

Revelation 2:1-7 “Ephesus: The Church of Loveless Theology”

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Context

The time is AD 95-96. Late in the reign of Emperor Domitian. John the old man, the aged apostle is on the isle of Patmos. Patmos is a prison island. The ancient Alcatraz of the Aegean. John experiences a breathtaking staggering vision of Christ among the seven golden lampstands. He doesn't look like the rejected and crucified Nazarene. He looks like the awe-inspiring, majestic, Christ of the cosmos. The *Son of Man*. Sovereign Ruler and Judge of history. Who comes not only to punish those that persecute His church, but He comes to purge His own church. To purify her. That is what this first vision is about: the preservation and purity of the Church. To that end, Christ commands John to write a letter to each of the seven congregations. These seven letters continue through chapter 3, where the first vision cycle ends. The seven churches are historical congregations in the Roman province of Asia, modern Turkey, the westside. The issues addressed in the letters are not limited to the seven churches in the 1st century, the number seven is symbolic indicating the idea of completion, perfection. So the principles apply to all the churches throughout the ages.

The City and Church of Ephesus

The first of these seven. Verse 1, *"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write. Jesus commands John to send a message to the church in Ephesus. Not surprising that Ephesus is the first. Of the seven churches, it is the closest to the isle of Patmos. So the mail carrier would naturally stop here first. But there is another reason to begin with the Ephesian church, more than mere proximity. Predominance. Ephesus is the most strategic city in the Roman province of Asia. Known as the "Metropolis of Asia." The economic, political, and religious center of the region. The city sits right on the coast of the Aegean Sea. It is a major port city. Not airport, seaport. The significance is similar to that of Atlanta's International airport. The busiest airport in the world. Likewise, Ephesus is a significant seaport. In the harbor of Ephesus are anchored the largest and fastest ships of the Mediterranean world. The traveler, after disembarking, walks up a magnificent street 35 feet wide, lined with columns, leading from the harbor to the city center. What adds to its prominence as a financial center is that Ephesus lies at the crossroads of three interstates, bringing trade and travelers from all over the world. The city boasts not only of a thriving downtown financial center, but of its sports stadium and amphitheater, seating 25,000 spectators. Ephesus is also a political center. There is some debate whether it is permanent capital of the Roman province. Even so, the Roman governor spends much time here at the imperial court house in order to try cases and administer justice. The city is also a religious center. The capital city of the occult, black magic, witchcraft. The ancient historian, Pliny, explains that scrolls containing magic formulas and spells are called "Ephesian letters." Yet Ephesus is most famously known as the home of the temple of the Greek goddess, Artemis, if one prefers the Latin version, Diana. The temple in Ephesus is one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. One of the largest buildings on the planet. Four times larger than the Parthenon in Athens. Longer than a football field, 425 feet long, 220 feet wide and has 127 marble columns*

reaching 62 feet high. As you can imagine, tourists from all over the Roman Empire come to Ephesus to see the temple of Artemis. Including, no one less than the Apostle Paul.

At the end of Paul's second missionary journey, he stops by on the return trip to Antioch. Then comes back on his third mission trip, and remains in Ephesus for three years. Had a very significant ministry, starting a church, a seminary hosted by the school of Tyrannus. The Greek philosopher, Tyrannus, rented his lecture hall to the Apostle Paul. The impact of Paul's proclamation was stunning. Multitudes converted from witchcraft, burning 3-4 million dollars' worth of magic books (Acts 19:19). The impact of the gospel crippled the idol industry, bankrupting the idol makers union, which started the infamous riot led by Demetrius. As a result of the pioneering work of the Apostle Paul, Ephesus became the epicenter of Christianity in Asia.

Later, while imprisoned, Paul wrote *The Epistle to the Ephesians*. After which the apostle was released from jail, traveled back to Ephesus and installed his favorite student as pastor of the church, Timothy. *As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines* (1Ti 1:3 NIV). Timothy followed the apostle Paul as the pastor of the Ephesians. Where he remained to vindicate the truth claims of the gospel against false teaching. Were there ever a congregation that needed doctrinal discernment, it was Ephesus. God in His goodness gave to this church pastors who were theologically brilliant; Paul, Timothy, not to mention Apollos then the Apostle John in his last years. As a result, the ministry of these high caliber pastor-theologians, the Ephesian congregation became theologically muscular. Solid, doctrinally.

Commendation

For which Jesus commends them. Verse 2, *I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false*. Astounding commendation. Jesus commends them for not bearing with evil men, i.e., false apostles. Apparently, at some time, the Ephesian church was invaded by false teachers. Just as Paul had forewarned the elders in his farewell address: *I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them* (Acts 20:29-30). Paul's warning came to pass. Wolves in sheep's clothing infiltrated the flock of God in order to devour it. Celebrity pastors who claimed to be apostles.

That is an staggering claim. Imagine the impact. An apostle is an eyewitness of the resurrected Christ. The teaching of an apostle is totally authoritative, inspired, infallible. Here are these cowboys who come riding into town, on their high horse, claiming to be apostles, the authorities in the ancient church. Maybe you haven't heard of them. But as they quickly point out: "Paul had not met all of the apostles himself. He was the last on the scene. After the others had left Jerusalem for the mission field in Babylon, or India. So of course, Timothy, Paul's convert would not have known them all either." Now here they are claiming to be apostles, i.e. witnesses of Christ, sent by Christ with an urgent message. So, overtime, the elders invite each man to share his message. After listening, an elder looks the man straight into the eye and says, "You, sir, are a heretic." The elder doesn't say, "He means well. He has good intentions." No. "He is a liar and the truth is not in him." For that Jesus commends them.

He commends again. Verse 6, *Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate*. Who are the Nicolaitans? Tune in next time. Suffice it now to say that the Nicolaitans are another sect of heretics. How do the Ephesians react toward them? Jesus states, *you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate*. “In that you hate their works, you share My heart. You share My thoughts.” Jesus hates Nicolaitanism. So He commends the congregation for their doctrinal discernment, rigorous theological examination of these men.

Might wonder what Jesus would say to the American evangelical church today, where there is *No Place For Truth* (David Wells)? There is no place for truth in the church which has conformed to the culture. Postmodern world rejects any notion of absolute truth. What church do? Avoid truth. Avoid theology. The popular message in many American churches today is that of “therapeutic moralism.” Feel-good rules for living. Packaged in sermons on overcoming worry, regret—vital subjects. But subjects equally relevant to Muslims, Hindus. Therapeutic moralism isn’t sufficient for Ephesus. These Christians must think and live in a world that is hostile to the faith. Sexual immorality of the most accessible kind. Whatever one’s orientation. At the temple of Artemis, 24/7 there are one thousand cult prostitutes on duty to guide any spiritual seeker in sacred act of Hieros Gamos, ceremonial sex. By which one achieves an orgasmic moment of divinity. Moreover, they are surrounded by the occult, demonic, witchcraft. Then there are Greek philosophers in one’s face, ranting about pantheism on one hand to atheism on the other. Christians in Ephesus don’t survive on therapeutic moralism about *Your Best Life Now*. They must know not only what they believe but why they believe it. The church is in a survival situation, not unlike the American church. The difference is they know it and the American Church doesn’t.

Recently I have spent some time in Scotland, at the University of Aberdeen, King’s College. The fifth oldest English-speaking school in the world. Established in 1495 by King James IV to educate the ministers of northern Scotland. Famous theology department for centuries. Professors now? Islamic scholars. Directly across the charming cobblestone street is the Center for Islamic Study. City center, former sanctuaries of once thriving congregations, now dead, renovated into bars, casinos, hotels. Welcome to the future of America. Again the difference between American church and the Ephesian is that the Ephesians know that they are in a survival situation. While the American Christians are entertaining themselves to death, the Ephesians learn how to discern true reality from false reality reflected in true teaching and false teaching. They became so solidly orthodox and theologically astute that they can examine a false apostle and recognize him as a heretic. Doctrinally dominant.

What does Jesus say? Verse 6, *Yet this you have*. He commends them for it. As American Christians who find ourselves in an anti-intellectual theological wasteland, we might be tempted to think of Ephesus as the perfect church. But we would be wrong.

Condemnation

Yes, Jesus commends them. But also condemns them. Verse 4, *But I have this against you: that you have abandoned the love you had at first*. The church in Ephesus has abandoned her love for Christ. Unimaginable. Like a bride forgetting about her groom! How does a church so committed to theological excellence lose the very object of theology itself. Oxymoronic. The word theology comes from two Greek words, *theos*, God and *logos*; Word. Literally, *theology* means the “word of God.” Theology is the discipline, or science, of the study of God, His relation to the world. Presents a most haunting question. How does a church so dedicated to

theological rigor lose the object of theology? How can a church so solidly orthodox, so doctrinally dominant lose her love for God? Intentional? They don't just wake up one day and say, "Let's abandon our love for Christ." Instead they become hardened by decades of theological battle.

It reminds *The Band of Brothers*. HBO mini-series, chronicling the story of Easy Company, 101st Airborne Division during the Second World War. The series follows this "band of brothers," soldiers, from their paratrooper training in Georgia before the war, to the occupation of Germany after Victory. Toward the end of the war there is a very disturbing scene of these paratroopers liberating a concentration camp. Immediately beforehand, a replacement joins Easy Company. New troop fresh from the States. Never seen combat, never fired his weapon. Clean and starched uniform. He joins Easy right before liberating the death camp. Upon seeing the human carnage, he is horror-struck. Living skeletons crammed together in hut like sardines. Human zombies walking around in a living death. Upon seeing this unimaginable evil, the new guy has a mental breakdown. He cannot quit crying and vomiting. The veterans? How do the vets react? Business as usual. Sure, it's bad business, but it is business as usual. They're used to it. These paratroopers jumped behind enemy lines the night before the D-Day invasion. Many didn't survive the night jump itself. The drop zone was littered with mutilated corpses. Blown to pieces by anti-aircraft-artillery. These troops go on to bloody skirmish at the crossroads. Famous fight. Battle of Market Garden. Battle of the Bulge when pulverized by mortar fire. Body parts all over the frozen ground. When get to Dachau to liberate the death camp, it's bad business, but business as usual. The new guy, who has never experienced the horror of combat, he can't cope. The veterans cope because their consciences have become desensitized. Their hearts hardened by years of brutal battle.

So it is with the church in Ephesus. Battle-hardened congregation. Now 40 years after the death of Paul. They have survived decades of theological battle in the middle of the cosmopolitan center, pagan culture. They have endured these imposters disguised as apostles, Nicolaitans, Gnostics, Docetics. The battle has taken its toll. They don't realize that hearts are hardened by years of theological battle. In an effort to preserve orthodoxy, protect the church, they have become suspicious of each other teaching false doctrine. Overly critical. Harsh, judgmental, even cynical.

That happens to those who must fight daily for theological truth. Like ChristChurch, a recently planted congregation in a young denomination committed to the inerrancy of Scripture, its inspiration. Not many of those left. Our denomination fought its way out of the old Southern Presbyterian Church that had gone astray. Hard-heartedness is in our DNA. It is easy to become hardened toward one another and lose one's love for the church, the body of Christ. I was just reminded of this last week. Last Saturday by a young man at men's breakfast. "PCA churches like ChristChurch are strong on theology, but there is no community."

Like the church at Ephesus, but it was not always so. When planted, the congregation was a beehive of activity: caring for the sick, taking meals to shut-ins, babysitting for young mothers, opening up their homes to entertain strangers, hosting dinners. If someone missed a service, the elders called. They knew for whom they were responsible: those in their home group. When a new people visited, members invited them to lunch spontaneously. But they lost the love that they had at first. Some so hardened and embittered, they don't want to come to church because they don't like the people. If they do come, they only complain about the service. Too long. Too much singing. The sermon makes me think. They lost their first love. But it was not always so. Had you gone to the homes of any of the families in the congregation, it would not have taken

too long to find yourselves talking about the Lord. “Here is where I am reading in the Scripture. I am learning so much about God. The futility of worldliness. The emptiness of atheism.” They even shared their own burdens; struggles against the flesh, “Will you pray with me? I cannot quit looking at the woman at work. I can’t get her out of my mind.” Were you to visit the same family now, you hear talk only of football, vacation, travel, parties. They lost their first love.

Theology and Love

Some friends point out, “That is what happens when a church stresses theology. Theology divides. The focus on theology kills love. You should forget about theology and focus on love.” Yet is that what Jesus wants? He *commends* the church for her theological muscularity. But *condemns* for their lack of love. The situation is not either-or. Either theology or love. No. It is both-and. *Both* theology *and* love. Reflected in the greatest commandment? *To love the Lord thy God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind.* Love is expressed with both heart and head. There is no disconnect. The motto of the seminary which I attended, Reformed Theological Seminary is “A mind for truth and a heart for God.” Theology and love. Christians are not check their brains at the door of the sanctuary. That is Buddhism, Hinduism. The goal of the worshipper is to achieve a state of mindlessness. A mind devoid of content. Not Christianity. According to Christianity, life transformation begins with mind-renewal. *Don’t be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind* (Rom. 12:1). So what is needed in the church is both “a mind for truth and a heart for love”, theology and love, doctrine and devotion.

So how does a church achieve this? *Verse 5, Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first.* Remember, repent. Remember the height from which you have fallen. Where you were. Remember the good ‘ole days when love flourished in the congregation. Remember the excellence you enjoyed. Repent. Turn back reverse course. Make a decisive break from the direction of apathy, indifference, cold-hearted complacency. No new program: *Do the works you did at first.* What? *Love one another.*

Or the church will not survive. *Verse 5, ... If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.* The lampstand is the symbol of the church’s very function on this earth. To be a light in the present darkness. To bear the light of Christ in a dark world. The lampstand is the symbol of Christ’s presence. Which Jesus threatens to remove. To remove His blessing and presence from the congregation. To snuff out the light of the lampstand and just let the church die. Which happens every day to churches on main streets across America. Peachtree in Atlanta. Jesus judges the church and removes His lampstand from its place. Rather than waste His time with a loveless congregation He moves His lampstand to a place where believers are actually concerned for one another, not just their social prestige, but their sanctification. A warning to the superficial and shallow, from those congregations Jesus removes His presence. Sure there might be a building there. A few people might continue to trickle into it. So? It makes no difference to the city. The lampstand is gone and the building is no good to the city. To the church of loveless theology Jesus says, *Remember and repent, or be removed.* To whom is Jesus speaking? To them, or to us? *He who has ear, let him hear what the spirit says to the churches.* Amen.