does not urge the Ephesian Christians to feel bad about their sins. It is not what they feel about them. They must not wait till they feel sorry. The fact is they have sinned, and they must turn from their sin in repentance. There is no need to wait.”³

- C. **Repeat.** “Do the things you did at first.” It is not a question of waiting until they “fall in love” again; the whole issue is not of “feeling” before “doing.” “It should be repeatedly impressed that the counsel given is to **do the first works**, and not to **feel the first feeling**. The feelings cannot be excited; the doing may be reached. The old affection will not come back at our will, but to do may be in our power.”⁴ The call is to exhibit the love for Christ that was first manifested in obedience to Him and in self-sacrificing love for the brethren. You will note the cure for the loveless orthodox Ephesians is not less doctrine. On the contrary, the cure is the proper application of even more doctrine!
- D. **The Warning.** Disobedience is a further sign of lack of love to the Savior, and the penalty for such is the removal of the Church’s lampstand. Ramsey makes this observation: “The scenery and the site have varied from century to century. Where there was water there is now land: what was a populated city in one period ceased to be so in another, and has again become the centre of life for the valley: where at one time there was only bare hillside or the gardens of a city some miles distant, at another time there was a vast city crowded with inhabitants, and this has again relapsed into its earlier condition: the harbour in which St. John and St. Paul landed has become a mere marsh, and the theatre where the excited crowd met and shouted to Diana, desolate and ruinous as it is, has been more permanent than the harbour. The relation of sea and land has changed in quite unusual fashion: the broad level valley was once a great inlet of the sea, at the head of which was the oldest Ephesus, beside the Temple of the Goddess, near where the modern village stands. But the sea receded, and the land emerged from it. The city followed the sea and changed from place to place to maintain its importance as the only harbour of the valley. All those facts were familiar to the Ephesians; they are recorded for us by Strabo, Pliny, and Herodotus, but Ephesian belief and record are the foundation for the statements of those writers. A threat of removing the Church from its place would be inevitably understood by the Ephesians as a denunciation of another change in the site of the city and must have been so intended by the writer. Ephesus and its Church should be taken up, and moved away to a new spot, where it might begin afresh on a new career with a better spirit. But it would be still Ephesus, as it had always hitherto been amid all changes. Such was the meaning that the Ephesians must have taken from the letter; but no other of the Seven Cities would have found those words so clear and significant. Others would have wondered what they might mean, as the commentators are still wondering and debating. To the Ephesians the worlds would seem natural and plain.”⁵

II. **THE EXHORTATION.** “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the Churches.” This exhortation applies to all and is addressed to the individual. “To him that overcomes” is an expression that occurs in all of the letters. It is to be understood of the final victory of the saints in overcoming all spiritual opposition. The idea involved in overcoming incorporates warfare, an unrelenting warfare that involves the saints in this dark world. “The conqueror is promised that he will *eat from the tree of life*. The Revelation concludes with a beatitude upon those *who have the right to the tree of life* (22:14). This language is a biblical way of expressing the promise of eternal life in the consummated Kingdom of God; it is not a special blessing awarded to a particular group of Christians; all believers will find their names written in the Lamb’s book of life (20:15; 21:27). Why then does John seem to make the promise of eternal life a particular blessing only for the conquerors? The answer is that every disciple of Jesus must be in principle a martyr and be ready to lay down his life for his faith. Jesus himself taught more than once that those who would follow him must be ready to take up their cross (Mark 8:4; Matt. 10:38), and the cross is nothing less than an instrument of death. The Revelation pictures a life and death struggle between Christ and the Antichrist for the hearts of men; and the conqueror is he who is unswervingly loyal to his Lord even though it costs him his life. *Paradise* is one of the Bible’s ways of describing the dwelling place of God. Paul spoke of being caught up in ecstasy to Paradise where he heard wonderful things (2 Cor. 12:2). In the present passage, Paradise is

equivalent to the heavenly Jerusalem which is to descend from heaven to earth at the consummation of God's Kingdom when God himself takes up his dwelling among men (21:10; 22:4)."⁶

CONCLUSION: John tells us in his first epistle: "We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, *I love God*, yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: whoever loves God must also love his brother" (4:19-21). The church is called to be strong in the faith and to be contending for the faith, but as Paul told the Corinthians, *If I have not love, I am nothing. . . the greatest of these is love* (1 Corinthians 13). What we discover in the Church at Ephesus is not ruin from without but, "What injures, and finally ruins, is invariably from within, not from without. In vain does Satan seek to cast down those who, resting on Christ's love, have Him as the cherished object of their soul and life."⁷

ENDNOTES

¹ J. R. W. Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church* (IVP, 1972), p. 32.

² D. E. Johnson, *Triumph of The Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (P&R, 2001), p. 72.

³ Stott, p. 32.

⁴ T. Murphy, *The Message to the Seven Churches of Asia* (Presbyterian Board of Education, 1895), p. 187.

⁵ W. Ramsay, *The Letters to The Seven Churches* (rpt. James Family, 1978), p. 245.

⁶ G. E. Ladd, *A Commentary on The Revelation of John* (Eerdmans, 1978), p. 41.

⁷ Wm. Kelly, *The Revelation Expounded* (rpt. Bible Truth, 1970), p. 43.