

The Greatest Is Love

by Steve Zeisler

I wonder how a prospective employer would react if a Christian wrote in his resume that he was a vital member of a family of millions of brothers and sisters in every nation on earth; that he was a soldier on permanent active duty behind enemy lines, part of an army fighting a thoroughly evil, powerful, invisible foe? A Christian could also include the fact that he was a contributing member to the human agency by which the rest of mankind receives whatever spiritual light and corruption -- arresting influence it has; that he belonged to the body of people who are the pillar and support of the truth. Those things are true of all Christians, thus it would be legitimate to include them in your resume. The church of Jesus Christ is an extraordinary creation. One of the most remarkable things God has done to bring about the salvation of the world was to make us into a body who can be used by him, his body on earth.

The book of Revelation opens with a dramatic vision of Jesus Christ to the apostle John. By this time John was an old man, living on the island of Patmos, to which he had been banished. In this vision he beheld the figure of Jesus standing among seven golden lampstands. "The purpose of this first vision of Jesus was so that John could learn about the ministry Christ has among his people. the church. "The opening chapters of Revelation, in fact, mainly concern the church. This remarkable, frightening, impressive Figure dictated to John letters to seven churches located in seven cities in Asia. We have already discovered that the church of Jesus Christ is always overseen and ordered by the living lord. He is concerned for his church. He walks among us, correcting us and encouraging us. Interestingly, the churches referred to in chapter one are located in cities. "The church is never to remove itself from society, never to hide out on a mountaintop, seeking to quarantine itself from the contamination of the world. The churches in Revelation are located in cities, and their influence is compared to a lamp stand, shedding light in the darkness around.

Further, these churches are organized into congregations. Each letter is addressed to the "angel" of a particular church. That word technically means "messenger." John is not referring to those beings whom God created, called angels in Scripture. Here he is talking about messengers, and he probably is referring to the human leadership in any given location. The Lord is looking at congregations (like Peninsula Bible Church), who are located in a particular area (like Silicon Valley), who are sufficiently organized to have leaders. These letters, therefore, are to correct congregations like ours.

There is a common pattern in these letters to the seven churches. Each letter first highlights a certain attribute of Christ, usually something we learned about him in chapter one. Next (in most cases) he commends the churches for something good that they are doing. He then corrects or warns them about some negative aspect, and refers to the consequences that will follow if they do not heed the correction. Lastly, he has a word to those who are described as "overcomers," the individuals in a congregation who, whether the rest of the church obeys or not, are determined to obey, to hear the words of the Spirit and become different people. "That is roughly the pattern that is followed in each of the seven letters.

Note that these letters end with the appeal to the "overcomers," to "those who have ears to hear." Christ's concern for any individual church, whether that concern is about lovelessness, corruption, or whatever, is precisely his concern for the individual heart as well. Since the church is a collection of individual Christians, each one of us is capable of the same kind of sin which the Lord is pointing up to the different churches here. Thus we would do well to examine our individual lives by the same yardstick by which the Lord is measuring each of these churches.

The first letter is addressed to the church at Ephesus.

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this: "I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot endure evil men, and that you put to test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you have found them to be false; and you have perseverance and have endured much for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have left the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you, and I will remove your lamp stand out of its place unless you repent. Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God."

Ephesus in the first century was a proud, aggressive, materialistic city. It was known as "The Metropolis of Asia the greatest city in the Roman province of Asia. A seaport, it was located in a prime trading area, its great harbor bidding welcome to the merchants of the entire known world. Diana, the goddess of love, was worshiped in Ephesus in grossly perverted fashion. Although the worldly residents of the city scoffed at any criticism of their materialism, the sexual practices or their economic power, however, the city was also one of the three locations where the church had its most outstanding success in ministry and in missionary activity to other areas.

The New Testament refers to the church at Ephesus a number of times. The church of Jesus Christ, of course, began in Jerusalem. As it grew it moved outside the boundaries of the city and indeed the country. Antioch, in Syria, became a great center of Christian learning and fellowship. sending out missionaries to other parts of the world. Ephesus became the third great center of Christian faith in the early years as the gospel moved further and further from its source. Located in what is now Turkey, the city became a center of learning and growth. The apostle Paul spent almost two years there, teaching and discipling. Both Scripture and tradition link together the ministries of Apollos, Aquila and Priscilla, Timothy, and even John to the Ephesian church as well. All of Asia in turn heard the word from its mother church in Ephesus (Acts 19:10). It is probably accurate to say that the six other churches referred to in chapters two and three of Revelation had the church of Ephesus as their source. Thus the Ephesian church was the first in importance in that entire region of Asia. It was the first city a traveler from Patmos would encounter, and its area of failure, abandoning love. is of first importance to the Lord. Christ raises that issue with the church in every age. The awful, "Yes, but. . ." quality of this letter is immediately apparent. The warning is obvious: "You are wonderful in some areas, strong, capable and effective, but you have forsaken something very important." This congregation at Ephesus. Jesus said. faced having its lamp stand removed altogether. "You may not be allowed to continue to represent me at all if you do not repent of the loss of love that has become characteristic of you. You are good and capable, but a terrible problem is infiltrating your ranks. You have left behind the love you had at first."

Let us look first. however at the things that Christ commends about this church at Ephesus. We need to learn from its strengths as well as its weaknesses. First. the!: arc commended for their perseverance and hard work. "The word for " toil" means hard. sweat-- producing effort. They were willing to work hard. and they persevered against odds. Hard work is a must for any church. Some churches. however. seem to think that inoffensiveness is the attribute they should cultivate. They seek to be sol's and gentle and beneficent, as inoffensive and unnoticed as possible in the community. Other churches seem to be designed solely as beautiful, sentimental wedding chapels. Their congregations arc dead, being fed on nothing but ritual. inoffensiveness what a sad goal for the church! The church needs to be hard working. It must penetrate areas of need in the community. be willing to bear heavy burdens and speak clearly the word of truth to a hurting world. We ought to be willing to put our lives on the line and be a hard working. persevering church.

A second good mark for this church at Ephesus was their refusal to compromise with evil men. we are told. They would not acquiesce to people who slyly served the cause of evil. Nor would they compromise with error. with lies. with " false apostles." as they are called here. teachers who claimed to speak for Christ but in fact were telling lies. They tested the teaching of everybody who came along and rejected untruth.

Further. Jesus says. the Ephesians lived "for My name's sake." Personal aggrandizement did not interest them. They were not building economic empires for themselves. They were not being religious to benefit

themselves, either financially or socially. Their prime concern was that the name of Christ be honored. Nor were they hypocritical. They wanted Jesus to receive the honor in everything they did. It is a terrible thing when a church loses its commitment to honoring the Lord and seeks to honor itself or its leaders instead.

I would say that many of the strengths which the church at Ephesus had are in some measure also true of Peninsula Bible Church. We are a mother church to other congregations in this area; a teaching center that has helped in the growth of leaders who now serve in other places. At times we have had to publicly take a stand against men who were committed to wickedness. At times we have had to examine theological error, make difficult choices and suffer the resulting consequences. By and large I would say we are not apt to compromise. We are usually willing to work hard and persevere; and we are concerned for the name of Christ, though certainly there is room for growth in these areas.

The searching question, of course, naturally follows: "Do we mirror the church in Ephesus in every respect, in both strengths and weaknesses?" Would the Lord say of us, "You have lost the love you had at first"? And what exactly does he mean by these words? Jesus is not referring to the object of love. i.e.. Christ. Rather he is talking about the experience of love. One of the first experiences these Christians at Ephesus had was that they were caught up with the inner fountainhead of love They knew that God loved them. and that love bore fruit so that they loved God in return. Not only that. they loved their brothers and sisters and the non -- Christian world around them. The whole context of their early life of faith was one of love. of longing to do something good for another, of desiring to reflect the beauty of the lord and live to his praise. And this love was never coerced. The desire to love others in return welled up from inside of them. .Jesus is se! trig to the Ephesians. "Your earliest experience of Christianity was characterized by love Everywhere you turned. your response was one of love But you arc in danger of losing that."

Anyone who is a Christian has experienced at some point in his life a deep and life-changing encounter with the love of God: and then he has responded by loving in return. John says in his first letter. "The one who does not love does not know God. for God is love." In order to be able to say that we know God at all. early in the encounter we must have responded in love to him; we must have known at one time what it is like to love him and know that he loves us. We are not converted primarily by the driving logic of the faith although that faith is extremely logical. It was not primarily the intellectual arguments or the theological weightiness of the Christian faith that won us to the Lord. The love of God for us is what wins us. If we have not discovered that he loves us and we have not responded ourselves, then it may very well be that we are attenders but not really Christians yet.

The issues these people faced are true of every individual in every church. If you are a Christian, and if love is not a part of your experience now, then it once was. That is why we have this great commandment of the Lord here in Revelation, "Remember where you once were, and return to that." Loss of this kind of love may be the cause of a congregation ceasing to exist. We cannot represent Jesus Christ in this world if we will not again learn to be a people characterized by our love for the Lord and for those around us.

How can one lose all the vitality which that love first produced? I think the problem is that there is a devilish, slow transference (at least in the case of these Ephesians) from the hard work and expense that issues from real love, to effort and toil that have a different origin. Hard work and expense of yourself may occur because you are guilty and you are trying to remove guilt, for instance; or because you want people to think highly of you; or even because it has become a habit. These people worked hard and they had paid a price. But no longer was it effort that came from within that brought joy to them, rather it was effort that came because of external pressures.

The trouble is, it all looks the same. You cannot always tell the real from the fake, whether it is visiting the sick. giving money, long hours spent meeting the needs of someone, enthusiasm to speak the words of Christ, translating the Scriptures, whatever. Any or all of these things can be motivated by a desire to look good, or to remove some stain of guilt you feel remains with you, rather than what you should feel a sense of how much God loves you and the delight of loving service in return.

Another reminder that a life may be spent wisely for love's sake or foolishly without it is found in one of the great lyrical passages of Scripture, 1 Corinthians 13:

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have faith that can remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to be burned, but have not love, I am nothing... Now these three abide faith, hope, and love and the greatest of them is love.

Tongues, the experience of the spirit, miracles, etc., are a battleground for Christians. Paul says, "If you speak in the tongues of all kinds of men, even the tongues of angels and you do not have love, so what?" You have not amounted to anything if I prophesy and teach, if my theology is flawless, if I have strong evangelical roots but I do not have love then it all amounts to nothing. Some Christians are inclined to regard the faith in terms of ministering to the poor, alleviating suffering, sacrificing themselves, etc., but if these activities result from external pressure rather than love flowing from the heart, then it profits nothing at all.

Here in this passage from 1 Corinthians' and in Jesus' words to the church at Ephesus, Jesus is declaring that what finally counts is knowing that God loves us: and to become so convinced of that fact that we love him in return, with the result that we give of ourselves in concern for others. "I have this against you, that you have lost your first love." If you were the commander of an army facing a battle, wouldn't you choose patriots who love their country to fight for you rather than mercenaries, soldiers for hire'?

The same kind of question is being asked about contemporary child-rearing. Day care centers and babysitters are performing many tasks that parents used to do because they loved their children and were committed to them. People are being paid to diaper infants, teach them how to walk and talk because parents are so often away from the home. In the past, because of love for their children, fathers took responsibility to teach them what life was all about. They taught them skills for living life, passed on values, modeled inner character and maturity. Today people expect the schools to teach all of these things. Aren't we paying our taxes for that purpose'? people ask. But how much less valuable such learning is than being taught all those things by someone who loves you.

That is the distinction that this passage calls upon us to make. The Ephesian church worked hard. People who love Christ work hard. Which experience is ours'? Does the toil and perseverance result because of a joyful response to what God has already done; or are we being paid, financially or emotionally or in some other way, for what we are doing?

What about Peninsula Bible Church? Do we have the same failings as the church in Ephesus'? Accurate self-appraisal is always difficult. Interestingly, the Lord's purpose here is not to have someone steer the whole church in a different direction. No one can do that. The appeal, rather, is made to the individuals who make up the congregation. Do we have ears to hear'? Are we listening'? Are we willing to face up to what we have become and change direction'? Are we willing to reject useless effort and choose loving concern'? Our future as a church hangs on the individuals who are following the Lord, those who are willing to hear from him and learn to correct this abuse if it is present among us. Those who do so will be given even now, an eternal quality of life. "To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is the Paradise of God."

How does one correct loss of love? The Lord is not telling us to become sentimental. It is interesting that he says to the Ephesians, "You are good at hating." Hating is a part of loving. "You hate the deeds of the Nicolaitaris, which I also hate." Love has an edge to it. It is perfectly proper, of course, to hate the results of evil, but not those who become involved in evil. So becoming sentimental does not correct the problem. What he does say is, "Remember . . ." That is first and foremost. "Remember therefore from where you have fallen." The second step is, "Repent." And the third step, go back and act the way you once did. When the prodigal son, having squandered his inheritance, found himself eating the pigs' food it was then he remembered the love he had experienced in his father's house. That memory was what prodded him to begin the long journey back home again. Even as a servant in his father's home he knew he would be loved.

Every Christian can recall the time when he felt the sense of God's love drawing him to Christ. Remember what it was like to wake up with a sense of approval from the Lord'? The estrangement was over, and it was

easy to love him because of that? Remember your first experiences as part of a community of people who did not force you to earn your way into their hearts! You were accepted because you were a believer. You were now part of the team. People listened to you and you listened to them. Love was exchanged between you because of your faith in Christ, not because you were impressive or had managed to earn status among them. Remember also your desire to do good for somebody without ever wanting recognition for what you were doing? You just wanted to be a blessing to somebody. Whether people took notice or not did not interest you. Those are remembrances of vital Christianity. Why settle for anything less? Why succumb to pressure to look good, to dour --faced, joyless, imitation Christianity? If you can remember what was vital, why not go back to it? Then, having remembered, repent of your sin because lovelessness is sin. Repent and return to what you once experienced. Begin again to live in God's love, to love in return and act differently.

Ephesus was a rich, arrogant city. given over to selfindulgence of every kind. It sounds rather like our Bay Area, doesn't it? Wherein lies the hope for such a city or such an area'? Certainly not in hard, driven, loveless Christians. The power to do good in our world comes from people who have been so delightfully changed by the power of God, and are so appreciative of that change, that they find themselves wanting to do good. They have an inner response that says. "Let me help you. let me reach out and share with you the good news." However much effort a church expends, if it fails to remember its first love it stands in danger of being shut down by the Lord and losing its opportunity for service. Let us pray that the Lord will give us ears to hear and that we will respond to his leading.

Lord, open our ears so that we can understand where we have spent ourselves in effort but have forgotten why. Give us concern for you and for others, a love that comes in response to your love of us. We pray that you will continue to use us as a lamp to the world around us, knowing you care so much for the community that we are a part of. In Jesus name. Amen.

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Revelation 2:1-7
Second Message
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