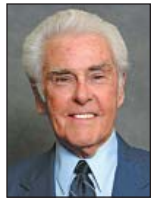


Return to your first love

The Book of Revelation is strange to many, but when it is studied in its historical context, its language becomes understandable. The



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letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor are the most familiar portions of the book (chapters 1-2) and their symbolism is the most understandable. The seven lampstands represent the seven churches, with the seven stars representing their leaders, also known as angels.

The apostle John, its author, was in exile on the island of Patmos and wrote out of concern for the leaders' possible persecution and failure in shepherding the churches. The persecution of Christians that resulted in John's exile is generally attributed to Domitian, the emperor of Rome. Edward A. McDowell declares that perhaps "there were divisions of the Empire which more readily fell in with Domitian's policy than the province of Asia," and the city of Ephesus was the largest city in Asia ("The Meaning and Message of the Book of Revelation," p. 5).

Jesus commends the doctrinal commitment of the Ephesian church (vv. 1-3). The revelation contained in the book came from Jesus, "him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands," to the churches. This definition of Christ's knowledge and concern for the churches and their pastors gives positive affirmation of Christ's concern for present day churches and pastors.

The struggle of contemporary leaders is different in some ways, but Christ's supportive presence for those who stay committed to the Lord's ministry can help them survive

challenges to their service. It can be said of them as it was to the Ephesian churches: "You have persevered and endured hardships in my name, and have not grown weary."

The basic failure of the church at Ephesus (2:4). "Yet I hold this against you; you have forsaken your first love." What does this mean for Ephesus and for us? According to McDowell, the first love which the Ephesians had forsaken "was the love that her people knew and practiced in the earlier days, the love that had been handed down as a tradition from the great apostle Paul and confirmed by John the beloved" (p. 41). Both Paul and John had been pastors of this church.

In her devotional commentary on Revelation, Anne Graham Lotz, the daughter of Billy Graham, symbolized what first love might look like by relating it to marriage. "When I first fell in love with my husband, I was preoccupied with thoughts of him. I was almost obsessed about spending time with him. My love was affectionate, emotional, passionate, fervent.... When we were first married, I starched his shirts and ironed his underwear! And none of it was a burden because I was in love!" ("The Vision of His Glory," p. 50).

But then she indicated how serving Jesus superceded his worship. She described how her ministry schedule dominated her life such that she "went around the world telling others how to love Him" but she was losing the strong love for God she had had before.

She had to follow the agenda Jesus gave the Ephesian church. Lotz declared that one thing Jesus does when he judges is to provide correction for his concern. For her condition (and for ours when needed), it is to remember, repent and return.

Bible Studies for Life

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Scripture: Revelation 2:1-7

"Remember the height from which you have fallen" (v. 5a). In the midst of substituting service for love, this change can come so swiftly that it may not be recognized until self-analysis highlights it. In marriage enrichment conferences, the challenge is often helping couples remember their initial passionate love and help them recover it. Similarly, remembering the early love for Christ that came with original response to his love can be accomplished when we become aware of our need.

"Repent and do the things you did at first" (v. 5b). The Lord is not suggesting that the works of ministry are not important but that they have become matter-of-fact without the warm love that once motivated them. Repeating what had been true about their earlier love is again necessary as they serve Christ.

"Return to your first love" (v. 7). When the Holy Spirit speaks, we must listen carefully and then seek to fulfill what he is revealing to us. When obedience leads to a renewal of first love, the Lord will "give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God."

"Him who overcomes" is the one who "fights against sin, the devil, and his whole dominance, and in his love for Christ perseveres unto the very end" (W. Hendricksen, "More Than Conquerors," p. 78). Conquerors would be enabled to inherit eternal life in heaven in fellowship with Jesus, the Lord.

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