

*We exist to make disciples who delight in God and make Him known
by proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ.*

The Church of Lost First Love
Revelation 2:1-7

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SermonAudio Blurb: In this series of the letters to the churches of Asia Minor we consider perhaps the most written to church in the entire New Testament, Ephesus. A church that has much to commend for and yet receives a stinging warning from her Lord. It is a good warning for all churches to keep what is most important most important.

I. Introduction.

- A. The name of a church is to convey meaning.
 - 1. How that is done over the years in America has changed but still much information would be gleaned simply by the name.
 - 2. United Methodist Church; or First Congregational Church; or Oak Street Presbyterian Church all told us much as to what to expect.
 - 3. Today we have vaguer terms in many of the cool churches such as Elevation Church or Solomon's Porch.
- B. Today we look at the first of the seven churches which receive letters from Jesus.
 - 1. Each has a specific issue or issues that are confronted or praised.
 - 2. And each has admonitions given.
 - 3. And today we look at the first one, Church of Lost First Love.
- C. Discussion on the nature of this section.
 - 1. These are literal churches in history. They are not representative of ages within the church age from Pentecost on to the end. Though this is a very popular view and you will find it showing up in many ways if you are reading or researching Revelation.
 - 2. These are written in the order that the postal route of the Roman Empire would take.
 - 3. Similarities:
 - a. They are all brief

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- b. They contain a unique description of the Lord Jesus, drawn from 1:12-20.
 - c. Most contain a word of approval (except the letter to Laodicea), and most carry some rebuke for the congregation (except those to Smyrna and Philadelphia).
 - d. Each letter exhorts its readers to specific action, and each one holds out a promise as an incentive for true obedience. This makes this section very practical for us here at MDF.
 - e. Ladd makes a very good observation of this section, “Churches 1 and 7 are in grave danger; churches 2 and 6 are in excellent shape, churches 3, 4, and 5 are middling, neither very good nor very bad.”
(Ladd, *A Commentary on The Revelation of John*, p. 36)
- D. Ephesus as a city:
- 1. Ephesus was a leading seaport and the capital of the Roman province of Asia. Three major roads all came together there making it a natural cosmopolitan city. In fact it was the largest city in that part of the world.
 - 2. Paul had evangelized it, and then used it as a base of operations for at least three years (Acts 18:19-21; 19; 1 Cor. 16:8). From that city all of these other churches came into being. Essentially it was a seminary.
 - a. Timothy had labored there (1 Tim. 1:3)
 - b. The Apostle John did so as well.
 - c. Ephesus was a recipient or subject of four New Testament books (Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Revelation).
 - d. Paul also wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus.
 - 3. Ephesus from a religious point of view:
 - a. Religiously it was dominated by the great temple of Diana.
 - b. Reading the book of the Acts, for example, we have a riot in Ephesus and men shouting, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians." This temple to Diana was one of the seven marvels of the ancient.
 - c. So this is a very religious area and a very wicked area. Temple prostitution was a way of life. The entire society was highly sexualized and the economy was firmly connected to the success of this temple worship and perversion in sexuality.
- E. The introductory section of the letter:

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1. What/who are the stars? (1:20)
 - a. They are the angels of the churches.
 - b. This leads to the next obvious question: what is meant by “angels?”
 - (1) *Angelos* simply means “messenger” and therefore some see them as unique messengers to the various churches.
 - (2) Some see them as the key elder/pastor/bishop of the church.
 - (a) A challenge to this is that the formal office of bishop had not developed yet.
 - (b) The plurality of elders seems to be an issue here, though it does not totally break this.
 - i) Even among the apostles there were differentiations between them in effect and influence.
 - ii) If you wonder about this consider Galatians 2:9 where Paul refers to Peter, James and John as pillars of the church.
 - (c) Some take this in a slightly different position where it is a prophet attached to the church who would receive God’s revelation.
 - (3) Others see them as literal angels for there is a connection between angels who are guardians to nations and individuals in the Old Testament (Dan. 10:13, 20, 21; 12:1)
 - (a) Weakness of this is that it would mean that John is bringing a message to angelic beings so that they can then bring that same message to the earthly churches, when he already received this message from an angel.
 - (b) Secondly, the rebukes of chapters 2-3 are in the 2nd person singular, making the messenger the focus of those rebukes and would be the only place an angel is held accountable for the actions of a believer.
 - (4) A final possibility is that it is referring to human messengers who function as representatives of the church. These would be people like Epaphras or Epaphroditus who were men

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entrusted to bring apostolic letters and recommendations to the churches.

(5) I lean toward (2) or (4), more toward (2) because he is holding the star accountable for the church.

(6) Regardless, this is not the part of the bible to begin to develop a theology of church leadership.

2. What is a possible significance in Jesus Christ holding the stars in his right hand?

a. It is an image that speaks of authority and control. If I am correct that the stars speak of pastors, then it is a reminder that we are not our own, but we serve the “Chief Shepherd” (cf 1 Peter 5).

b. The same image is present in the walking among the lampstands—which speak of the churches themselves. Jesus Christ is not distant, but intimately present in the churches and is aware of their actions and inactions. It is reminiscent of Matthew 28:19, “lo, I am with you always.”

c. It speaks as well to the fact we do not serve a god or man who died; rather, we serve and are watched over by the risen Lord.

d. Notice that what is most important is not the stars nor the lampstands, but the fact that they are vitally connected to the Lord Jesus Christ.

(1) As a pastor this is a good word for me and I would hope for the other elders here as well.

(2) It is good to know we are upheld in the hand of our Lord. We are wise to be content there and to desire to walk in that reality.

(3) But it is also good to know that Jesus walks among the church herself. We never need to bid Him to be with us, for He is always with us.

(4) May Missio gather every week knowing that He is present with us and may our words and thoughts and actions reflect that holy reality.

II. The Praise to the Ephesian church.

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- A. Five praiseworthy aspects of the church.
- B. They labored, toiled and persevered (2a).
 - 1. This speaks to a diligence and effort that borders on exhaustion. The church existed in a very difficult context and it resulted in a lot of hardship and required diligence.
 - 2. These people were not lazy about their faith, they were hard workers.
 - 3. Very reminiscent of Paul's words to the church in Thessalonica, "We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; 3 constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father" (1 Thessalonians 1:2-3).
- C. Did not endure evil men (2b).
 - 1. Unlike a similar church in Corinth who was often proud of their tolerance, especially within the church itself.
 - 2. This church dealt seriously with sin.
 - 3. This showed a level of spiritual courage to stand up against men who came into the church with error and evil. They served as gate-keepers to the truth.
- D. Put to test those who called themselves apostles (2c).
 - 1. Here we have something that needs to be remembered even today.
 - 2. There is a tendency for some to rise up in the church and claim many things that simply cannot be substantiated and yet too often the church simply accepts them—or is afraid to speak against it.
 - 3. This also indicates that Timothy had a good influence in the church when he was sent by Paul to fix things.
 - 4. Today we have a terrible scourge in the church called the NAR. It is tightly connected to what is called the "five-fold ministry" and is filled with example after example of weak, bad, and downright false teaching.
- E. Persevered and endured for Christ's name's sake (3).
 - 1. Every church has seasons of good and bad. In today's consumer-culture often during the hard times people fade away.

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2. But for the sake of the reputation of Jesus Christ they stayed and endured.
- F. They hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans (6)
1. No idea who these people are.
 2. Many guesses but there simply is no record that is sufficient to go by. Suffice it to say that the church knew what he was speaking about.
 3. Very strong language used here though, with Jesus Christ hating them and their works.
 4. And it instructs us as well, when we see false teaching pressing against the Church and the fruit of that teaching being revealed in all sorts of evil, to have a holy hatred for it and its destructive ways.

III. The Sharp Rebuke.

- A. Note the sharp change of direction through the use of *alla*.
1. In a sense there is a setting up of the readers, where they are hear praise, but are really be lifted up to be dropped hard.
 2. When you know what you are looking at it serves as a sharp exclamation point.
- B. Left your first love (4).
1. “First” speaks of time more than priority. It is a love that they used to have in a prior time; rather than a greater, more important love.
 2. What is meant by this? Two main views:
 - a. First, it is a loss of love for God/Jesus.
 - (1) Many sermons have been preached on this.
 - (2) One weakness in this is that they are actively enduring for His name’s sake, which is a clear act of love for Jesus.
 - b. Second, it is a loss of love for one another.
 - (1) The reason for this is the level of attention that John gives in all of his writings to the love of one another in the Church.
 - (2) In fact, in John’s gospel and letters, it is this very love of other Christians that is the key mark of being a true believer and follower of Jesus Christ.

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c. Solution:

- (1) The second is probably in view but without forgetting the first view.
 - (a) Of course you cannot keep a love for Christ absolutely separate from a love of the brethren.
 - (b) This is one of John's main points in 1 John, that the mark of being born of God and loving God is to love the children of God.
 - (c) (Briefly take them through 1 John 4:7-21 and show the arguments made.)
- (2) It is possible that in their zeal to be pure, that they also forgot the admonition that they were to have a love for one another.
- (3) Something to consider in all of this is a basic history of the Ephesian church.
 - (a) Established by Paul and in Acts 20:17 calls and warns the elders to be on guard (if time take them through the passage).
 - (b) In Ephesians 1:15 we see that there was a clear presence of love for the brethren that Paul commended.
 - (c) In 1 Timothy 1:3 we learn that Timothy is sent by Paul to fix what was wrong at the Ephesian church. They had not been diligent.
 - (d) Putting all this together can lead to the idea that in their effort to weed out false teaching, that the love they once had was lost. Orthodoxy was cold and not infused with grace.
 - (e) Notice that in the remedy of vs 5 that there are "deeds" that they are not doing.
 - i) In other words, they were not "doing" their first love.

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- ii) This helps us also remember that “love” is not a sentimentalism as much as an action.
 - iii) Notice also that it is not delineated what those deeds were that were missing. The assumption was that they knew what they were.
 - iv) Jesus said that “if you love me you will keep” What was the first commandment that He gave? “This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you.” (John 15:12)
- (4) If correct, it is a reminder to us as well. We can get so caught up in battles that we do not keep a heart that is tender toward one another.
- (5) Passages on love of the brethren:
- (a) John 13:34.
 - (b) Romans 12:10.
 - (c) 1 Thessalonians 4:9.
 - (d) 2 Thessalonians 3:2.
 - (e) Hebrews 13:1.
 - (f) 1 Peter 1:22.
 - (g) 1 John 3:14.

IV. What is the warning given (5)?

- A. Removal of the lampstand.
- B. This needs to be soberly thought! Lampstand = church.
 - 1. Jesus Christ is the Lord of the church and though we can have the name “church” it does not mean it is true.
 - 2. He is saying that if they do not repent then they shall cease as a church.
 - 3. There is a debate on whether the removal would occur at some unique time in history or at the second coming of Jesus. But it appears that this

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“coming” in vs 5 is merely used to describe the moment where a true church transitions into the church in name only.

4. A frightening word to be honest and there is only one way to resolve it, “repent.”

V. What is the promise given (7)?

A. Eat of the tree of life in Paradise.

1. It is anticipating Rev 22:2, 14.
2. At the same time, it is speaking more of eternal life than the tree itself, just as each of the promises that follow (2:7, 10, 17, 26-28; 3:5, 12, 21).
3. The mention of Paradise is another reference to the Garden of Eden, and it speaks of the renewal of all things prior to the Fall. It is another way of speaking of the “new” heavens and earth.
4. It also reminds us that we need to look beyond this world to the next.
5. Often when a person or church is confronted with the need to repent it is not easy to do so.
 - a. The sin is pleasant.
 - b. They are trapped by it and find extraction from it incredibly difficult.
 - c. I picture the Wizard of Oz here where they are in the field of poppies and fall asleep.
 - d. Often the only thing that helps a person fight and persevere to the point of overcoming the sin is the promise of eternal life.

B. Limited to those who overcome—who are they?

1. “Overcome” is a uniquely Johannine term.
2. John 16:33 gives us the basis of any overcoming. The over-comer needs to be in union with Jesus.
3. 1 John 2:13-14
4. 1 John 4:4.
5. 1 John 5:4-5.

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VI. Conclusion.

- A. When I consider Missio in this section I see much to commend us in what John praises this church for.
1. But I am compelled to ask if we are remembering our first love, that love of Christ that compels us to love one another.
 2. I cannot make a conclusion but I do want us to consider the charge and the warning given to this church in Ephesus.
 3. What and how will this church be destroyed?
 - a. Perhaps we will give in to false teaching until it overwhelms us.
 - b. But I would suspect that a loss of love for the brethren is much easier to let happen.
- B. This is a sober reminder of the spiritual war that we really are waging rather than the one that perhaps you think you are waging.
1. One passage came to my mind repeatedly as I worked on this message, “But one whom you forgive anything, I forgive also; for indeed what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, I did it for your sakes in the presence of Christ, **so that** no advantage would be taken of us by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his schemes. (2 Corinthians 2:10-11).
 2. “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:35)

VII. Benediction/Doxology.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

Small Group Questions

- It is hard to see love for one another in the whole church as it grows. Missio is at the size that many of you do not know all who come. It is in the groups that we desire to see this actively pursued by each participant. Therefore, spend time considering first, what does it look like to love one another. Use John 13:34-35 as a guide. Especially consider the clause, “. . . even as I have loved you. . . .” This should take up the bulk of your time if you really think about the many ways Jesus modeled love to His disciples.