

“When Love Grows Cold”
(Revelation 2:1-7)

Introduction

1. Churches are a lot like people. They come in all shapes and sizes, and no two are ever alike, even twins! Each has its own strengths and weaknesses, its own temperament and peculiarities. Some are vibrant and evangelistic. Others are rather lifeless and quiet. Some are a beehive of activity, others are not busy at all.
2. Churches do develop reputations. “There is a conservative church ... liberal church ... strong Bible-teaching church ... socially minded church ... traditional church ... contemporary church ... pastor led church ... deacon run church ... and the list goes on.
3. However, of all the things that could be said about a church, I believe nothing could be more precious and meaningful than it be said, “that is a church that loves Jesus fervently.” Well, of all the many good things one might say about the church at Ephesus, that is the one thing you could not say. (Note verse 4.)
4. Why does a church stop loving Jesus and what, if anything, can be done about it? To those questions our Lord provides an answer.
5. - The 7 churches are literal historical congregations.
 - The 7 churches were on a major postal/travel route moving counter clockwise.
 - The number 7 reflects completeness. These 7 churches are typical or representative of local churches throughout history. Hence all the messages are for all the churches throughout history.
 - There is a basic and common literary pattern of 5 parts:
 - 1) The addressee and a characterization of Christ from the vision of chapter 1;
 - 2) Christ’s knowledge of the church’s condition and a word of commendation;
 - 3) A word of reproof or correction;
 - 4) A word of exhortation;
 - 5) A word of promise.

I. Christ is characterized by His protection. 2:1

- Angel (messenger) – 1) literal angel (cf. 1 Cor. 11:10); 2) pastor of the church; 3) messenger to the church
- Write (aorist imp.) – there is a sense of urgency
- Ephesus:
 - 1) a crossroads of civilization.
Politically – capital of Asia and known as the “Supreme Metropolis of Asia.”
Commercially – the great highways converged there, and a major seaport was still in place, though silt brought down from the mountains by the Cayster River was and did eventually fill the harbor. Some have referred to Ephesus as “the Vanity Fair of the Ancient World.”

Religiously – the city was the center for the worship of the fertility goddess “Diana” (Roman) or “Artemis” (Greek). The temple dedicated to Diana was one of the “7 wonders of the ancient world” and a source of intense civic pride. Thousands of priests and priestesses served in the temple, many as religious prostitutes. One of Ephesus’ own philosophers, Heraclitus, lamented over the immorality and wickedness of the city saying that its citizens were “fit only to be drowned and that the reason he could never laugh or smile was because he lived amidst such terrible uncleanness.”

- 2) Paul, Aquila and Priscilla evangelized and founded the church at Ephesus (Acts 18:18-19; 19:1-10). Paul believed the city to be so significant as a gospel outpost that he labored there for at least 2 years (Acts 19:10). His ministry was not uneventful and included a riot related to the temple of Diana. Later Paul would meet with their elders at Miletus (Acts 20:17-38) and he wrote one of his prison letters to them in the early 60’s. Paul, Timothy and now John had ministered to this church. What a heritage! What a danger!!! Here is a 2nd generation that was living off the prestige and momentum of the past.

1. **Know that Christ cares.**

Holds (pre. tense) – possession, protection and power. Means to grasp or hold fast. The seven stars in His right hand – the messengers are in the hand of authority. He is responsible for them and they are accountable to Him.

2. **Know that Christ is there.**

Walks (pre. tense) – walks about. The Lord Jesus patrols the ground of His churches. His presence is a constant promise of protection. He is both sustainer and watchman. He is always with us watching our actions, hearing our words, perceiving our motives, reading our every thought. What assurance! What accountability!
III. What did he hear, see, last Sunday? At the supper table? In the Sunday School classroom, in the hallway? At the cafeteria, the school? Never forget Church! Never forget Danny Akin! He is there!

II. **The church is commended for its purity. 2:2-3, 6**

This church was awesome, outstanding in a number of areas. The Lord fairly and accurately takes note of the good things that they are doing. We would do well to follow them at this point.

1. **Jesus is pleased with our good deeds. 2:2**

Activity and orthodoxy were hallmarks of this church.

Labor – hard toil, wearisome and strenuous labor to the point of exhaustion.

Patience (*upomone*) – endurance (cf. 1 Thess. 1:3), perseverance.

Bear – to endure. You cannot stand nor do you tolerate evil men.

*They were active, energetic, busy with the business of the church. In all of this Jesus is well pleased.

2. Jesus is pleased with our faithful dedication. 2:3

Persevered – same as patience in verse 2. They continue to endure and persevere.

Labored for the right reason: My name's sake.

Have not grown weary – no throwing in the towel, dropping out of the race, refusing to answer the bell. Amidst persecution and opposition they stayed with it. What an example for us to follow!

3. Jesus is pleased with our sound doctrine. 2:2-3, 6

- Wicked men of verse 2 are false brothers claiming to be apostles. Charlatans and imposters existed in the first century just as they do in the 21st century. This church tested them. How we cannot be sure, but I suspect it started along this line: What do you believe about the person and work of Jesus? This is the key to all of one's theology!
- Verse 6 adds to this initial test. Who are the Nicolaitans?

In the entire New Testament, only two passages refer to the Nicolaitans – Revelation 2:6 and 2:15. Likewise, the church fathers – Irenaeus, Clement, and Tertullian mention the Nicolaitans only briefly. The New Testament shows that the Nicolaitans were a sect whose teachings were repudiated in Ephesus (2:6), yet they had several adherents in Pergamum (2:15).

[Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 1. 26. 3) identified the Nicolaitans as the heretical followers of Nicolaus, the proselyte of Antioch (Acts 6:5).] “The Nicolaitans are the followers of that Nicolaus who was one of the seven first ordained to the diaconate by the apostles. They lead lives of unrestrained indulgence. The character of these men is very plainly pointed out in the Apocalypse of John when they are represented as teaching that it is a matter of indifference to practice adultery, and to eat things sacrificed to idols.”

Hippolytus added that one of the seven appointed apostles lapsed from the true doctrine (*The Refutation of All Heresies* 7. 24). Clement of Alexandria identified the followers of Nicolaus as a Gnostic sect who “abandoning themselves to pleasure like goats, as if insulting the body, lead a life of self-indulgence” (*The Stromata* 2. 20). Tertullian asserted that the Nicolaitans aimed at destroying the happiness of sanctity by their lust and luxury (*Against Marcion* 1. 29).

The consensus of early Christian writings is that the Nicolaitans were the followers of Nicolaus (Acts 6:5) and thus, the founders of libertine gnosticism.

Other scholars use etymological study to posit that the word “Nicolaus” is simply the Greek equivalent of Balaam. This view also proposes that the two words, Balaam and Nicolaitan, have common meanings. Balaam, derived from two Hebrew words *bala* ‘am, means the “destroyer of the people.” Nicolaitans, composed of two Greek words, *nikan laos*, means “conqueror of the people.”

The theology of the Nicolaitans can be seen in the description of the evil works of the church at Pergamum (Rev. 2:15). What did the Nicolaitans teach? Immorality and idolatry appear to be the heresies which they tried to teach in the churches at Ephesus and Pergamum. Ephesus refused but Pergamum tolerated a group who believed the Nicolaitans. These pagan practices, contrary to the thought and conduct required in the Christian churches, paralleled the teaching of Balaam in the Old Testament. Balaam taught Balak to cast a stumbling block before the Israelites causing them to “eat food sacrificed to idols and practice immorality” (2:14, RSV).

The Nicolaitans perhaps had misunderstood Paul’s doctrine of freedom from the law. They encouraged eating meat sacrificed to idols and participating in immoral sexual practices. The Nicolaitans also could have been responsible for the teaching that “one could worship Caesar in the flesh and Christ in the Spirit.” In order to avoid embarrassment at civic and religious activities, this group may have chosen to assimilate pagan practices into the life of the church. This attempt to accommodate non-Christian practices is condemned by Christ. It was also rejected by the Ephesians. For this they are commended by Christ.

III. The church is criticized for its passion. 2:4

By all outward appearances Ephesus looked like a healthy and holy church. Good deeds, faithful dedication and sound doctrine were its distinguishing marks. Yet, all was not well. Indeed there was a crucial problem that, if left uncorrected, could be fatal to this fellowship.

1. We must not disappoint the Lord.

But I have (pre. tense) against you. What sobering words to hear from our Lord, “But I have against you.” There is an area of your life where I stand on the opposite side, an area that pains me, hurts me, disappoints me. It is possible to disappoint our Lord.

2. We must not depart from the Lord.

- Lit. the love of you the first you left. “Left” means to forsake, let go. They did not lose, they left their first love.
- First love: 1) original love for one another or 2) initial love and devotion to Christ. This is the better, yet tragic understanding.
- The text does not say they left their love; it says they left their “first love.” Their love had grown cold. The fervent and passionate love they had for Jesus when they first received Him had dissipated and waned. “Every day with Jesus was not sweeter than the day before.” What they once did out of love they now did as a matter of routine. They were doing the right things but not for the right reason.
*Why we do what we do matters to Jesus!

IV. **The church is corrected with a plan. 2:5**

All was not well, but all was not lost. It never is with Jesus and His church. Our great physician has diagnosed the illness. Now he offers a remedy.

1. **Remember from where you have fallen.**

Remember (pre. imp.). Keep on remembering. Never forget what you have lost! Go back and note when and where the flame of love grew faint. Take an inventory and evaluate where you are now compared to then. Go back to the time when your love for Jesus was all that mattered. What was it like? What is missing now?

2. **Repent of your sin.**

Repent (aor. imp.) – to change your mind resulting in a change of attitude and action. Think differently about your sin; sins of indifference, religious formalism, legalistic routine.

- Labor is no substitute for love.
- Purity is no substitute for passion.
- Deeds are no substitute for devotion.

Do not pat yourself on the back for doing good things for the wrong reason. God looks on the heart. Where is your heart in all of this?!

3. **Return to where you first fell in love.**

Do (aor. imp.) the first works. The first works are the key to restoring your first love. When the days with Jesus were so sweet and precious you could think of no one else, what were you doing? What were you thinking? You could not believe he loved someone like you! Forgave someone like you! Wanted someone like you! You walked, talked and sang and thought of Him constantly. You were continually aware of His presence, continually in conversation with Him.

* The place where you first fell in love is the place where you first understood He loved you, not because you deserved it or could even earn it, but because He just did.

*The place where you first fell in love was probably somewhere near the cross.

“How matchless the grace, when I looked in the face, of this Jesus, my crucified Lord; My redemption complete, I then found at His feet and Calvary covers it all.”

“At the cross, I stood one day, love and mercy found me. Near the cross O lamb of God, bring its scenes before me.”

Returning and doing the first works will keep a church from losing its witness and eventually its existence. Today Ephesus is a rubble and ruin. Tragically it appears the Ephesians never got their first love back.

V. **The church is challenged with a promise. 2:7**

- Challenge to hear (imp.)
- Spirit speaks ... churches (plural!) It is for us too.

1. **We can conquer by perseverance.**

- Overcomes (pre. tense) see 1 John 5:4-5 for who is an overcomer. The true disciple who by faith continually gains the victory.

2. **We will celebrate in paradise.**

- As each characterization of Christ looks to the vision of Chapter 1, so each challenge to the Church looks to the end time blessings of chapters 19-22.
- Tree of life – Gen. 2:9; 3:22-24; Rev. 22:2
- Paradise of God – Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 12:4. A synonym for Heaven. A Persian word meaning a beautiful park or garden. Paradise lost is paradise regained for the overcomer whose faith and love are in Jesus.
- Tree of life – banishment of pain, suffering, death.
- Paradise of God – place where Jesus is!
- Keeping our eyes on Heaven will keep our hearts near Jesus.

Conclusion

Tell me where you spend your time and I'll tell you what you love. Tell me what you think about and I'll tell you what you love. When you think about the answer to those two questions may it be that the answer is the same: may it be that the answer is Jesus.