

The Necessity of Love

May 21, 2017

Revelation 2:1-7

1 "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

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. 3 I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. 4 But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. 5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. 6 Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.'

To Ephesus (2:1–7)

Ancient Ephesus was the fourth largest city of the empire after Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch, Syria. It was the cultural and commercial center of the Roman province of Asia, the “temple keeper of the great Artemis” (Acts 19:35), and the most important seaport on the west coast of Asia Minor. Today, its ancient harbor has long been filled with silt from the Caÿster River, and the shoreline now lies eight miles farther away. Since 29 B.C., Ephesus had been a center of the worship of the goddess Roma and of the emperor cult. During Domitian’s reign (A.D. 81–96), Ephesus received the honor of “warden” (Greek, *neokoros*) of the imperial cult, and a new temple in honor of the god Domitian was built. The head and arm of Domitian’s colossal statue is displayed in the museum of Ephesus. Paul’s missionary activity of two to three years (Acts 20:31; about A.D. 52–55) reached its high point in this city, and according to Luke “all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:10; cf. 1 Cor. 15:32; 16:9; Acts 20:29–30); Timothy apparently lived there for some time (1 Tim. 1:3), and according to Irenaeus the Fourth Gospel was written in Ephesus.

The Christological predication is that the message comes from the one **who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands**. The preeminence of the Ephesian community among the churches of the province of Asia is reflected in this self-designation. Indeed, the Pastoral Epistles and the first and longest letter of Ignatius, together with later traditions, reflect the importance of the church in Ephesus in early Christianity. Some manuscripts even refer to Ephesus in the prescript of Ephesians (Eph. 1:1), though the better manuscripts omit this reference. The prophet John is commissioned to write to the angel of the **church in Ephesus**.

The word **church** (Greek, *ekklēsia*) is synonymous with “the people of God” in the Old Testament. What is peculiar about the church in the New Testament is that it is the people who call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, who confess that “Jesus Christ is Lord” and believe that God raised him from the dead (Rev. 10:9, 13). In Revelation, the church is both the local community and the whole people of God because the fulfillment of God’s promise (1:5–6) is present in both. The seven messages are written for seven local communities and simultaneously for the whole church. In the recurring clause, “what the Spirit says to the churches” (plural), the ecumenical dimension of the individual messages and of the whole letter comes to the fore.

The main section, beginning with **I know** (vv. 2–6), evaluates the situation in Ephesus and offers first praise (vv. 2–3) and then censure (v. 4), followed by the demand to remember and to repent, a demand that is connected with a threat of judgment (v. 5). The main section closes with a repetition of praise (v. 6), found only here. The call to listen (see above) and the promise to victors conclude this message (v. 7).

Christ, who holds in his hand “the seven stars,” who “walks among” the communities, is

not an absent deity, enthroned in infinite distance beyond the stars. He is present among them in love (1:6), in praise (2:2–3, 6), and in critical judgment (vv. 4–5). Nothing is hidden from him who can say **I know your works**. In contrast to Paul where “works of the law” has the negative connotation of quest for self-righteousness apart from faith in Christ (Rom. 9:31–10:4), our author regards good **works** as the necessary consequence of the status received at baptism. “Works” constitute the conduct of Christians who are delivered from their sins by grace alone (1:4b–6). In this instance, the works consist of **your toil and your patient endurance**. Their toil is apparent in that **you cannot bear evil men but have tested those who call themselves apostles but are not, and found them to be false**. Their endurance under pressure is known to Christ: **you are enduring patiently** (cf. 1:9) **and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary** (v. 3). The community has experienced stress, though its form is unknown to us. The Greek past tense, “you bore up” (rather than **bearing up**, RSV), points to difficulties in the past. The confession of the **name** of Christ was the cause of their suffering (cf. 2:13; 3:8; Matt. 10:22; 24:9). Endurance, perseverance (Greek, *hypomonē*), has become the chief Christian virtue in Revelation and presupposes a situation of hardships and perhaps occasional persecution (cf. Heb. 10:36–39; James 1:2–4; 5:11; 2 Tim. 2:12).

Their **toil** is evident in their consistent rejection of itinerant **apostles** who were tested (past tense) and found **to be false** (cf. Acts 20:29–30). In 1 Cor. 12:10 the “discerning” between spirits is the theological charisma of distinguishing true prophets from false ones (cf. 1 John 4:1). “False apostles” had already plagued Paul’s ministry (cf. 2 Cor. 11:13–14, 22–28). Here the false apostles are probably emissaries of the Nicolaitans (v. 6). The Ephesian Christians continue to **hate** their **works**, that is, they radically reject the teaching and conduct of this heretical group and their emissaries (v. 6). The nature of their teaching is not indicated here (but see below, 2:14–15; and 2:20–22).

In spite of the high praise, we also hear a sharp censure. **But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first**. It has been suggested that in their zeal for orthodoxy, the Ephesian Christians became unloving, inquisitorial, and censorious (Caird). Yet Christ himself can say, **I also hate** the works of the Nicolaitans (v. 6). Love does not exclude hating **the works**, the false teaching and abominable conduct, of heretics. Therefore, the criticism voiced against this church is not the result of an absence of pastoral care and concern toward heretics (cf. 2:20–22). On the contrary, the Ephesians know that tolerance of falsehood is not a charisma, and they are commended twice for their clear stance against heretics. But their first **love** has grown cold, which is one of the first signs of the end (Matt. 24:12). Our text does not specify whether it is love toward God and Christ or love toward sisters and brothers within the community. It probably refers to both. In Jer. 2:2, the Lord says to Jerusalem, “I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride,” and the new Jerusalem of the end is “prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (21:2). The liturgy of the redeemed at the end will reflect reciprocal love between God and his people. But during the interim, their love and enthusiasm for God and their new sisters

and brothers which was so obvious at the beginning is being worn down by daily stress and fear. Their patient endurance (v. 3) of ridicule and diverse chicaneries is without love, and thus their good works become worthless (1 Corinthians 13). Love is the first and foremost gift of the Spirit; it is the bond that goes out from Christ (1:5) and should unite the Ephesians with each other in solidarity. As a gift of the Spirit, love should be the light of the Ephesian lampstand, and when that light is not rekindled, then the lampstand itself will be removed (v. 5). Without love toward God, toward brothers and sisters, a church ceases to be a church in spite of its commendable orthodoxy and brave endurance of hardships.

Remember then from what you (singular) have fallen. Behind this sentence lies the common apocalyptic idea of the fall of angels (e.g., *1 Enoch* 6–18; 64–69; *Jubilees* 5; etc.). The point here would be that the angel of Ephesus, far from guaranteeing the charisma of love, has himself **fallen**. He is part and parcel of the problem of lovelessness in the Ephesian church. He has fallen, perhaps, because the dragon’s “tail swept down” these stars of heaven (12:4). Three imperatives punctuate Christ’s exhortation: **remember** your beginnings. The Old Testament emphasis on remembering (cf. Deut. 5:15; 7:18; 8:18–19; Isa. 44:21; 57:11) is taken up in the New Testament. To remember is to make the past come alive, to rediscover the liberation that had propelled the Ephesian Christians out of an idolatrous society and into the kingdom and to recall the love of their Lord who energized their lives; to remember is to **repent**. Repentance is not the same as feeling sorry for oneself, or crying over spilled milk, but it means to turn daily to him who “loves us” (1:5b) and who is therefore able to give us the charisma of love; **do the works you did at first**. Faith is active in love, and the love that was the beacon at their beginnings must shine again in the turmoil of the present. These three imperatives are not to be confused with legalistic injunctions. They are gospel imperatives, spoken by Christ. They demand what the church’s Lord offers. Yet they are imperatives, and their urgency is underscored by a threat of judgment.

If not, if the three imperatives do not find realization by the Ephesians, **I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent**. The threat of exclusion from the one church by the church’s Lord underlines the seriousness of his demand for repentance, mentioned twice in v. 5. This demand is also a twofold invitation, to take the opportunity offered and to repent. Repentance is not a right that the church possesses but a privilege granted to it. This becomes clear through texts such as Heb. 6:4–8; 10:26–31. It would be false to conclude that **I will come** does not refer to the parousia (cf. Caird). The meaning is: unless you repent, the parousia will be judgment for you, namely, the removal of your lampstand, the exclusion of your church from the millennium with Christ (cf. 2:16, 25; 3:3, 11; 20:4–6; 21:9–22:5). His coming is not dependent on the community’s conduct, but the consequences of his coming are. Furthermore, judgment does not just fall on the world, but the church is also subject to judgment. The threat of judgment in this message to the Ephesians may also have been an answer to the notion that the believer “does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” already (John

5:24; cf. Eph. 2:4–10). If so, then an overly realized eschatology was held not just by heretics but also by members of a church that received both praise and criticism.

The call to **hear** what Christ is communicating through **the Spirit** continues the demand to remember and repent. The time to listen and repent is now. Simultaneously, the call to hear introduces the promise to conquerors which concludes the exhortation on a positive note. **To him who conquers** lovelessness and indifference toward sisters and brothers, who every day anew (present participle; continuous action!) overcomes apathy and stoical unperturbed resignation and becomes again fervent in Spirit, **I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God**. The tree was one of the symbols of Artemis, whose temple at Ephesus was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The Artemision offered asylum within its sacred precinct. For John, the sacred precinct, the paradise of God, will receive the Christians who are alienated by the idolatry surrounding Artemis. Only victorious Christians share in the life to come. As historical background we read in the *Testament of Levi*: And God “shall open the gates of paradise and he shall remove the sword that has threatened since Adam; and he will grant to the saints to eat of the tree of life” (18:10–11). In the new Jerusalem, with paradise not just restored but created anew, the conquerors shall eat the fruit **of the tree of life** (cf. 22:2). This future eating in the kingdom is anticipated in the sacramental eating, and it has its absolute contradiction in the eating of food sacrificed to idols (2:14).¹

a. To the church of Ephesus (2:1–7)

Ephesus was the most important of the seven cities. Though Pergamum was apparently the official capital of the province of Asia, Ephesus was its greatest city. It was an assize town and a seat of proconsular government (Acts 19:38). When a proconsul took up his appointment he had to enter his province at Ephesus. Situated near the mouth of the river Cayster, it was a great commercial centre (despite problems posed by the silting up of its harbour which persisted so that the site is now several miles inland). Much of the trade of the East came to the Aegean via the port of Ephesus. The great road from the Euphrates terminated there, as did roads from the Cayster valley and the Maeander valley to the south.

Ephesus was an outstanding religious centre, the chief cult being that of Artemis (cf. Acts 19:24ff.). The city had the prized status of *neōkoros* (lit. ‘temple-sweeper’!) in connection with the great temple which was one of the seven wonders of the world. But religion and magic were hopelessly intermingled, and magical arts were popular (cf. Acts 19:19). ‘Ephesian letters’ were charms widely supposed to cure sickness and to bring luck.

¹ Krodel, G. A. (1989). *Revelation* (pp. 104–110). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House.

Paul spent over two years in Ephesus establishing the church (Acts 19:8, 10), to which the important Epistle to the Ephesians was later sent. Timothy was there for a time (1 Tim. 1:3), and tradition says that John lived there in his old age.

1. The greeting is to *the angel of the church in Ephesus* (for *angel* see on 1:20), but there is no doubt that the message is to the church. It comes from the risen Christ, described as holding *the seven stars in his right hand* (cf. 1:16; the verb here is rather stronger than 'had' in that passage and denotes a firm grip). He is also said to be walking among the lampstands (in 1:13 there was no mention of walking, but cf. Lev. 26:12; Dan. 3:25). The effect of this salutation is to give a picture of Christ as present in the very midst of the churches, a Christ who is intimately concerned with them and cares for them.

2. The exalted Christ knows what goes on among his people. He selects three things (cf. 1 Thess. 1:3): *your deeds* (the general term), *your hard work* (*kopos* means labour to the point of weariness), and *your perseverance* (Barclay, 'the courageous gallantry which accepts suffering and hardship and loss and turns them into grace and glory').

The Ephesians' zeal for the right comes out further in their inability to *tolerate wicked men*. They have also tested out men who claimed to be *apostles* and shown them up for what they were. *Found them false* shows that these men were not merely deluded; they were deceivers. The term *apostle* is not used here of the Twelve, but in the wider sense (cf. 2 Cor. 11:13). Paul had foretold that 'savage wolves' would trouble the Ephesian church (Acts 20:29), and we see the fulfilment here. Clearly the Ephesians did not take their faith lightly. They quite understood that it made demands on them, and they worked hard at being Christians. And they were not credulous. They tested and rejected false claims among professing Christians.

3. The verb *endured* is that used in verse 2 of their inability to 'tolerate' evil men. But for Christ's sake they have *endured*. *Have not grown weary* likewise takes up the word 'hard work' of the previous verse, being the verb from the same root ('you have not grown weary of labour'). In these letters praise is regularly given where it fairly can to those churches which are to be rebuked for some failure. Thus there is more praise for Ephesus and Thyatira which are rebuked, than for Smyrna and Philadelphia which are not.

4. The condemnation of this church is expressed in one memorable phrase, *You have forsaken your first love*. It is not clear whether this is love for Christ ('you do not love me now as you did at first', GNB), or for one another ('you have given up loving one another', Moffatt), or for mankind at large. It may be that a general attitude is meant which included all three ('you do not love as you did at first', Phillips). *Forsaken* (*aphēkes*) is a strong term; they had completely abandoned their first fine flush of enthusiastic love. They had yielded to the temptation, ever present to Christians, to put all their emphasis on sound teaching. In the process they lost love, without which all else is nothing.

5. There is nothing more to the accusation. But it is damning enough in all conscience. So Christ calls on them to come back. There are three steps. First they should *remember* their first state (there is a tragic air of completeness about the perfect, *peptōkas, fallen*). It is possible to slip away gradually without realizing what is happening. A useful counter is to go back in thought to the first days. The Greek imperative is present, with a meaning like 'keep on remembering', 'hold in memory'. They had enjoyed a close walk with God. Let their minds dwell on that. The second step is *repent* (the aorist points to a sharp break with evil). Christians can never dally with wrong. There must be a sharp break with it. But Christianity is not basically negative and the third step is *do the things you did at first*, i.e. the works that had issued from their first love.

If they do not heed, dire consequences are sure and swift. *I will come* is in fact in the present tense 'I am coming'. John sees it before his eyes. If the church does not heed the injunction Christ will remove its lampstand, which appears to signify the total destruction of the church. A church can continue only for so long on a loveless course. Without love it ceases to be a church. Its lampstand is removed. *If you do not repent* shows that the judgment is not irrevocable. If they repent they may yet be saved. But if not, there is no hope.

6. *But you have this in your favour*, says Christ: *You hate the practices of Nicolaitans, which I also hate*. While love is the typical Christian attitude, love for the good carries with it a corresponding hatred for what is wrong. 'Neither doth he abhor any thing that is evil' (Ps. 36:4, Prayer Book version) is a terrible condemnation. Notice that it is *the practices* and not the persons which are the objects of hatred.

Nothing is known about the *Nicolaitans* other than what is recorded in Revelation. Irenaeus says that they owed their origin to Nicolas, who was one of the Seven (Acts 6:5; *Adv. Haer.* i.26.3; iii.10.7). Clement of Alexandria defends Nicolas saying that he was misunderstood (*Strom.* iii. 4.25). All here is conjecture. Victorinus of Pettau, the first commentator on Revelation, refers to them as 'false and troublesome men, who, as ministers under the name of Nicolaus, had made for themselves a heresy, to the effect that what had been offered to idols might be exorcised and eaten, and that whoever should have committed fornication might receive peace on the eighth day' (*ANF*, VII, p. 346). But this, too, looks like speculation. Etymologically the name combines 'victory' and 'people' and one could get roughly the same meaning from Balaam, from which it has been concluded that the Balaamites (v. 14) were at least similar. Since the practices of the Balaamites and the followers of Jezebel (v. 20) are much the same, it appears that this group was akin. It cannot be proved but it seems the most reasonable reading of the evidence that all three were connected, though not identical. This is not the enemy from outside openly seeking to destroy the faith. The false teachers claimed 'not that they were destroying Christianity, but that they were presenting an improved and modernized version of it' (Barclay). This is the insidious fifth column, destroying from within.

7. *He who has an ear ...* occurs in each of the letters. It stresses the continuous activity of the Spirit and is a call to attention. There is a similarity in our Lord's formula (Mark 4:9; etc.) though he uses the plural, while the singular is found in Revelation. The expression is a personal challenge. The plural *churches* shows that the message is not only for those Asian Christians so long ago but for every one who 'has an ear'. In each letter Christ is the speaker but we are told what the Spirit says: 'the word of Christ is the word of the Spirit' (Beasley-Murray).

There is a little message to *him who overcomes* in each of the letters. Some see a reference to the Nicolaitans ('overcome' is *nikō*). But John is fond of this verb (he uses it seventeen times) and the connection is not necessary, though it may not be out of mind in this particular instance. Swete aptly says, 'The note of victory is dominant in St John, as that of faith in St Paul; or rather, faith presents itself to St John in the light of a victory.' To the man who perseveres through to final victory Christ says that he will give to eat of the tree of life (cf. 22:2, 14, 19). After Adam's sin the way to the tree of life was cut off and guarded by cherubim (Gen. 3:24). Now it is given by Christ to his triumphant follower. But it is not to be taken for granted. Only some have the right to it (22:14), and it may be taken away (22:19). *The paradise of God* points to bliss in the presence of God himself. *Paradise* is from the Persian, with a meaning like 'park' (NEB, 'Garden of God'). It is used of bliss in the world to come.²

² Morris, L. (1987). *Revelation: an introduction and commentary* (Vol. 20, pp. 63–67). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.