

Revelation. The Church in Ephesus Revelation 2 v 1-7

Suffering exile for Christ on the lonely island of Patmos in the dangerous closing years of 1st century, the Apostle John was worshipping one Sunday when he was granted a spectacular vision. He saw his Master Jesus risen and glorified and ruling from Heaven, and the Lord gave Him messages of comfort and challenge to 7 representative congregations. Jesus is pictured among 7 lampstands which represent these 7 congregations and is described as holding 7 stars representing angels whom He instructs specifically regarding each church. So Christ is with His people in our suffering and instructing His angels concerning us! The first of these messages is to the Church at Ephesus.

This was John's old congregation – he had been their minister for some years. They would probably have read his first letter, so they would be familiar with the three tests John recommends to Christians for self-assessment, to see if we're walking in the light of Christ: Right belief, right behaviour and right fellowship.

As we read the Lord's message to Ephesus it would seem that this congregation were strong on the first two but lacking in the third.

Ephesus had strong orthodox beliefs. They had the theology correct. After all hadn't Paul, the gifted theologian responsible for much of the Spirit-inspired New Testament been a teacher at Ephesus for a number of years? Church members at Ephesus knew sinners are saved by God's grace, not by works. Rather we are justified by faith in Christ. They believed and taught sound doctrine in Ephesus.

More, they practised a high standard of moral behaviour. Marriage was held in high regard there. Business was conducted ethically. The community knew you could expect integrity from Christians in Ephesus. They had no time for those false teachers who tried to influence members for their own ends. They couldn't help but

disapprove of the immoral lifestyle of a group known as the Nicolaitians. So no one could fault the Ephesian Christians on their ethics. They practised good behaviour.

But here's where they fell down. Their love had grown cold. Jesus commends them for their theology and morals and hard work but then with disappointment says, "I have this against you: You have forsaken your first love". Their fellowship with the Lord and one another had grown cold. Their initial devotion when they first tasted the joy of salvation had faded.

Do we remember what the apostle Paul says about love in 1 Corinthians 13? They too were a notable congregation with numerous members exhibiting various gifts but they were sadly divided into competitive cliques over favourite preachers and worship styles. And Paul says, so what if we speak in the language of angels and know lots of theology, even give dramatic service? Without love we are nothing, gain nothing, make nothing only empty noise, like a "clanging cymbal" or "resounding gong"! If we don't have a fellowship where people love Jesus and one another for His sake we are seriously lacking. So much so, the Lord warns we may lose our lampstand – our witness for Him may be compromised and lost! It makes sense for many of the people we talk to out there *want* to believe in God, but don't believe in Church, for when they look at us they don't see love but judgementalism.

Observe Ephesus again. A good church. Noble apostolic heritage. Great tradition of evangelical preaching and Biblical teaching. High standards. Willing service, even to the point of enduring hardship to stand up for Christ. And yet cold at heart.

What happens when a church like Ephesus forsakes their original love? Several things:

- Nominal attendance and formalism take the place of adoring worship. "We love the place O God wherein Thine honour dwells" wrote the Psalmist. We *love* to come to God's House, to be in His presence, to

pray and listen to His Word and share the company of His like-minded people. We have a passion to know Christ more and make Him known. But when the love grows cold, so does the worship. Gatherings grow smaller because people love other things more.

- Here's another thing – when love wanes, criticism wins over compassion. We may disapprove of the practices of the Nicolaitions but we are meant to love them as people, as Christ does. How easy, when Christians forsake their first love, to become critical and unsympathetic to people, ready to condemn rather than pray God would show them grace, rather than us show them kindness or patience or even the Christian virtue of forgiveness.
- One more and it's this – when love leaves the fellowship, self-interest takes the place of self-sacrifice. When we cease to love the One Who surrendered His life on a cross we cling on to our lives and the things which please us and make us comfortable. Instead of sharing and giving away for Him, we seek to grasp and control more and more for ourselves.

What does the Risen Lord Jesus, Who has shown Himself to be standing with us in our sufferings say to church members like those in Ephesus?

He doesn't suggest anything. He commands us to repent, change our ways, rekindle the love we practised at first. To love is undoubtedly a challenge but for Christians it is not an option. God is love. He wants His people to experience and practice love, like our Saviour. A church cannot afford to stop at two out of three, we must seek with the Spirit's help to live out all the commands God gives and therefore we must put Christ back at the centre of our individual lives as Christians and in the heart of our fellowship together. He is the One worthy of constant, heartfelt worship, He is the One Who shows us how we should behave. And He is the inspiration for our love.

With the command comes a promise, access to the Tree of Life in Paradise, in other words, eternal life. Life before the fall was perfect

fellowship, Man and Woman in harmony with God, with each other and their environment. They rebelled and sinned and their first son murdered the second. Before the first book of the Bible is ended we have polygamy, incest, rape, sibling jealousy, violence and perversion of every kind.

But Revelation, the Bible's last book, shows us the beginning of Paradise and harmony being restored to heavenly perfection. Christians will live in love and peace and unity before God's throne and never cease to offer all thanks and praise to Him. Our Saviour commands us to start now. Loving Him Who first loved us and loving one another for His sake, let us practice this beautiful blessed thing the Bible calls fellowship, and show the world out there a little bit of heaven!

Let's pray.