

“To the Church in Ephesus”

Sermons on the Book of Revelation # 3

Texts: Revelation 2:1-7; Exodus 25:31-40

Jesus Christ is the Lord of his church. He walks among the seven lampstands and holds the seven stars in his hand. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. He is alive forevermore and holds in his hands the keys of death and Hades. Jesus Christ is our great high priest who has freed us from our sins through the shedding of his own blood. He has made us to be a kingdom of priests to serve his God and father. That same Jesus now comes to us with words of exhortation and rebuke found in the seven letters addressed to the churches of Asia Minor.

We are continuing our series on the Book of Revelation and we come to that section in Revelation (chapters 2-3) in which we find seven letters which were originally addressed to the seven churches scattered throughout Asia Minor (Turkey) and to whom John is sending this circular letter we now know as the Book of Revelation. The letters to the seven churches are part of a larger vision which begins in Revelation 1:12 and which continues on to the end of chapter 3. But before we go any farther, it is important to put these letters in their proper context in order to interpret them correctly.

Although a number of commentators believe these letters represent seven consecutive periods in church history—the Ephesian era being the first, the Laodician being the last—it is much better to see these churches as historical Christian congregations facing horrible persecution at the hands of the pagan Roman empire in addition to struggling with heretical teaching arising from within. Throughout the Book of Revelation, the number seven represents completeness and perfection. The letters to the “seven” churches means these letters and situations they describe are representative of the whole of Christ’s church throughout the ages. The issues they faced in the first century are the same issues we will face in the twenty-first.

As we have seen in previous sermons, it is also important to keep in mind the unique literary style of the Book of Revelation as we work our way through John’s visions. Each of these visions serves as a different camera angle as the redemptive drama unfolds during the course of this present evil age. Each vision focuses upon a particular aspect of the struggle between Christ and Satan during the last days and the great tribulation, which is, as we have pointed out, the entire period of time between the first advent and second coming of Jesus Christ.

Throughout these visions, John uses apocalyptic language in which symbols serve as word pictures of the cosmic struggle between Jesus Christ and his already defeated but ever defiant foe, the devil. John uses symbols such as lampstands, stars and keys, as well as certain numbers, such as “seven,” to point us to the realities which these symbols represent. This means that the symbols used in apocalyptic literature are not to be taken literally, as can be seen by the description of Jesus Christ which opens this vision in verses 12-20.

In order to correctly understand the meaning of these symbols we must look to the Old Testament from where they are drawn, as well as to the first century Roman empire, which serves as the historical backdrop against which the struggles these symbols portray is played out. For example, in these letters to the seven churches, John will refer to the historical circumstances faced by the Christians of first century Asia Minor. But John will frame these historical issues in the context of a greater struggle in which

apocalyptic symbols are used to point us beyond Asia Minor and the Roman Empire of the first century to the struggles we face in our own age. The Christ of the seven churches of Asia Minor is the same Christ who wins the great victory over Satan and all those allied with him. The Christ of the first century church is the Christ of the twenty-first century church. The Christ who walks among the lampstands of the seven churches in Asia Minor, is the same Christ who walks among us when his people assemble for worship.

Before we look at the first of these seven letters this morning—the letter written to the church in Ephesus—there are several things which can be said about these letters in general and which we should keep in mind during the next few sermons.

It is vital that we connect the seven letters to the Christ who is ever-present in his church. This particular vision begins with John’s vision of the resurrected Christ recounted in verses 12-16 of chapter 1. Says John: *“I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone ‘like a son of man,’ dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.”*

All of the images John uses are drawn directly from the Old Testament and it is pointless to try and interpret these things literally as some medieval artists attempt to do. When Jesus is described as being like a “son of man,” John reveals to us the true meaning of Daniel 7 and the everlasting kingdom of which Daniel had been speaking. When John speaks of Jesus with a long robe and golden sash, he is telling us that Jesus is the great high priest. When we hear that his head and hair are white, we see the reflected glory of the ancient of days. When Jesus’ feet glow like a furnace we should think of his purifying power. His voice, being like that of rushing water, means that his word is the word of God. When Jesus speaks all creation must listen, for his testimony is true.

Furthermore, the lampstands are symbolic of God’s Holy Spirit, present in the churches, and who, through these lampstands, reminds us of the church’s function to be light-bearers to a fallen world. This is why in Exodus 25:31 and following—our Old Testament lesson—Moses describes in great detail how a golden lampstand with seven lamps is to be constructed for use in the tabernacle and then later in the temple. Even in Israel’s days in the wilderness, God was revealing his presence with his people through his Holy Spirit, to which the gold lampstand with seven lamps symbolically pointed. And now in John’s vision the same symbol appears again, only this time we are told of its true significance. Where the lampstand is present, Jesus is present. Where Jesus is present the Holy Spirit is present. And where the Holy Spirit is present, the church brings God’s light to the world around it which lives in darkness.

In verse 19, John is commanded by the Lord to write, *“what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later.”* Some have argued that this statement is the interpretative key to the whole book, dividing things into the past (what you have seen), the present (what is now) and the future (what will take place later). But a number of commentators have pointed out that the correct division here is actually two-fold. John is commanded to write about what he has seen, things present and things future.¹ Since John has already told us in verse 1 that the things about to be revealed concern events which are

¹ Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 32.

soon to take place, it makes a great deal of sense to understand that John will discuss things that now are—i.e., the issues facing the seven churches to which he is writing, and then later—beginning in Revelation 4:1—he will address things which are yet to take place in the future course of redemptive history until Christ’s second coming.

But there is something else we must consider for each of the next seven weeks. Jesus addresses seven historical churches in these letters. But when he addresses them, he also addresses us, promising blessing for obedience and threatening curse for disobedience. Yes, these are real imperatives which we must heed. But like all imperatives in the New Testament, they must be seen in the light of the indicatives (promises) which precede them and follow them.

With these things in mind, let us now turn to our text, Revelation 2:1-7 and Christ’s letter to the church in Ephesus.

Before we look at this letter, however, it might be helpful to know a bit about the city of Ephesus and the church which was founded there in the early 50's of the first century. The city of Ephesus was famous throughout the ancient world for its temple dedicated to Diana (Artemis). In the Acts 19, we read of Paul’s two years spent in the city, which came to an end after certain Jews tried to exorcize a demon in the name of Jesus, only to have the demon possessed-man turn on them and beat them to a pulp. As a result of this incident, there were so many occultists in the area who came to faith in Jesus Christ that it was not long before those making a living selling religious trinkets associated with Diana worship and the temple began to see their formerly thriving businesses dry up. As Luke recounts in Acts, a near riot ensued when the local theater was filled with scores of merchants and worshipers of Diana shouting “great is Diana of the Ephesians,” and seeking to do great bodily harm to the apostle Paul.

Archaeological evidence indicates that the temple drew pilgrims from the surrounding areas—making it quite a tourist attraction—but that the temple held much land and financial clout, controlling much of the local banking interests. Ephesus was also the home to one of the world’s largest libraries, as well as being a center for the occult. In the words of one writer, “if there was any city in which the church needed spiritual discernment, it was Ephesus.”² Indeed, this congregation will be commended by Christ because of that very fact. But the Ephesian church will also come under rebuke for having lost its first love, perhaps the inevitable fall-out in a church besieged by false doctrine and controversy.

All seven of the letters to the churches begin with the same command from Christ: “*to the angel of the church in Ephesus.*” Some believe that the term angel (or messenger) is a reference to the ministers of these churches, or to the messengers who brought John’s letter to that particular congregation.³ But more likely, the reference to angels is to those angels assigned by Christ to each of the churches mentioned. In Daniel 10:12-11:1, the prophet Daniel speaks of heavenly princes ruling over earthly nations, and so it might follow that God has assigned angels to particular congregations to rule them and protect them.

The letter to the Ephesians begins with a reminder of the authority of the one speaking to them through the pen of John: “*These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.*” Jesus is the Lord of his church, who now comes to the Ephesian

² Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 70.

³ Poythress, The Returning King, 85.

congregation with a word of blessing and a warning of curse. Because Jesus holds the seven stars in his hand and walks among the lampstands, he is uniquely aware of the circumstances of this particular congregation. He is aware of the circumstances of all his congregations. Far from being an absentee landlord, indifferent to the plight of his people, Jesus knows full well what his people have endured. He knows the struggles the Ephesians have faced. He also knows their sins and their failures.

As the Lord of the church who walks in their midst, Jesus has this to say to his people: *“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.”* In the midst of a very hostile and pagan environment, the Ephesian Christians have faithfully persevered. They have not tolerated wicked men—perhaps a reference the church’s removal of those who embraced the pagan immorality around them. The Ephesians have tested all those who claim to be apostles and found these claims to be false. This is probably a reference to what appears to be a common problem in the first century church—people who claimed to be associated with what some call the outer circle of apostles, men like James the Just, Silas, Andronicus, and Junia. But these people had no such association and used the supposed connection to the apostolic circle as a means of garnering support for their false teaching.⁴

After carefully examining such apostolic pretenders, the Ephesians found their claims to be false and exposed the evil of their ways, preventing them from getting a forum and removing them from the midst of the church. Indeed, the Ephesians have persevered in rooting out such evil and for this Christ commends them. But how, exactly, this rooting out of false teachers is connected to the declaration in verse 6: *“you hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate,”* is not clear. The Nicolaitans are mentioned again in the letter to the church in Pergamum and we will take up this particular heresy in more detail when we turn to that letter down the road.

The teaching of the Nicolaitans is compared to two Old Testament figures, Balaam and Jezebel, who sought to lure Israel away from YHWH by tempting the people to adopt pagan practices in addition to worshipping YHWH. As it concerns the Ephesian congregation, either the false apostles were Nicolaitans—teaching that it is acceptable to worship Christ and pagan deities—or else, the Nicolaitans represented yet another threat in addition to that of false apostles. In any case, Christ commends this congregation for their doctrinal faithfulness and perseverance in removing false teachers from among their midst. He commends them, because like him, they too hate the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

But in addition to his word of commendation, we also hear word of rebuke from the Lord of the church. *“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.”* This congregation has lost its first love and because of this, Jesus says, it has fallen from its earlier lofty heights. In fact, they have fallen so far, that Jesus’ threatened curse is very drastic—the removal of his blessing and his presence from this congregation. When Jesus threatens to remove his lampstand, he is referring to the fact that the lampstand is the symbol of his presence and the Holy Spirit’s empowerment of this congregation to be a light to the unbelieving world around it. Jesus exhorts this congregation to go back and do those things it did at first or else, he says, his blessing will be removed and this congregation will cease to be a light to unbelievers around it.

⁴ Beale, [The Book of Revelation](#), 229.

What does Jesus mean when he speaks of losing our first love? Many have taught that this refers to losing our love for Christ, the symptom of which is that our relationship with God grows cold, we cease from praying, we are no longer concerned about seeing unbelievers come to Christ, and so on. But this misses the mark. Jesus has just commended this congregation for persevering in the faith and pursuing sound doctrine! Although many evangelicals believe this to be the case, the Ephesian's stress upon doctrinal purity *has not* lessened their love for Christ. Quite the contrary is true. Christ commends them for being faithful to him as evidenced by their discernment of false teaching!

Therefore, the loss of the first love is much more likely a reference to the fact that all of the doctrinal infighting this congregation has experienced has produced a bitterness and judgmental attitude within the congregation.⁵ The problem is not that the desire for sound doctrine has dried up their love for Christ. Rather the struggles over sound doctrine has produced a poisonous atmosphere in which believers have lost their love for each other. Given what they have been through, they suspect others of teaching false doctrine. They have become overly critical, questioning not only doctrine, but motive. They have become contentious and they argue about theological minutia. Indeed, they have stopped doing what they did at the beginning. They have lost their first love. The solution, Jesus says, is to do those deeds that these Christians did at first, that is, when the congregation was first formed.

But the Lord's word of rebuke and his warning about the removal of his lampstand is not the final word to the church in Ephesus. Jesus reminds the Ephesians that it is not too late and that repentance is still possible. "*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*" This church can indeed go back and do what it did at the beginning and not come under Christ's judgment. This is clear from the final promise of blessing: "*To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.*" The command to repent is followed by the promise of the gospel. In the words of one writer, "In this first letter the painful memory of paradise lost . . . is transformed into hope, as the promise points ahead to the tree of life in the new Jerusalem, bearing a different crop each month and healing the nation through its leaves."⁶

There is also an amazing irony here which should not be lost to us. The temple of Diana was built upon the site of an ancient tree-shrine.⁷ In fact, the symbol of the temple and the worship of Diana was the date-palm which was reproduced on many of the religious trinkets sold in the city. The irony is that Jesus, the Lord of his church, will crush all the idols of such pagan worship. He offers access to a far better tree than a mere palm! He offers us the tree of life which yields "endless delight and eternal life."⁸

Since the letter to the church in Ephesus is written to Christ's church in all ages, what should we learn from our Lord's word of condemnation and rebuke to this congregation?

After hearing Christ's commendation of the Ephesian church for their perseverance in sound doctrine and his rebuke of them for losing their first love, I don't think it accidental if you thought to yourself that the

⁵ Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 72.

⁶ Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 73.

⁷ Hemer, The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Settings, 41-47.

⁸ Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb, 73.

Ephesian church of the first century sounds like many a Reformed church in the 21st century. While it is certainly an overstatement to say that this letter describes all Reformed churches, the fact of the matter is, since the thought probably occurred to many of us and since so many other Christians accuse Reformed Christians of stressing doctrine without love, we'd be remiss if we did not consider the importance of listening very carefully to what the Spirit says to us through this letter.

The first thing we should say is that resolution to the problem of believers losing love for each is not to give up stress upon sound doctrine in order to become more loving. The sentiments of one noted local pastor—“I'd rather have the right attitude than the right doctrine”—are every bit as muddle-headed as that of Christians who use sound doctrine to bully their friends who don't know the bible as well as they do. Jesus commends this church for sound doctrine, but rebukes them for not loving each other. It seems to me that to sacrifice doctrine for love is just as bad as sacrificing love of the brethren for sound doctrine. Christ's church should continue to drive out false apostles and hate the teaching of the Nicolaitans. And it is sound doctrine which comes to us in the words of John from his first epistle: “*we love because he first loved us*” (1 John 4:19). Sound doctrine—understanding that Christ loved us before we loved him—is the prerequisite for truly loving our brothers and sisters in Christ. We cannot truly love others as we ought, apart from understanding Christ's prior love for us. Therefore, in order to love others, we must start by reflecting upon Christ's love for us, love which we do not deserve.

Second, we must be clear that the command to return our first love carries with no power of fulfilling it. When Jesus commands us to our love neighbor, or to return to our first love, in one sense, he is condemning us. How can I love someone I don't even like? Commanding me to love someone doesn't make me able to love them. The key here is to two-fold. On the one hand we need to see others in terms of our mutual relationship to Christ—Christ has died for others, redeemed others, and loved others, even as he has done these things for me when I am undeserving of them. On the other hand, we also need to make sure that we have a proper meaning of what it means for Christians to love one another like they did at the beginning. A group hug and singing “we are the world,” won't do the trick. Indeed, what often passes for loving the brethren is often a superficial show of emotion.

Wherever churches were founded in the New Testament, there were concrete signs of love among the brethren within these congregations. No one went without the essentials of life. Widows and orphans were cared for. Christians shared their burdens—material and spiritual—which each other. We read that they prayed for one another and they supported one another with food and clothing. This is kind of thing associated with loving the brethren in the Scriptures. In our present context, such love will manifest in some of the following ways. When someone loses a loved one, do they get calls and cards of sympathy? Are meals prepared and baby-sitting provided when someone gets sick? When someone loses a job, do people in the church help them find a new one? When someone stops attending church, do they get calls from concerned members who miss them? This is the kind of thing that Jesus is talking about when he speaks about doing the things the church did at the beginning. Jesus is not asking us to make superficial demonstrations of emotion. Jesus is talking about genuine love which manifests itself in action. By doing these things, the church is able to contend against false teachers and the poisonous cloud of suspicion, judgmentalism, and acrimony will be wonderfully dissipated by acts of mercy and charity.

As we consider the commendation and rebuke given to the Ephesian congregation, let us pray that God will grant us to hear what the Spirit says to the church in Ephesus.

May we as a church be faithful to our Lord's call to persevere in the face of false apostles and false teaching.

May we also be faithful to our Lord's command to love our brethren.

For the Lord of his church comes to us this morning with the promise that if we are his people through faith in Jesus Christ, together we will overcome and one day, together, we will eat from the tree of life in the paradise of God.

Beloved, Christ has purchased us with his own blood and made us all a kingdom of priests. Jesus is ever faithful even when we are not. And we love our brothers and sisters in Christ, only because Jesus has first loved us.

Amen!