

THE LOVELESS CHURCH

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d. Letter to the Church at Ephesus – 2:1-7

[THE CHURCH THAT LOST HER FIRST LOVE]

i. **Background on the city of Ephesus** [Taken from **The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible**, vol. 2, p. 324-5.]

Ephesus was located between the Koreros Range and the Mediterranean Sea. This made it a most important entry point to the rest of Asia Minor. The early Greeks made it a colony calling it an “emporion” which means “the way in.” “Because their concept of such settlement was that of a gateway by which an active self-governing community could tap the trade and resources of a foreign hinterland.”

Ephesus as one of the great sea ports competed with the city of Miletus. Like Miletus, the sea port soon lost her ability to function as a sea port because of the quest for charcoal and de-forestation which resulted in the loss of the top soil on the many mountains slopes. Rain washed away the soil and the river carried the soil to the mouth of the river that fronted the Aegean Sea. By NT times, Ephesus was no longer known for her ability to function as a seaport.

What made Ephesus rich was not her trade anymore. She was famous for the worship of Artemis (a gross, many-breasted monstrosity, popularly known to have fallen from heaven) at the Temple of Ephesus. “It is said that the building was four times the size of Athen’s magnificent Parthenon. . . . It was widely depicted on coins. The general impression left with the archeologist and historian, who peer into the crowded past of the great city, is that the guild-master was not unjustified in his claim that ‘all Asia and the world’ (Acts 19:27) revered the Ephesian Artemis.” This brought in the tourists and tradesmen to cater to the needs of the many worshippers who flocked to the Temple of Artemis to pay her god homage and servitude. The Temple was also a treasury and bank in which private individuals and even kings would make their deposits. It was therefore a stronghold of pagan worship when Paul went there to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul had to deal with a riot in Ephesus because of his preaching (Acts 19). In 1 Corinthians 15:32 (“...I have fought with beasts at

Ephesus, . . .”) Paul described his experience there as having fought with beasts. “He caught up a phrase of Plato from his student days in Parsus. Plato likened the mob to wild animals. It was a dangerous situation.”

ii. Background on the church at Ephesus

1. Paul first visited Ephesus during his second missionary journey.

Acts 18:19-21, *"And he came to Ephesus, and left them there: but he himself entered into the synagogue, and reasoned with the Jews. When they desired him to tarry longer time with them, he consented not; But bade them farewell, saying, I must by all means keep this feast that cometh in Jerusalem: but I will return again unto you, if God will. And he sailed from Ephesus."*

2. The impact of Paul’s short stint in Ephesus had produced very quick results (ca. A.D. 50). The people had sufficient knowledge of God’s Word to correct and teach Apollos and Aquila.

Acts 18:24-26, *"And a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man, and mighty in the scriptures, came to Ephesus. This man was instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in the spirit, he spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord, knowing only the baptism of John. And he began to speak boldly in the synagogue: whom when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly."*

The content of their instruction was summed up very aptly here in . . . Acts 18:27-28, *"And when he was disposed to pass into Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him: who, when he was come, helped them much which had believed through grace: For he mightily convinced the Jews, and that publickly, shewing by the scriptures that Jesus was Christ."*

3. Some of the issues Paul had to encounter and deal with in Ephesus on his Third Missionary trip included:

- a. Correcting insufficient teaching in the disciples of John the Baptists (Acts 19:1-7);
- b. Remaining in Ephesus two years to teach the Word of God (Acts 19:8-10);

- c. Paul did many miracles in Ephesus (Acts 19:11-20);
- d. Idols maker at Ephesus were up in arms because they lost much money due to the many converts who gave up idol worship (Acts 19:24-41);
- e. Paul's last important words to the leaders of the church in Ephesus (Acts 20:17-38).

4. The letter to the Ephesians (A.D. 62) was one of Paul's prison epistles. He wrote to encourage the church dealing with problems of family life, working life, marriage, etc. but the first three chapters were on doctrines including the doctrines of spiritual gifts, maturity, good works, etc.

5. Timothy was made pastor by Paul in the church (A.D. 63) and some of the elders gave Timothy some problems that Paul had to write to Timothy not "let any man despise his youth" as he ministered (1Tim. 4:12). The qualifications of elders and deacons are also listed here implying that some of the leaders failed to have these qualifications.

6. By the time we come to Revelation we are not sure whether Timothy was still around as the pastor but John had apparently taken over the spiritual oversight of the church (ca. A.D. 95). This was the last mention of the church in Ephesus.

iii. The church of Ephesus in Revelation (Rev. 2:1-3)

1. The Character of Jesus Christ –

"Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks;

2. The Commendations –

I know (“oida” – refers to complete and full knowledge rather than “ginosko” which refers to a progressive acquisition of knowledge).

- **thy works** – a general term which summarizes all that follows,

- and **thy labour** — this is toil, it denotes labour to the point of sweat and bodily exhaustion. It describes an all out effort, demanding all that a person has to give including mentally, physically, and emotionally. The Ephesians were no doubt very diligent workers for the cause of Christ.

- and **thy patience** — it is a perseverance under intense trial and adverse circumstances. It does not denote a grim fatalistic resignation but rather a courageous acceptance of hardship, suffering and loss. They were prepared to be persecuted for Jesus Christ.

- and **how thou canst not bear them which are evil** — They held to a very holy standard of behaviour and were sensitive to sin. They undoubtedly exercised church discipline (Mt. 18:15ff). Earlier (some 30 years ago they were exhorted by Paul to not to “give the devil and opportunity” (Eph 4:27) and they must have adhered to this religiously.

- and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: They must have listened to the apostle Paul’s teaching to guard the flock which they did here too as commendations by Christ. Acts 20:28-31, *“Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears.”*

- And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted. They have not grown “weary” of their life of sanctification in the church. They dealt with sin very zealously and they were commended highly by Christ for this.

- **Verse 6** -- But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitanes, which I also hate.

- “The few references to this heresy in the writings of the church fathers link it to Nicholas, one of the seven men appointed to oversee the distribution of food in Acts 6. Some argued that Nicholas was a false believer who became an apostate, but retained influence in the church because of his credentials. Others suggest that the Nicolaitanes misrepresented his teachings. Whatever its origin, Nicolaitanism led people into immorality and wickedness. The letter to Pergamos links it with Balaam’s false teaching that led Israel astray. The deeds of the Nicolaitanes thus involved sensual temptations leading to sexual immorality and eating things sacrificed to idols (2:14) without regard for the offense of such behaviour (cf. Rom. 14:1-15:3)—all in the name of Christian liberty. It has been suggested that ‘the teaching of the Nicolaitanes was an exaggeration of the doctrine of Christian liberty which attempted an ethical compromise with heathenism’ [Merrill C. Tenney, **Interpreting Revelation**, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), p.61].

- Irenaeus wrote of the Nicolaitanes that they ‘lived lives of unrestrained indulgence’ (cited in Tenney, **Interpreting Revelation**, 61),

- Clement of Alexandria added that the Nicolaitanes ‘abandon themselves to pleasure like goats . . . leading a life of self-indulgence’ (cited in Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, 1:67).” [MacCarthur, 1:61]

3. The Sin committed in the church in Ephesus that displeases God (Rev. 2:4-6)

- **Left their First Love** -- Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou

hast left thy first love. Two OT passages which reflect the same problem are Jer. 2:2-13 and Ezek. 16:8-15.

• **What is the First Love?** -- Matthew 22:37-39, “Jesus said unto him, *Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.*” It is to ensure that the glory of God comes first in every area of the believer’s life. There is nothing that the believer would not do for Christ. An illustration of this first love was Abraham’s offering of Isaac, his only begotten son, as a burnt offering to God in Genesis 22.

God’s love is defined as “Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.” [1 Corinthians 13:4-7]

The Greek word for charity is “*agape*.” Why did the KJV translators translate the word *agape* as “charity” whereas in other places the word “love” is used?

There are 109 occurrences of the word *agape* in the verb form (*agapao*). In all these occurrences it is translated as “love” in the KJV. Out of 106 occurrences in the noun form (*agape*), once it is translated as “dear” (Col. 1:13), 29 times as “charity” (Rom. 14:15; 1Cor. 8:1; 13:1, 2, 3, 4 (3x), 8, 13 (2x); 14:1; 16:14; Col. 3:14; 1Thess. 3:6; 1Tim. 1:5; 2:15; 4:12; 2Tim. 2:22; 3:10; Tit. 2:2; 1Pet. 4:8 (2x); 5:14; 2Pet. 1:7; 3John 1:6; Jude 1:12; Rev 2:19) and the remaining 76 times as “love”.

The word “charity” is appropriately chosen by the KJV translators. It has the idea of the emotion love but when the context demands that it is more than mere “feeling” that is to be expressed, and an action is emphasized, then the word “charity” is more appropriate. In 1 Corinthians 13, the Christians were self-centered and sought self glorification. They had to be show love in very concrete toward one another in the church. Talk without action is dead love. Show your “*agape*” love by your action.

Love suffers long – to bear long and patiently enduring with people who exasperates you;

Love is kind – It is good natured, gentle, tender, and mild. It desires to do good to others and desires the happiness of others.

Love envies not – Love would not diminish the success beauty and blessing and happiness, welfare, delights,

possessions, enjoyment of others.

Love vaunteth not itself – Love is not boastful. He will not brag of his own excellence. He does not have a spirit of superiority over others. There is no feeling of contempt and disregard for others.

Love is not puffed up – Love is to blow or puff up. He is inflated with pride and vanity and full of self-esteem. To “vaunt” is to EXPRESS the feeling of pride and others can see it clearly. Here the word “puff up” refers to the “FEELING” of pride itself which is not visible to the eyes.

Love does not behave itself unseemly – Love is not a disgraceful conduct in a manner which deserves reproach. He is not disrespectful to superiors and the opinion of others. He has a proper and balanced regard for inferiors as well as not despising their rank, poverty, dressing, dwelling, and pleasures. He has a balance and healthy respect of all relations of life. His speech is seasoned with salt. His yea is yea and nay, is nay. He uses no vulgarity, and avoids profane and coarse language, improper allusions, double meanings and innuendoes, vulgar expressions. The reason is that these things hurt the ears and offend the heart of purity and graciousness.

Love seeketh not her own – Love is not selfish. He seeks not his own happiness but the happiness of others. He promotes others and accepts self-denials and practices personal sacrifices and toil. Her lives to do good to others as a child of God.

Love is not easily provoked – The word “easily provoked” literally means “to sharpen a knife or sword.” The Christian with this love is not easily roused to anger. He is not prone to violent anger or exasperation. He is calm, serious and patient. He looks soberly at things. He may be injured by someone but he governs his passions, restrains his temper and subdues his feelings. He does not give way to sudden burst of anger.

Love thinks no evil – Love enables the Christian to put on the best possible construction on the motives and conduct of others. He who loves is not malicious, censorious, and disposed to find fault and impute improper motives to others. True love prompts charitable judging.

Love rejoices not in iniquity – Love finds no joy or delight in the sin of others. There is no joy in hearing that our enemy has fallen in hard times and sin. Evil men find pleasures in the fall and sin of others (cf. Rom. 1:32), but not the believer who has the *agape* love of God.

Love rejoices in truth – The contrast of the evil man who delights in sin and evil is that the believer rejoices in truth. Truth to him is paramount. The Word of God is Truth. He up holds the Word of God and evaluates all circumstances and events and persons against the Word of God.

Love beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things – With this *agape* love the believer is able to bears, believe in, hope and endure ALL THINGS. There is nothing in this life and this world that the Christian is not able to deal with victoriously with God's *agape* love in his heart.

• **Do ALL Christians have this *agape* love?** – Every genuine Christian has this love. It was given to him by the Holy Spirit at the time of his conversion. In Romans 5:5 we are told that, "*hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.*" In other words every born again believer has this love given to him at the time of his conversion.

God is asking all His true children to exercise this love which He has equipped all of us with this love. We have no excuse therefore and say that we cannot love. All Christians have this ability to love. The question is not can or cannot but will or will not!

• **Constrained by Christ's love** – The motivation behind every Christian's action and thinking is Christ's love. It is the critical balance on the scale of truth and righteousness. Without God's love, the practice of truth would be skewed. 2 Corinthians 5:12-15, "*For we commend not ourselves again unto you, but give you occasion to glory on our behalf, that ye may have somewhat to answer them which glory in appearance, and not in heart. For whether we be beside ourselves, it is to God: or whether we be sober, it is for your cause. For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again.*"

Without this love the Christian cannot sustain his witness and defense of God's Holy Word. He will change course and loyalty. His hand will be lifted for the plough and he will turn around and love the world. This is the inevitable end without the love of God constraining us in ALL we do. Love for family, job, church, friends, etc. must all be subsumed under this love of God. This will enable the Christian to love aright and to love consistently.

• **Remember** -- "*Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.*"

Remember what it was like to love God with all you heart, soul, strength, and mind? They were blessed days of service and life as a Christian. Communion with God was genuine and true. There was no hypocrisy. There was only unfeigned faith. Life was blissful with Christ and service was a great delight. Nothing was able to rob us of that great joy

and diminish the fire of fervently serving the LORD! REMEMBER?

First work is preceded by first love and the fruit of the first love would be the first work! Mere external obedience without a heart constrained by God's love is legalism. It is extreme it would be legalism gone amok!

Barnes' commentary aptly describes the price paid for not repenting when he wrote, "The eminence which you once occupied. Call to remembrance the state in which you once were. The duty here enjoined is, when religion has declined in our hearts, or in the church, to call to distinct recollection the former state--the ardour, the zeal, the warmth of love which once characterized us. The *reason* for this is, that such a recalling of the former state will be likely to produce a happy influence on the heart. Nothing is better adapted to affect a backsliding Christian, or a backsliding church, than to call to distinct recollection the former condition--**the happier days of piety. The joy then experienced; the good done; the honour reflected on the cause of religion; the peace of mind of that period, will contrast strongly with the present, and nothing will be better fitted to recall an erring church or an erring individual from their wanderings than such a reminiscence of the past.** The *advantages* of thus "remembering" their former condition would be many--for some of the most valuable impressions which are made on the mind, and some of the most important lessons learned, are from the recollections of a former state. Among those advantages, in this case, would be such as the following:

- (a) It would show **how much they might have enjoyed** if they had continued as they began--how much more real happiness they would have had than they actually have enjoyed.
- (b) **How much good** they might have done, if they had only persevered in the zeal with which they commenced the Christian life. How much more *good* might most Christians do than they actually accomplish, if they would barely, even without increasing it, *continue* with the degree of zeal with which they begin their course.
- (c) **How much greater attainments** they might have made in the Divine life, and in the knowledge of religion, than they have made: that is, how much more elevated and enlarged might have been their views of religion, and their knowledge of the word of God. And
- (d) such a recollection of their past state, as contrasted with what they now are, **would exert a powerful influence in producing true repentance**--for there is nothing better adapted to do this than a just view of what we might have been, as compared with what we now are. If a man has become cold towards his wife, nothing is better fitted to reclaim him than to recall to his recollection the time when he led her to the altar; the solemn vow then made; and the rapture of his heart when he pressed her to his bosom and called her his own." [emphasis added--Albert Barnes' Notes on the Bible, Swordsearcher 4.7]

Repent or swift judgement--The seriousness of the state of sin within the church was such that swift judgement was to follow without delay if there is no repentance. Repentance means to turn away from sin and come back to God in the way prescribed in Scriptures. In this instance was to restore back the first love the church used to have for the LORD.

The removal of the candlestick would imply extinguishing the church's impact in the society. The candlestick is the heart of the church. It is the blessing of God and the presence of God in the midst of God's people. When God's people function, including defending God's Word, without loving God first, it displeases God and soon faces His swift judgment and removal.

The church would soon die for it will lose its spiritual fervour and eternal significance. It will be nothing but a shell of an existence.

- He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches. This letter was addressed to the Church in Ephesus but the call and warning was to all the churches. Anyone who has ears listen and repent and change and come back to the LORD immediately.

NOTE: the use of the plural for churches. It is applicable to all churches. Beware, **any church can fall like the church in Ephesus!**

4. The Reader's response (2:7)

To him that overcometh (present participle) will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God."

How does John define the word "overcometh"? The root word is "*nikao*" which means "to prevail, conquer, or to get the victory." The significance of the word "overcometh" is that the action must be done continuously (present tense) until the believer dies or the LORD returns. The perseverance of the saint is emphasized here.

1 John 5:1-5, "*Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God: and every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous. For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?*" [emphasis added]

The "tree of life" in Paradise refers to Revelation 22:2 with a direct intimation to Genesis 2:9 in the Garden of Eden. This tree of life is found at the end of this world in Rev. 22:2. The Christian must see the end of all things and what awaits him in this life. This world is NOT his home. He is just passing through. He missed out on the first tree of life when he sinned. But in Christ Jesus he will enjoy the tree of life forever.

Revelation 22:2, "*In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.*"

Revelation 22:14, "Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city."