

Ephesus: A Church at the Crossroads

Revelation 2:1-7

We have a remarkable thing before us this morning. Imagine if I took this piece of paper and said to you, "I've just received a message from Jesus. I was in my study this morning. An angel appeared and handed me this piece of paper. It's a letter directly from Christ, and it's addressed 'To Harvest Church, in Wyoming, Michigan. And I've been commanded to read it to you."

How would you feel? Nervous? Anticipation? Maybe a little exposed.

Well, that's exactly what happened to the churches in Asia Minor. In each of the letters here in Revelation 2 and 3, Jesus specifically addresses an individual church and has a specific message for them. "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write..."

However, as we noted last week, these 7 letters, while addressed specifically to 7 individual churches, compose a single letter to the church of all times and places. In other words, there is no substantive difference between an angel showing up and giving me a piece of paper and what we actually have here in Revelation 2 and 3. In either case, we have, in every meaningful way, a letter from Jesus for Harvest Church in Wyoming, Michigan. The Jesus who spoke with John is speaking to us. The Jesus who knew the deeds of the believers in Ephesus knows the deeds of the believers at Harvest. In his commendations and condemnations for them, we can read his commendations and condemnations for us. These letters belong to us and are for us just as much as they belonged to and were for the churches of Asia Minor.

Last week we studied the vision John had of the real Jesus, a Jesus of overwhelming glory, awesome might, and perfect holiness and judgement. Though John was well-acquainted with Jesus during his earthly ministry and had been a faithful servant of Christ all the 60 years since Jesus's ascension, when this godly, old man saw the living, reigning reality of Jesus he "collapsed at his feet as though dead." As we said last week, if we could expect anyone in the entire Bible to feel comfortable around Jesus, it would have been John. But he's entirely overwhelmed and undone by the glory of our Savior and Lord. This is the Jesus who wishes to speak to us this morning.

Jesus begins by introducing himself:

"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."

There are two things Jesus is telling us here: he is reminding us of his sovereign **authority** and **presence**.

Authority: He holds the seven stars in his right hand – the hand of dominion.

Presence: He walks **among** the golden lampstands, present in the midst of the church.

We need to see Jesus in his special relationship to the church. Jesus reigns over all the nations of the world, but the church is his house, his holy temple. The church is his precious bride, the people for

whom he gave his life and shed his atoning blood. The church is the assembly of those who have been made new, made children of God, made citizens of heaven and ambassadors in the world. The church is filled with the Spirit of Christ and commanded to carry out the gospel mission of Christ. So, you can see why Jesus cares about what happens in his church.

I. Commendation

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.*

“*I know your works...*” Jesus knows this church perfectly—far better than they know themselves. We tend to see ourselves with rose-colored glasses. We have blind spots, blurred vision, and distorted perspectives. But Jesus sees with absolute, perfect clarity. His eyes are like flaming fire.

“*I know your works...*” Jesus means this as an encouragement. One of the greatest discouragements when we are suffering, or when the way is hard, is the feeling that no one knows. Does anyone notice? Does anyone care? Does anyone see? Jesus says, “I know. I care. I see.” He lovingly commends this church. They have toiled in the fight of faith. They have shown great endurance in their battle against false teachers and false teaching.

It wasn’t easy being a Christian in Ephesus. Ephesus was the primary city of the region politically, commercially, and religiously. It was the *neokoros*, the warden of the temple of Emperor Domitian, serving the cultic worship of the Roman ruler as a god. The Temple of Domitian controlled the highway leading into the city. The Temple of Diana dominated the harbor. It was one of the 7 wonders of the world—a block and a half long, 260 feet wide (as wide as the property from 52nd to the fence.), 60 feet high, surrounded by 127 columns, and all made of brilliant, white marble. Twice as large as any other temple of the day. These two temples, with all their pagan power and moral perversion, dominated the culture of Ephesus.

The city itself was large, with several hundred thousand people. And thoroughly, aggressively pagan. Every possible corruption of truth and morals was found there. Even unbelievers were aghast at the debauchery of the pagan feasts and temple worship. Heraclitus wrote that the morals of the temple were worse than the morals of animals. “The people,” he said, “who engaged in that were fit only to be drowned.”

And yet, the church in Ephesus was a growing, vibrant, faithful, church-planting congregation. The church of Ephesus was like the mother church of Asia Minor. All the churches referred to here had been planted by the church in Ephesus.

It was a church that boasted an impressive succession of pastors:

Paul – three years

Apollos – with Priscilla and Aquila

Timothy – Pauls’ protégé

The Apostle John – pastor until his arrest and imprisonment on Patmos

While the city was profoundly pagan, the greatest threat to the church was not from without but within. The Devil had tried mightily to corrupt the church with false teachers. Paul had warned the elders of Ephesus about this in his final speech to them.

Acts 20:28–30 *Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock... ²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.*

Paul had given Timothy, his pastoral replacement the same charge.

1 Timothy 1:3 *As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine...*

2 Timothy 4:1–3 *I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: ² preach the word... ³ For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions...*

This is what the church is always up against—false teachers twisting biblical truth and people eager to accumulate teachers to suit their own passions. Whether it's health/wealth theology, social justice theology, or emergent church theology, people will flock to hear it. It suits their passions. That's what the Bible promises. That's what we see throughout the history of the church. And that's why Jesus commends this church!

"...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."

One of the greatest needs of the church is the gift of discernment. I just read an article about Rachel Hollis, a top-selling, self-proclaimed Christian author who is teaching self-help, self-actualization, and achieve-your-dreams theology. Christian women are scooping it up by the score. (There's a great article on The Gospel Coalition website titled "Girl, Follow Jesus").

A church cannot survive without discernment. But—and this is a critical lesson for the church—neither can it survive without love.

II. Condemnation

⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

Can you imagine Jesus, the King and Lord of the Universe, the one who holds all of human history and your little life in his hand, saying to you, "I have this against you"? Remember, Jesus loves this church! This rebuke comes full of loving concern for his precious bride.

What is it that has so concerned the heart of Christ?

"You have abandoned the love you had at first."

There is quite a bit of debate about the specific meaning of this phrase. Which love is Jesus speaking of, love for God or Christ, love for one another, or something else?

Most preachers take it to mean love for Christ, probably because of the old King James translation: "you've abandoned your first love." That sounds like Jesus is talking about a "primary love," the most important love. But that's a poor translation. The ESV is more accurate: "the love you had at first." The love they have abandoned was not their **primary** love but their **prior** love.

This is why most **commentators** take this love to be **their love for one another**. The best evidence for this interpretation is found in verse 5, where Jesus calls the church in Ephesus to repent, not by calling them to recover loving **affections** but to recover loving **actions**.

⁵...repent, and do the works, (the deeds) you did at first.

The failure of Ephesus was a failure to actively love each other with the sacrificial, gracious, servant love they once had. Thirty years ago, in his letter to this church in Ephesus, Paul had praised them for their love.

***Ephesians 1:15–16** For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, ¹⁶I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers...*

They once were known for their love for all the saints. But they had abandoned it.

And that's a problem, as John, their former pastor, explains so clearly in his first letter:

"If anyone says he loves God but hates his brother, he is a liar and the truth of God is not in him."

***1 John 4:7–12** Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.... ¹⁰In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.*

This failure to love is a critical failure for two reasons:

1. It is a renunciation of the gospel message. The gospel is the incredible story of God's great love for lost, ruined sinners in Jesus. Churches that say they believe the gospel without manifesting the love of Christ amongst themselves are repudiating the very gospel they say they believe.
2. It is an abdication of the church's gospel mission. **Beale** points out that Jesus' threat to "remove their lampstand" is directly related to their failure to BE a gospel lamp. In failing to love one another with the love of Christ, they are abandoning the church's mission and calling to be a light to the nations. He believes this is the primary point of the text. Jesus is offended by their failure because it is a failure of gospel mission! They live in a dark place—a place that is desperately in need of gospel light. But a church that doesn't love one another

with conspicuous concern for a lost world is a church that has forgotten its mission and is of no use to Christ.

Beale: “If they will not exercise their call to be a lamp of witness, then their lamp will be removed, as it was with Israel in the OT....If they do not repent, Christ will judge them. They will cease to exist as a church when the very function that defines the essence of their existence is no longer performed.” (231-232)

Wow. Church history is littered with the churches who suffered for lack of love and gospel mission long before they failed for lack of orthodoxy.

This is a penchant warning to Harvest, don't you think? This is why I keep saying that being orthodox isn't enough. It's essential—but the only orthodoxy that delights the heart of Christ is the orthodoxy that empowers love and mission. Pastor Wayne will be speaking more on this tonight from John 17. There Jesus prays that the church would express true gospel unity, “so that the world may know” the gospel is true. The Jesus who prayed that prayer speaks here, 60 years later, the exact same truth to his church.

III. Consecration

A. A Command

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.

Remember: There was a time in the past when the church of Ephesus was happily, sacrificially engaged in loving each other. Jesus said, *remember*.

Repent: Acknowledge the sin for what it is—see it the way Jesus sees it. And then turn from the sin and take action towards obedience.

Remove: Jesus is very clear about what will happen if they, and we, do not repent.

*“I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.”
“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”*

It needs to be noted that this is a warning spoken directly to the members of the congregation. This congregation had been blessed with great preaching and tremendous leadership. No other church could boast the same. The failure to apply what they had heard, the failure to live in the light of the gospel they had been taught, the failure to shine the gospel light—was on them. It was their failure.

Good preaching and teaching can only do so much. At the end of the day, what Harvest will look like, how Harvest loves, how Harvest shines, is up to you. Preachers can't make you practice hospitality. Preaching and teaching can't make you give up grudges or old wounds and be restored to a brother or sister in Christ. Good theology can't make you open your eyes to see the visitor standing alone in the foyer or the young person who for some reason is being left out of the group. Orthodoxy can't make

you actually love each other and the lost world around us so that we eagerly pursue the mission Christ has given to us.

But I know two things:

1. Jesus isn't kidding with this command or his threat.
2. Jesus is the only one who can teach us and compel us to do this, and he surely will if we confess our sin and look to him.

How did the Ephesian church forget about love? The same way we tend to do it—we get busy, we get proud, trials turn us into ourselves. Most of all, we lose sight of Jesus and the promises he gives.

Notice how lovingly Jesus holds before us an unspeakable blessing to encourage us in faith and obedience.

B. A Promise

“To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”

This is a reference to eternal life: dwelling in intimate communion with God in His presence forever, like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, only better. This promise is all the marbles. There's nothing greater he could promise. This is what Jesus promises us if we conquer. We'll study that phrase more as we go through the book. For now, just know that we conquer by abiding in Jesus, looking to Jesus, and obeying Jesus.

Application: How are we doing in love and mission? How are you doing?

Love will involve knowing each other—on purpose.

- Intentional hospitality
- Use church directory for prayer
- Benevolent ministry

Love will involve refusing to allow grudges or division in the body.

Love will involve refusal to allow cliques in the body.

Mission will involve intentionally seeking to share the light of the gospel with a lost and dying world; intentionally going into the darkness with the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. It's one of the most essential ministries of the church.

We have all the power, grace, and truth we need in the gospel of our Lord Jesus, in the reality of his infinite love for us. As we come to the table, receive the love of Christ for you. And then commit yourself to obedience to his commands. He who has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Amen.