

A Church Without Love?

By Daryl Wingerd

Seven messages from the Lord Jesus to seven local congregations in 1st-century Asia form the bulk of the opening chapters of the book of Revelation. They are a mix of warning, encouragement, rebuke and commendation, with each church receiving its own personalized blend from the sovereign Lord—the one who knows them better than they know themselves, and who walks in their midst without being seen in bodily form.



The first church, Ephesus, receives commendation for their works, their toil, their patient endurance, and their intolerance for those who would try to introduce worldly compromise and carnal living into their fellowship—the Nicolaitans, as they were called. This church even stood firm against false apostles, men whom they had tested and found not to be genuine bearers of the gospel. Then, briefly, the Lord again commends them for “enduring patiently and bearing up” for his name’s sake. This group of zealous and tireless believers had not grown weary in their fight for the true faith, rejecting all teaching that was false and impure, all un-Christian living that flowed from false teaching (Rev. 2:3).

But shockingly, on what seems to be a very solid local church, Jesus drops a bombshell of rebuke: “you have abandoned the love you had at first.” This he has *against* them, and not merely as a minor passing critique, like some obligatory “and by the way, you could do a little better in this area” so as not to make their performance review seem perfect. He informed them that they had “fallen” and needed to repent and do the works they had done at first. This was a sinful lack in their church—a serious moral flaw.

Still more stunning are Jesus’ final words on the subject: “If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.” When we realize that the seven lampstands John saw (cf. 1:12) “are the seven churches” (1:20), the gravity of Jesus’ words become clear. If this local church, which had proven excellent in so many other ways, did not resume, restore, and return to the love they had at first, Jesus would no longer consider them a true church. With love missing, they could not be identified as a collection of true Christians.

As harsh as this seems, it fits with the way the rest of the New Testament elevates love as *the* defining Christian virtue (albeit among other defining Christian virtues, such as belief in the true gospel, a pattern of righteous living, and so forth). Love, after all, was the sum and substance of Jesus “new commandment” in John 13:34-35. “By this,” he said, “all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Without love, what reason would the world have to recognize a group of professing Christians as true followers of Christ? Where would be the evidence to support their claim? And if the world would have no reason to see them as his followers, why should Jesus?

Paul carries this theme in 1 Corinthians 13 where he informs us that where love is absent, there is no spiritual gift, no powers of prophecy, and no personal sacrifice that can make up for the lack. It’s really very simple: where love is absent, God is not impressed or pleased. Nothing else a professing Christian can do can fill the void—not evangelistic zeal, not doctrinal purity, not faithfulness in church attendance or personal disciplines, not self-denial, not generosity, not humility, not impressive teaching or writing, not regular and diligent hospitality, not anything. There is nothing that can make up for the lack of love.

As Paul writes elsewhere,

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,’ and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no harm to a neighbor, therefore love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom. 13:8-10).

Jesus said that the greatest commandment was to love God with all your heart and soul and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. Is a person to be considered a Christian—is a church to be considered a true church—if the greatest commandment has been abandoned?

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:7-8).