

REKINDLING THE FIRST LOVE

Revelation 2:1-7

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But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first (Rev. 2:4-5).

It is common today for church leaders to spend time at a retreat evaluating their ministries and seeking a vision for their congregation. It would be interesting if Jesus was present for these meetings to see what he thinks about many of the emphases governing his churches. According to the book of Revelation, Christ is in fact present with his people. Jesus knows what is going on in his churches and evaluates the state of heart in his people. Moreover, if Revelation is any indication, the Lord would not hesitate to rebuke those things that displease him. Indeed, according to the messages in Revelation 2-3, one reason why churches may fail and even disappear is that Christ comes to them and removes their lampstand (Rev. 2:5).

Christ's messages to the churches of Revelation are relevant to us today for the same reason they were so urgent nineteen centuries ago: Christ's people need to hear Christ's voice. The tendency is for our ideas about the church to veer in a selfish or worldly direction unless we are constantly under the correction of our sovereign Lord. This being the case it is remarkable that the messages of Revelation 2-3 exert so little influence among Christians today. Few believers have given serious study to these chapters, and few churches would highlight these as guiding passages for their life and ministry. Yet the Christ who speaks in these chapters continues to stand in the midst of his lampstands, continues to reign as the Sovereign of his churches,

and continues to hold the stars of the churches in his hand. Because the exalted Christ continues to proclaim his priorities to the church through these seven messages, Christians should study Revelation 2-3 with special care and respond with reverent obedience.

SEVEN MESSAGES TO THE CHURCHES

The so-called “seven letters to the churches” in Revelation are not actually letters. Instead, they form a vital portion of the book of Revelation, which forms a single letter to the churches. Note, for instance, that these messages were not divided and sent to the respective churches but rather were sent together to be read aloud in all of the churches. Their form is similar to the prophetic oracles of the Old Testament, through which God spoke with authority to his people. They are therefore better thought of as messages to these seven churches that are equally intended for the whole of the church throughout the gospel age. This was the view of the ancient church which commented on Revelation within a few generations of its writing. The Muratorian Canon, for instance, dated from 170 AD, states that “John also in the Revelation writes indeed to seven churches yet speaks to all.” Each message concludes, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev. 2:7). The fact that they are addressed to the churches in plural, and the fact that the problems identified here are common to churches of all times, makes it clear that these letters have universal relevance to all the churches of Christ. As Ramsay Michaels writes: “Nowhere is the old saying, ‘If the shoe fits, wear it,’ better demonstrated than here.”¹

The seven messages follow a shared format. Christ 1) praises the churches, 2) points out areas for repentance, 3) warns the churches of his judgment, and 4) promises blessings for those that overcome in his name. Each of the letters also begins with a description of Christ that is drawn from the vision of chapter 1. These descriptions connect the seven messages to the book of Revelation as a whole, just as the continued use of these images throughout the book shows that these letters apply to the entire history it represents.

The first message, to the church in Ephesus, begins: “The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the

¹ J. Ramsey Michaels, *Revelation*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 1997), 65.

seven golden lampstands” (Rev. 2:1). At the end of this message, Christ will threaten to come and remove the church’s lampstand. He thus begins by reminding them of his sovereignty over their place in his realm. Moreover, Jesus presents himself as standing amidst the churches, whose stars he holds in his hand. Thus when he says, “I know” (Rev. 2:2), we see that he is present with his people even though he is unseen. In this way, Christ, the Chief Shepherd of his flock, sets a good example for his under-shepherds. Jesus is present with his churches, is interested and involved with them. Vern Poythress observes that Christ addresses “each one according to its needs, with encouragement, rebuke, exhortation, and promise.”²

The seven messages are addressed by Christ to “the angel” of each church. This probably refers to the guardian angels assigned to the ministry of the congregations. His audience is made clear, however, when each message ends with an exhortation for the readers to hear “what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev. 2:7). By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the apostle John is transmitting urgent messages from Christ to his people. The messages to the various churches will each bear their distinctive marks, yet they convey a agenda. James Hamilton summarizes: “For the glory of God, Jesus charges the churches to be zealous for the gospel, reject false teaching, and live in a manner that corresponds to the gospel.”³

CHRIST’S PRAISE FOR FAITHFULNESS

The first of Christ’s messages was directed to the church of Ephesus, the leading city of Asia. It was the gateway to the Roman Empire in the region now known as Turkey, with rivers and roads connecting it to far flung places. Ephesus was famous for its great harbor, a great marketplace, and especially the great Temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was also a dissolute and greatly immoral city, in large part because of the cultic prostitution and the liberty granted to criminals at its famous temple. The ancient philosopher Heraclitus, who lived in Ephesus, was known as the “weeping philosopher,” because, he explained, “no one could live in Ephesus without weeping at its immorality.”⁴ Just as the awesome sight of the Temple of Artemis, four times the size of the

² Vern S. Poythress, *The Returning King: A Guide to the Book of Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 83.

³ James Hamilton, 53.

⁴ WB, 67.

Acropolis in Athens, with 120 gilded and inlaid marble columns, each 60 feet high, dominated the views of the city, the wickedness of pagan idolatry dominated the life of this place where Christ's people dwelt.

The church in Ephesus was a second-generation congregation, having been founded forty years earlier by Paul, who later stayed to teach for three years during his third missionary journey. It then was overseen by Paul's helper Timothy, until after Paul's death the apostle John came, probably around the year 66 AD. Paul wrote one of his greatest epistles to this church, together with two of his pastoral epistles. From Ephesus came the Gospel of John, in addition to John's three epistles. The apostles had thus invested a great deal in this church, and it is likely that the church in Ephesus extended the gospel throughout Asia so as to plant the other churches of the region.

With such leadership and ministry, it is not surprising that Jesus finds much to praise in these believers. First, he says: "I know your works, your toil" (Rev. 2:2). This refers to their faithful efforts to spread the gospel and to build up the church through ministries of love and service. They had worked hard and they have the satisfaction of learning that Jesus had noticed. Not all Christians work hard. Not all believers put the gifts given to them by Christ to good use. The word "toil" translates a Greek word that means hard labor (*kopon*). None of us work as diligently as we should for Christ, but it encourages us to find that he pays attention to what we do on his behalf. We are reminded here of the words Jesus will say to all of his followers who worked hard for him while he was gone: "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Mt. 25:21).

Not only had the Ephesians performed good works in Christ's name, but they had persevered patiently under trials: "I know... your patient endurance... I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary" (Rev. 2:2-3). This commendation indicates not merely that they had continued in believing, but that they had stood up to the pressure to conform to the surrounding culture. Derek Thomas writes: "In the face of opposition, these Christians had continued in their witness to Jesus Christ. They had not yielded to the pressures to conform. They had stood firm, enduring the cross that came in the wake of their bold testimony."⁵ They were like the Christians in the early Twentieth Century in

⁵ Derek Thomas, *Let's Study Revelation* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2003), 20.

America would not succumb to modernism, and refused to water down the Bible's teaching on creation, sin, redemption, and holiness. They were like churches today who will not yield to the demands of relativistic postmodernity, but uphold the authority of Scripture, continue to preach Jesus as the only Savior of the world, and raise their children to walk in the old paths of sexual purity, sacrificial service, and obedience to God's Word.

Third, Christ commends the Ephesians for their vigilance over the truth: "I know... 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" (Rev. 2:2). It is especially encouraging to read this, given Paul's parting words to the Ephesian elders a generation earlier, warning them of "fierce wolves" who would try to come in "not sparing the flock" (Acts 20:29). "Therefore, be alert," Paul urged them (Acts 20:31), words that the Ephesians apparently took to heart. It seems that false teachers had come among them, claiming to be apostles, but under testing they had been proven as false and rejected. Jesus goes on to identify this threat in a further commendation: "Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate" (Rev. 2:6). We will gain more details about the Nicolaitans in a later message, but for now we can be sure that they were teaching false doctrine and encouraging compromise with worldly sensualism. William Barclay summarizes: "The Nicolaitans were not prepared to be different; they were the most dangerous of all heretics from a practical point of view, for, if their teaching had been successful, the world would have changed Christianity and not Christianity the world."⁶

Observers of culture today note that Christianity's main offense is the way our faith will not yield to the claims of other viewpoints. Many urge believers to relax our exclusive stance, to accommodate worldly perspectives and embrace a more pliable attitude towards matters like gender, sexuality, and the claims of science over the Bible. In this way, it is argued, Christians will get along better and receive a less hostile hearing. There are two great errors in this advice, however. The first error is failing to realize that this attitude always been the stance of faithful Christians. Eighty years ago J. Gresham Machen wrote a book called *Christianity & Liberalism*, in which he argued

⁶ William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, The Daily Study Bible (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1976, 2004), 77.

against the demands for Christians to embrace a secularist viewpoint. He answered by pointing out that the stand for exclusive biblical truth was the very thing that caused the early Christians trouble in the Roman Empire:

The early Christian missionaries demanded an absolutely exclusive devotion to Christ. Such exclusiveness ran directly counter to the prevailing syncretism of the Hellenistic age... Salvation... was not merely through Christ, but it was only through Christ. In that little word 'only' lay all the offense. Without that word there would have been no persecutions; the cultured men of the day would probably have been willing to give Jesus a place, and an honorable place, among the saviours of mankind. Without its exclusiveness, the Christian message would have seemed perfectly inoffensive to the men of that day... All men [would] speak well of it... But it [would also be] entirely futile. The offense of the Cross is done away, but so is the glory and the power.”⁷

We see here how important it is in how Christians define success. Those who would define success in terms of cultural approval and numerical growth need to reckon with the example of the first Christians, and, second, with the fact that Jesus praised them for refusing to allow false teaching. Indeed, Jesus’ own example was one of constantly striving for truth, without yielding to false teaching and practice. Surely Jesus’ praise to the Ephesians for testing and rejecting the false teachers should disabuse us of the idea that we can remain neutral in matters of truth. We certainly should avoid needless controversy and argument. But when truth is up for sale there is fidelity to Christ on one side and friendship with the world on the other. “This you have,” Jesus said: “you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate” (Rev. 2:6).

CHRIST’S CHALLENGE TO REKINDLE LOST LOVE

There was, however, a serious problem in Ephesus, and Jesus did not hesitate to confront it: “But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first” (Rev. 2:4).

This rebuke is understood in two ways. Many commentators hear Jesus saying that in their zeal for correct doctrine the Ephesians have

⁷ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity & Liberalism*, 123-4.

become unloving towards people. In earlier days they had warmly embraced all who named the Lord in faith, but their zealous orthodoxy has made them suspicious and harsh. The second view sees this rebuke as charging the Ephesians with growing cold in their love for Jesus and their zeal for a close relationship with him. It is likely that both are involved, especially since loss of love for God will result in less fervent affection for fellow Christians. This poses a serious challenge for doctrinally-minded people: Jesus' rebuke does not say that zeal for truth must always make our love grow cold but it certainly indicates that this is possible. This is why Paul warned: "If I have prophetic power, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing" (1 Cor. 13:2).

We should consider this problem of abandoning our first love as it relates to churches and to individual Christian. How deadly it is to grow up in a church active in good works and sound in doctrine but devoid of love for Christ! This is the failure that results in young people from seemingly good churches drifting away from the faith: despite good works and faithful Bible preaching, there was no fire to enflame the soul and no grace to melt the heart.

According to James Boice, who traveled extensively in evangelical churches in America, despite vigorous activity in churches an actual interest in God is hard to find. While there is great interest in proper organization, ministry technique, and musical performance, "God has become 'weightless' for the masses of today's alleged believers. Quoting David Wells, Boice asserts that "God rests upon us so inconsequentially as not to be noticeable."⁸ In other words, Christians who were making much of building their ministries and waging a culture war with pagan secularism had taken their eyes off of God himself and were in danger of forgetting his sovereign glory. "Lacking a biblical and well-understood theology," Boice observed, "evangelicals have fallen prey to the consumerism of our times... [and] modern evangelicalism has become a movement that is shaped only by popular whim and sentimentality."⁹

The remedy to otherwise good churches that have lost their fervor for Christ is given in his rebuke: "Remember therefore from where you

⁸ James Montgomery Boice, *Revelation*, unpublished manuscript, 9.

⁹ James Montgomery Boice, *Revelation*, unpublished manuscript, 6:9-10.

have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first” (Rev. 2:5). Surely this will start with preaching and worship that are centered on God and not man and that are strongly grounded on the Bible and its message of saving grace. Jesus warns: “If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent” (Rev. 2:5). The ruins that currently occupy the former site of the Ephesian church warn us of Christ’s seriousness, as should the decreasing influence and power experienced by our churches today.

This same rebuke should be directed towards Christian individuals: “I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first” (Rev. 2:4). Many Christians recognize that the enthusiasm they once had for Christ is no longer seen in their lives. In former days, perhaps when first converted, we zealously searched God’s Word for truth and applied it to our lives. We thought much about Jesus and our hearts burned with wonder for the grace of his cross. We longed to grow in godliness and each advance was a thrilling confirmation of our salvation. But these have become commonplace themes to us now. Perhaps with the increased burden of responsibility, or a foolish tolerance of sin or worldly influences, we just don’t find ourselves drawing near to the Lord as we once did. We have not turned from the faith and we are still performing our Christian duties. But from Jesus’ perspective, it is obvious that the first love has grown dim, perhaps replaced with lesser, more worldly priorities.

If we find that Jesus’ rebuke fits our own situation, what should we do? He provides the answer in three points. First, he says, we must remember: “Remember therefore from where you have fallen” (Rev. 2:5). We should think back to former times when Christ occupied a higher place in our lives. We should remember the blessing it was to have our minds filled with the light of God’s Word filling and what a joy we had in our hearts when Christ had the first place there.

O. Henry wrote a short story about someone who began again by being reminded of what he once had been. A boy grew up in a village, and in the school there he sat beside a sweet, innocent girl who had captured his heart. Later the boy found himself in the city, where he fell into bad company and became a pickpocket. One day on the street he had just lifted a purse when he spied the very girl he once sat beside in school. Suddenly, by seeing her, he remembered the boy he

once had been and realized how far he had fallen.¹⁰ We may notice in others the Christian we once were: maybe a recent convert or one who is filled with wonder for Christ and his grace. If so, Jesus urges us to remember our first love with longing. William Cowper wrote: “Where is the blessedness I knew / When first I saw the Lord? / Where is the soul-refreshing view / Of Jesus and his word?”

Remembering is not enough, however. Jesus adds: “repent” (Rev. 2:5). This means that we must take action to change whatever caused us to lose our fervor for Christ. Perhaps something has come into our life that now needs to go back out. In some cases, this may require the actual removal of things like video games, worldly magazines, hobbies that eat up our time, or worldly associations. We should ask ourselves what happened or what entered our lives so as to account for our lessened fervor for Christ. Then we should remove it or put it back into its proper place and priority.

Finally, Jesus says to “do the works you did at first” (Rev. 2:5). This means that we must return again to the cross of Christ seeking forgiveness and cleansing from sin. This was the first thing we did in our conversion to Christ, and it was in wonder for “the breadth and length and height and depth” of the cross (Eph. 3:18) that our fervor was born and thrived. Second, we must return to what we used to do. This will include things like regular and eager attendance in church, serious time devoted to God’s Word, and a focused time of prayer at the beginning and end of each day. Geoffrey Wilson points out that Christ’s command “is not, ‘Feel thy first feelings,’ but, ‘Do the first works.’” This makes that point that the way “to regain this warmth of affection is neither by working up spasmodic emotion nor by theorizing about it, but by doing its duties.”¹¹

“Remember, repent, and return” – this is Christ’s call to reformation for churches that have grown dim and Christians who have abandoned their first love.

CHRIST’S PROMISE TO THOSE WHO CONQUER

The final element in the seven messages to the churches of Revelation is a promise from Christ for blessing to those who

¹⁰ Cited from Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, 72.

¹¹ Wilson, 484.

conquer through faith: “To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (Rev. 2:7).

To conquer with Christ does not mean that all our difficulties have gone away or that believers can all expect to become thin, beautiful, wealthy, and powerful. Christians conquer by persevering to the end in faith, godliness, truth, and fervent love. This is the chief message of the entire book of Revelation, so we will gain a deeper idea of Christian overcoming as we progress in the book. Revelation 12:11 will provide us perhaps the clearest picture of Christians conquering in faith. The chapter depicts the warfare between Satan and the church that suffers his affliction. John writes: “they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.”

To conquer in Christ is to confess our sins and seek the atoning power of his death for our forgiveness, to hold fast to the gospel truths of the Bible as the foundation of our faith, and out of love for Jesus to be willing both to live for him now and die with him should there be a day of final testing. Do you realize what a victory this overcoming faith wins? John wrote in his first epistle: “this is the victory that has overcome the world--our faith” (1 Jn. 5:4).

Christians conquer amidst tribulation in this world, but the blessing Jesus promises is received in the world to come when he returns: “To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (Rev. 2:7).

This promise refers back to the blessing lost by Adam and Eve through sin, as they were barred from eating from the Tree of Life (Gen. 3:22). Ever since that day sinners have sought desperately to either find or build a paradise here on earth. Have you been trying to do that? Ever earthly form of paradise fails precisely because it cannot provide the life for which we were created. Yet Jesus holds open before those who persevere with him, bearing the cross through this world, and conquering through their faith, a true paradise prepared in heaven for those who love him, where the Tree of Life blooms with leaves “for the healing of the nations” (Rev. 22:2). Jesus confronts us with our obligation to overcome through faith in him: he says, “In the world you will have tribulation.” But, together with the promised Tree of Life, Jesus offers his own presence to those who

rekindle their first love for him, saying, “take heart; I have overcome the world” (Jn. 16:33).