

THE CHURCH THAT LOST ITS LOVE

by Ray C. Stedman

What a wonderful week this has been! The whole world has been caught by surprise at the developments in Eastern Europe. New doors of freedom have opened there; even the barrier of the Berlin Wall has been set aside. It has been fascinating to watch. What struck me most was the universal reaction of people to this dramatic change. No one ever expected it to happen! Over and over as people were interviewed they said, "I never believed this would happen in my day." It was not only the common man who was surprised but statesmen, politicians, national leaders and even the military; everyone was wholly taken by wonder at this dramatic breakthrough.

That is highly significant. It indicates that this was not a man-made, planned event. It all happened spontaneously. No one sat down and decided to move, through politics or by the inner counsels of the mighty, to bring this about. It is indicative that a change was made in the councils of God. Somewhere in the invisible realms, where the cosmic battle of the ages is being fought, a blow was struck for liberty! As a result we have a political earthquake which is shaking Europe to its foundations.

The interesting thing to me is that it is this invisible war which we are studying in the book of Revelation. This is the book that unveils it for us. And here, at the very beginning of this book, the church is in the forefront -- in the front-line trenches. Let me read again the words of Jesus to John as the apostle saw him in the powerful vision that opens this book:

"Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches." {Rev 1:19-20 NIV}

Then, in Chapter 2 through Chapter 3, we have these remarkable letters to the seven churches. I find many people would like to skip these letters and get on into the juicier sections of Revelation where the great upheavals of the last days are depicted. But it is a great mistake to do that. Our Lord set his church in the midst of the world. It is his instrument to control and determine human history. Jesus calls the church "the light of the world" {Matt 5:14}, and "the salt of the earth," {Matt 5:13}. The Apostle Paul calls it "the pillar and ground of the truth," {1 Tim 3:15 KJV}. That is the mystery and mission of the church. It is expected to exert tremendous influence in the world's affairs. It is a mistake, therefore, to pass these letters over. Here we see our Lord correcting things within the church, encouraging and teaching it how to live influentially in the day in which it is called to live.

As we come to these letters we must ask ourselves: "Why are there only seven churches, and why these particular seven?" The only satisfactory answer is that these are representative churches. They are carefully selected churches. There were many other churches in the province of Asia at the time John wrote this letter. Others of them could have been selected, but only these seven were chosen. They were not even the best known churches in Asia, but they were chosen by the Lord because they represent conditions that will obtain throughout the whole period of church history from its beginning to its end. In other words, there are only seven types of churches that exist at any one given period of time. Every church that truly knows Jesus as Lord can be recognized as one of these seven at some particular moment of its history. By repentance or disobedience it may change its classification to another of these seven types, but it will always be found to fit somewhere in this seven-fold pattern.

But beyond that, as many commentators have pointed out, these letters are a kind of preview of the entire history of the church from its beginning to its consummation. In other words they represents even stages or periods of church history. The key that suggests this is the word (in 1:3) that calls this whole book a "prophecy." This prophecy includes Chapters 2 and 3, as well as the rest of the book. Seven, as we have

already seen in Chapter 1, is the number of completeness. These letters, then, is our Lord's preview of the entire church throughout its history as it moves through various stages of development.

We must never forget that all of Revelation was written for these seven churches. Each is expected to know and understand the whole book. It is not just Chapters 2 and 3 that concern the churches; their concern is the entire vision that was given to John. As we go through these letters we will try to trace (though in very brief space) the different periods of the history of the church, and also take careful note of what the Lord says to each historic individual church.

Somewhere in this listing of churches we will find Peninsula Bible Church as well.

One further preliminary before we turn to the text. These churches are here called "lampstands," i.e., they are light-bearers. They are not the light themselves, but they hold or bear the light. The light, of course, is the truth as it is in Jesus, that truth which God wants the human race to know. There are many truths that are unknown to man in his natural state. No university, great or mighty or important as it may be, has knowledge of the truth which the church is given to tell the world. That is the moral and redemptive "light" which the church is called to reflect to a dark world. It is the business of the church to tell truth to the world. We must never forget that. We are not simply to make our way through this difficult world as best we can, coming together in little holy huddles to survive until the coming of the Lord. We have an influence to exercise, and these letters to the seven churches marvelously reflect that fact.

Notice also that each letter is addressed to the *angel* of the church. Many commentators struggle over this. What is meant by "the angel of the church"? It is true, as some have pointed out, that this word can be translated "messenger," and in other parts of the New Testament it does have that meaning. But it does not have that meaning elsewhere in Revelation! The word "angel" appears many times in the book outside these seven letters, and in every case it refers to a heavenly being -- what we normally think of as an angel. It is suggestive here that each church has a heavenly being responsible for guiding the human leadership of each.

Some have seen this is as a reference to the pastor, or human leader of the church. That is not likely since in all the churches of the New Testament you never find a single human leader. Leadership is always in the plural -- elders and pastors of churches. It is men who have made that change in the centuries since our Lord began the church. Dr. H. A. Ironside once told me of his experience when he was asked to preach every Sunday in the Brethren Assembly, on 42nd Street in Oakland, many years ago. A certain individual in the church would write him a letter every Monday morning, and he always knew how he had done by the way the letter started. If he had pleased this individual, and had said the things the man agreed with, the letter always began, "To the angel of the church at Oakland, greetings." But if he had displeased him, or said something he did not agree with, the letter would invariably begin, "To Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among us" -- a phrase taken from Third John 1:9.

But here we have no human leader addressed. It is sent to the angel of the church, the one responsible to help the human leaders of the church to know the mind of the Lord. Remember that in Hebrews we are told that angels are "ministering spirits, sent forth to serve the heirs of salvation" {Heb 1:14 KJV}, i.e., Christians. It seems very likely therefore that in those invisible realms, which are very real but which we cannot see, there are angels assigned to each church to help the leaders and the congregation to know what is on the heart of its Lord.

Now let us come to the church at Ephesus in the opening verses of Chapter 2:

"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

"These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary." {Rev 2:1-3 NIV}

The first thing the Lord wished to impress upon this church at Ephesus was that he was the Lord of all the churches. He was in their midst, observing among the lampstands. He was also in direct control of the angels of the churches and therefore had full access to the leadership of each church.

This church at Ephesus had been begun by the Apostle Paul. You can read the account of it in the 19th chapter of Acts. When Paul came to Ephesus he found a number of disciples who had been led to some knowledge of truth by Apollos, the great orator of the early church. But they knew nothing but the ministry of John the Baptist. When Paul asked them whether they had received the Holy Spirit they confessed that they did not know that the Holy Spirit had been given. So Paul preached Jesus to them, they believed and were baptized by the Spirit and so the church in Ephesus came into existence. Some time later Paul himself labored there for over two years, and many years later he sent Timothy to this church. (The two letters to Timothy are addressed to him while he is working there). Tradition tells us that after John had written the book of Revelation he also went to Ephesus and spent the closing years of his life there.

Ephesus was not the capital of the Roman province of Asia, but it was the most important city in it. It was a center of great commercial life and a crossroads of the empire. The city was known throughout the Roman world as the center for the worship of the goddess Artemis, and the great temple of Artemis (or Diana, as it is called in the King James Version) was located there. This great temple was larger than two football fields in length, and was one of the seven wonders of the world. Its ruins are still visible today. The city therefore had great influence in the Roman world. As you read the account, you can see much of the same atmosphere of worldly power and influence as in the Bay Area or the city of San Francisco today.

Each of these letters consists of a searching appraisal, of both good and bad, which our Lord makes of the condition of that church; and also an appeal for repentance on the part of those who had fallen away and plea for a return to faith, with a spiritual promise to those who hold fast.

The Lord sees three commendable things about this church.

First, he says they were hard, committed workers: "I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance." These Christians were activists. They were not couch potatoes. They took their faith seriously and they put it to work. They witnessed; they labored; they ministered to human needs. They helped the downcast and ministered to the homeless and outcasts of society. They were busy people, continually working, and our Lord commends them for that.

Second, their doctrine was orthodox. Jesus commends them highly for this: "I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles, but are not, and have found them false." Their faith was well defined and well defended. They did not run after every theological fad that came along. They examined them as to whether or not they were true. They checked up on what was being taught and they strongly opposed some of the teaching that was being presented by some of the itinerant speakers of that day.

In his last visit with the elders of the church at Ephesus the Apostle Paul had warned them that they would have trouble in this area. In the 20th chapter of Acts we find him summoning the elders of Ephesus to come down to him at the city of Miletus. There he delivered to them a farewell message of moving impact because he thought he would never see them again. In the course of it, he said to them, in Verse 29:

"I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears." {Acts 20:29-31 NIV}

So Paul understood the problem that would confront this church. Here, the Lord Jesus recognizes how well they had followed the apostle's advice. They had checked up on speakers, and had refused the teaching of many. They had tested those who claimed to be apostles and found them to be false.

Last week I received a manuscript of a new book that will be published soon by Moody Press. It is a collection of articles written by some of the outstanding evangelical leaders of our day examining the teaching of certain

televangelists who are occupying much time and space on our television sets these days. It is a searching, but objective, examination of whether such teaching is in line with the Scriptures. Paul had shown these elders in Ephesus how to test doctrine. He gives it in that same passage, in Verse 32:

"Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified." {Acts 20:32 NIV}

What is the ground of testing? It is whether a teaching agrees with the Scriptures, with the "word of God's grace," as he calls it there. If this were more widely practiced today we would probably have been spared much of the terrible, shameful scandals that have occupied the front pages of our papers and other media.

Think, for instance, what would have happened here in the Bay Area if some church had analyzed the teaching of Jim Jones and had warned people of his errors. How many of the thousand that he led to their deaths would still be living today if the churches had had the courage and wisdom to analyze his teaching and challenge it!

Our Lord commends the Ephesians for doing this. He does not charge them with being judgmental, or say, as many do today, that churches have no right to judge. He points out that this was part of the teaching they had received, and he commends them for it.

The third thing he commends them for is found in Verse 3: "You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary." They had persisted in their teaching and their work despite much discouragement and hardship. They were not quitters. They were sturdy, determined disciples, faithfully working and witnessing and not deviating from the truth they had received. Up to this point in the letter they were getting a grade of A+. But -- that is not the whole story. Our Lord goes on:

"Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." {Rev 2:4-6 RSV}

Now we can see that this is a church in serious trouble. Despite all the commendable things, there is something seriously wrong. Our Lord puts it in one brief phrase, "You have abandoned your first love." That is the problem. So serious is that that he says, "If you do not correct it, I will remove your lampstand." This indicates this is a very serious matter. The removal of the lampstand does not mean that the individual members of the church would be lost or condemned to hell. What it means is the church would lose its ability to shed the light of truth. The light from this church would stop shining. They would become a church with no influence or impact spiritually upon the community around. They would be busy doing religious, but entirely irrelevant, things. They would still be working, still orthodox, but inconsequential, with no light, no impact.

Sadly, we have to say that there are thousands of churches like this in our country today. There are churches where congregations are still meeting year after year, Sunday after Sunday, doing religious things -- singing hymns, reciting the Apostles' Creed, perhaps doing some good works in the neighborhood -- but having no spiritual impact, seeing no change in people's lives, no releasing of them from their sins, no changes in the morals or outlooks of a whole community. Their light has failed.

What causes that condition? Our Lord says it is because they left their first love. They abandoned it. When we ask, "What is first love?" the answer is almost obvious. It is the love you felt for Jesus when you first came to know him. It is that wonderful sense of discovery that he loved you, and had delivered you, and freed you from your sins. Your heart went out to him in gratitude and thanksgiving; you had eyes for no one but him.

Watch a couple who have fallen in love. Note how they have eyes only for each other. How spacy they are! Talk to them, and they do not even hear you. They are only thinking of the wonder of each other.

So it is with a Christian when he first comes to Christ. His heart is filled with gratitude. What an amazing thing it is to him that he has been forgiven! He can hardly believe it. This is why new Christians often break into

tears when they give their testimony. I have seen strong men break down completely and are unable to tell their story because it means so much that Jesus has come into their heart. Their home, their family is different. They are forgiven of their sins. The love of Christ seems almost incredible to them. Earlier we heard recited the poem of John Newton,

In evil long I took delight,
Unawed by shame or fear,
Until a new object met my sight,
And stopped my wild career.

He saw that Jesus had forgiven him. He could not believe it. It seemed too wonderful to him.

Amazing love, how can it be
That Thou My God should die for me!

That is first love. Under the impact of it, the new Christian eagerly takes on various ministries. It is a delight to serve, to sing, to help, to reach out to others. It seems the least he can do for such a wonderful Lord. That is first love.

But gradually there comes an almost imperceptible shift of focus. We get busy, and what we do for Christ begins to loom more and more important to us. Gradually our position, our status, the longing for approval by others, begins to take first place. We go on doing the same things but not from the same drive or motive. We drift into the loss of first love.

There are always symptoms, signs, of this happening. Here are three of them:

1. The first one, visible at first only to the individual, is the loss of the joy and glow of Christian life. It soon becomes humdrum and routine. You begin to feel like you have heard it all already. Even the church service loses its impact. It seems mechanical, routine, dull and drab. That is a sign you are beginning to lose your first love.
2. Second, you lose your ability to love others. One of the great revelations of the Scripture is that the reason we love others is because we have first been loved ourselves. When we lose that consciousness of the wonder of Jesus' love we also lose our awareness of others and find our love for them fading. It is difficult to love. We become critical, censorious, complaining. We begin to choose our friends more closely and only associate with those we like. We lose the compassion that reached out to everyone at first.
3. Then, third, we lose a healthy perspective of ourselves. We become more and more important in our thinking. Instead of what the Lord wants and what will please him we begin to think of what we want and what will please us. Gradually, we become sensitive and touchy, unable to bear criticism. This begins to make divisions and often schisms in a congregation. Individuals in the church are no longer interested in evangelism. They are no longer concerned about those around them without Christ, but are focused on themselves, their own comfort, their own pleasure. Self-centeredness sets in.

Those are the marks of the loss of first love, and this is what was happening at Ephesus. I am fully aware that we have all done this at times. I have. You have. We have all felt the debilitating symptoms of a loss of first love. When a whole congregation begins to reflect that atmosphere it soon loses its influence. Its light goes out. Its lampstand has been removed.

What do you do when that happens? How do you recover from this? Our Lord gives three clear, specific steps to take: Remember, repent, and return! There it is.

"Remember the height from which you have fallen." Look back. Remember what it was like when you first came to Jesus. Remember the joy you had in the Lord. Remember the closeness you felt to him and him to you. Remember the inner support you leaned upon in times of pressure and trouble. Remember the ease with

which you prayed. Remember the delight you took in other Christians, in the reading of the Word and in the hearing of it. Remember how you could hardly bear to miss a service because you were learning so much of the truth about life. Remember that? Look back. Think back. Our Lord says, "Remember the height from which you have fallen."

And then, repent! Change your mind. That is what repentance means. Change your mind about what has taken the place of Jesus in your life. Renounce that ambition, that pride of position, that longing for approval that has become all-important to you and is motivating your work. Give up your critical spirit, your complaining attitude, your reliance on your knowledge or your training to make an impact in life. Put the Lord back in the center and focus of all your endeavors. Repent. Change your mind.

And then, return! I will never forget some years ago being at Mt. Hermon with a group of pastors at a pastors' conference. Dr. Bob Munger, who for years was pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley, stood up before the pastors one day and drew a great circle on the blackboard. He put an "X" in the middle of it, and said, "As I look back on my pastoral ministry there were many years in which I felt I was right in the center of where God wanted me to be. The Lord Jesus was real and vital and important to me. But in these last few years as I look at my life, I find I have drifted." He put an "X" on the periphery of the circle, and said, "I have drifted over to this point. I want to tell you men I am praying, and I ask you to pray for me, that God will lead me back to the center again." I can testify that God did that with Bob Munger and he went on to many years of fruitful service for the Lord. It was a moving thing to hear him do what the Lord tells us to do: repent and return to where you were before. "Do the things you did at first," Jesus says.

What are those things?

- Well, you read your Bible with eager eyes. You could not get enough of it. You longed to find out what the Word of God said.
- And you prayed about everything -- even finding a parking place! You responded to the hurts and the needs around you with compassion and with love, and you did not count it an imposition.
- Above all, you praised God from your heart. You loved to sing praises to his name and to think about his grace to you.

Now, do that again, Jesus says. Start there.

At this point, Jesus says a rather strange thing: "But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate," (Verse 6). Why did he not mention that in the things he commended earlier? The answer is that here was where the Ephesians were to begin.

There is much controversy as to who these Nicolaitans were. They appear again in the letter to the church at Pergamum, and we will say more about them there. But the Lord links this with the steps to recovery for this Ephesian church because this is where they are to start. Their passion is not all gone yet. In one thing they still retain something of their first love: They hated the practices of the Nicolaitans.

As best we can tell from the early church fathers and the references of Scripture, this was a group that linked Christian faith with loose sexual practices. They believed you could be Christian but your sex life could still reflect that of the world. They tied that in with a false religious piety. They laid claim to special position and power with God, but they lived like the devil. Jesus is saying to these Ephesian Christians, "Retain your hatred of such practices. That is a vestige of your first love still remaining. You hate them because I hate them. Start there. Continue to abhor such practices, but then go back and do the rest of the things again."

When we look at this letter from the standpoint of church history, we see this loss of first love becoming widespread in the churches after the apostles had passed away. This first period of church history covers the years from 70 A. D., when the temple was destroyed, to about 160 A. D., the middle of the 2nd century. During that time the churches were drifting away from a warm, loving, compassion-filled ministry to the world and becoming involved in doctrinal controversies and theological discussions, pounding out the teaching of the

church on the anvil of controversy. They were moral, but increasingly formal and perfunctory. This kind of condition is still with us today in many churches. The dominant atmosphere of that first period of church history was a drifting away from loving fellowship with Jesus into a critical and somewhat contentious attitude where human endeavors were of chief importance.

Verse 7, which we will take very briefly, contains our Lord's appeal to this church and the promise he makes to it:

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." {Rev 2:7 NIV}

"To him who has an ear," i.e., to the one who is willing to listen to the voice of the Lord.

Do you have an ear to hear what Jesus says?

Do you respond with sympathy and obedience to the word that he gives us?

Do you have an opened ear?

Then, this is what he says: "To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God."

The tree of life, you will remember, was in the Garden of Eden at the beginning. It was the tree that Adam and Eve were free to partake of until they sinned. After that, they were excluded from the Garden, lest they should eat of the tree of life. It appears again in the book of Revelation, in the 22nd chapter. There we see the new heaven and the new earth, and the tree of life is in the midst of the city. Its twelve fruits, one for each month, is the food of the people of the city.

It is the Fruit of the Month Club, if you like!

Our Lord is himself that tree of life. This is a symbol of Jesus. If we think of him much and draw strength from him, praying to him, and taking from him that strength he offers, we will find ourselves internally strengthened to meet the pressures and the battles we face today.

That is what he is saying.

Feed upon the tree of life. Listen to what Jesus says, and obey it, and you will soon find your spiritual life flourishing. You will grow strong in the pressures and struggles that come your way. That is the tree of life.

As we come to the communion table this morning, it is most appropriate that we should observe this reminder of our Lord's life and death. What we feed upon, of course, is the bread, which is another symbol of him. We are to gain strength by feeding upon the life of Jesus, taking from him that which we need to motivate us to be all that he wants us to be.

As we come to this Lord's Supper, ask yourself the question, "Do I still love Jesus? Do I still feel about him as I did at the beginning? Is he richer and deeper and clearer than he ever was before?"

Perhaps we should often sing that Gaither chorus,

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus,
There is just something about that name.
Master, Savior, Jesus,
Like the fragrance after the rain.
Jesus, Jesus, Jesus
Let all heaven and earth proclaim.

Kings and kingdoms will all pass away
But there's something about that name.

Though the heavens and earth may pass away, still that name remains, and is to be a fragrance in our hearts whenever we think of him.

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