

Ephesus: The Loveless Church Revelation 2:1-7

Perhaps you've heard about these "mystery worshipers" or "mystery guests" or "secret church shoppers" that attend worship services and provide an evaluation on his/her experience at a church service.

- **They are like "mystery shoppers."** These folks who are hired to show up at places and provide feedback regarding the service they receive.
- **Gathering this information is supposed to help churches better understand what first-time guests experience and how they can make them feel more welcome.**

We've never received a mystery worshiper (that I know of), but I stumbled on a review of my friend Steve Timmis' church in England, The Crowded House (2013)! The mystery worshiper was unsolicited. Steve gave me permission to share a bit of her review.

- **What was the name of the service?**
 - 9:30am.
- **How full was the building?**
 - The building was pretty full once the service started. It was difficult to estimate numbers – maybe a hundred or so. Most were young families with children, with just a few grey heads visible in the crowd.
- **Did anyone welcome you personally?**
 - As I entered the building, I was greeted by a welcomer stationed at the door. As I stood inside wondering where to sit, someone else came up and introduced himself, and pointed me in the direction of the hot drinks. Later, during a break in the service, someone else came and chatted. One of the friendliest churches I have been in.
- **Was your pew comfortable?**
 - Most people were sitting on padded chairs, but as these were all taken by the time I sat down, I was seated at the back on an old pew against the wall. It was not very comfortable.
- **How would you describe the pre-service atmosphere?**
 - The noise of chatter hit you like a wall when you entered.
- **What were the exact opening words of the service?**
 - There were two or three worship songs sung. Then the anonymous person leading the service said, "Welcome this morning to the Crowded House."
- **What musical instruments were played?**
 - Piano and guitar.
- **Did anything distract you?**
 - As the service started more people entered, and some people put extra chairs out. This was very distracting for someone sitting right at the back. There was also a constant stream of parents with small children wandering around, though I should mention that considering the numbers involved, the children were not particularly intrusive.
- **Was the worship stiff-upper-lip, happy clappy, or what?**

- There was no set liturgy. The format included some hymns and songs, then some prayer for the church community, then the sermon. The hymns were sung with enthusiasm.
 - **Exactly how long was the sermon?**
 - 40 minutes. “But it felt like 2 hours.” [Okay, I added that]
 - **On a scale of 1-10, how good was the preacher?**
 - 8 – Steve Timmis spoke very clearly and his talk was obviously tailored for an audience that included new Christians.
 - **Did the service make you feel glad to be a Christian?**
 - I drove away from Sheffield with a real buzz from this service.
 - **What one thing will you remember about all this in seven days' time ?**
 - The genuinely friendly welcome I received.
- It is interesting to know what people think of your church.
 - And these are not unimportant questions.
 - But the mystery worship thing raises a number of questions for me and brings to mind the review we that matters most. The main question is this:
 - **What does Jesus think of your church?**
 - **What if he showed up, what would he say?**

In each letter, we see that Christ knows all, and he gives warning and exhortation for each church. It is imperative that we hear and apply his words today.

What does Jesus think of the church in Ephesus?

Ephesus: The Church had many strengths, but it lacked love. That which is essential.

- It's very obvious when someone falls in love. They can't hide it (conversation, facial expressions, time, etc). Also w favorite teams, hobbies, restaurants, food (avocado on toast, cauliflower posing as other foods), etc.

But overtime, love can grow cold...

Ephesus had the truth but lost the love...

The message to this church in particular may be most important for us.

- It's possible to have right doctrine - to be zealous for truth - but have a cold heart.
- It does **not** have to be that way.
- **The study of the truth can and should lead to love for Christ and one another.**
- We study the truth not to make the head fat, but the heart right.

#1: The Authoritative Introduction (2:1)

A. “To the angel of the church in Ephesus”

Ephesus

The first church addressed; the closest to Patmos (remember these cities form an irregular circle that the postman would follow) w/ about **a third of a million people.**

- Pergamum was the rival in terms of prominence.
- But Ephesus was known as **the “Supreme Metropolis of Asia.”**
- **Commercially, the great highways converged there, and a major seaport was still in place, but the harbor eventually silt up, leading to the death of the city’s importance.**
 - **The deteriorating harbor serves as an illustration of the church’s condition.**
 - **They were in danger of losing their lampstand – no longer existing as a church.**

It was the center for the worship of fertility goddess Diana (Roman) / Artemis (Gk).

- The temple dedicated to Diana was one of **the “Seven Wonders of the Ancient World”**
- Thousands of priests/priestesses served in the temple, **many as religious prostitutes.**

Emperor worship was also **practiced** there (and in the other cities of these churches).

- Ephesus was the **“guardian”** of it.
- **Paul, Aquila, and Priscilla evangelized and founded the church at Ephesus (Acts 18:18-19; 19:1-10).**
- Paul taught there for over two years (Acts 19:10).
- **His ministry led to a riot related to the temple of Artemis.**
 - **So he was strengthening the disciples; evangelizing residents.**
 - **Many were converted and it caused a problem socially for those there.**
 - **READ Acts 19:23-32.**
- **Here’s the theatre today (Pics)**
- Paul would meet with their elders at Miletus (**Acts 20:17-38 – I’ll come back to that passage in a moment**), and he wrote one of his prison letters to them in the early 60s.
- **Paul, Timothy, and John had ministered to this church.**
 - What a heritage! **“Whose your pastor? “Timothy. John.”**
- John knew this church well! But it’s not him but Christ writing to them.

In a short amount of time, this church with this heritage had lost their first love.

- **What a word of warning to us!**
- **They had a great past; but their present condition was not good.**

Angels

Who are these angels? (Options)

1. An angelic letter carrier (1:1)
2. A representative angel for each church (notice its on angel per church, “a church angel”)
3. The pastor of the church itself? [highly unlikely given how the word is used in NT]
4. Personifications of the church (Not an actual angel but a symbol, a way of writing).

Not 3. I think number 1 or 2 is best, with #2 being most likely.

- In either case, the reality demonstrates that the church is a **spiritual entity.**
- The church is not like other human institutions.

B. “Write” (cf., 1:11, 19)

C. “The words of him...”

- This is the NT counterpart as “Thus Says the Lord”
- Jesus on equal footing with Yahweh himself

D. The identification of Christ: “who holds the **seven stars** in his right hand, who walks among the **seven golden lampstands**”

- This is an aspect of the earlier vision of John that proves relevant to the situation.
- Jesus “**holds**” the **seven stars (angels)** in his hand. (see 1:16; 20).
- They belong to him.

Notice Jesus now “**walks among**” the **lamp stands** (the churches).

- So sense his nearness.
 - In the garden, God “walked with them in the garden in the cool of the day”
 - It is intimacy and awareness.
 - Now he is walking among his people through the church.
- **Recall 1:12.** Jesus is “in the midst of the lampstands”
 - Here it’s strengthened: Jesus is not only “among” the church, but he “**walks**” among them. Where is Jesus? Walking among his church.
 - He is with us. He is walking among us.
 - What does this mean?
 - It means he **cares for his church and has authority over his church.**
 - He is present and watching over
 - He is aware of those things that honor him and things that do not.
 - He will discipline his church if needed.

Now notice that the description of the seven stars and the seven lampstands is what is used in the introduction to Ephesus.

- Even though Ephesus is being addressed specifically, all 7 churches are in view.
- This is probably not just to say the message is for every church (though it is) but it speaks of Ephesus being the “Mother Church” of the region.
- Remember Paul ministered in Ephesus for over two years and we read that “All of Asia heard the word.” (Acts 19:10)
- From that ministry, churches were planted in other cities...

So they had a great heritage --- but with that comes the temptation of **pride**.

- They are being reminded that there is no room for pride because apart from Christ they would be nothing and without him they can do nothing.
- **Often churches with great histories can lose their passion and fall prey to pride.**
- The same goes for institutions and individuals.

**A blessed past is not cause for present pride;
and it must never be an excuse for just coasting dispassionately through life.**

Therefore let us pursue humble dependence on Christ; and radical love for Christ and others – for all our days.

#2: The All-Knowing Evaluation (2:2-4)

Every evaluation begins with “I know.”

- **No church goes unnoticed – maybe unnoticed by people but never unnoticed by Jesus!**
- He knows it all! Every possible angle has been considered.
- Jesus “misses nothing.”
- **In sports, Referees going to the monitor because they miss calls! (It sort of drives you crazy, all the replays. And then there are plays that can’t review, like the play that cost the Saints the game! I’m still upset over that!). KY Derby is filled w drama!**

Jesus doesn’t need the help of slow motion... He knows all.

A. Commendation (2-3)

The church in Ephesus did many good things; and we should imitate them in this regard. They were known for their (1) works, (2) their endurance, (3) their commitment to sound doctrine.

1. Works (2a)

- They had done some diligent work.
- They had toiled. They weren’t lazy.
- They had not grown weary.
- The Lord takes notice of all our works, and the Bible is clear that we will be rewarded for them.
- It’s clear from this passage **one of those works was battling for the truth of the gospel in the midst of false teaching.**
- It’s clear from Ephesians (4:14), Colossians, the Pastoral Epistles, and 1 John that Asia Minor was filled with false teaching.

2. Patient endurance (2b-3)

- It wasn’t easy to be a Christian in Ephesus.
- They would not bow the knee to false idols.
- This led to all sorts of opposition: slander, mockery, slander, alienation, etc.

V. 3: “for my name’s sake”

- They have stood up for Christ in the face of opposition and in the midst of false teaching. They have been courageous for Christ.

3. Their commitment to sound doctrine (2c-3)

“you cannot tolerate wicked men... and tested those who call themselves apostles but are not, and found them to be false.”

- What an astounding claim to make in our pluralistic age!
- **Jesus says, “I commend your intolerance”**

False apostles.

- These wandering missionaries had come into the church in Ephesus claiming apostolic authority.
- The Ephesians remembered **Acts 20**.
- **Why was Paul strong in his warning? Because they lived in Ephesus.**
- Ephesian Christians needed **doctrinal discernment**, and it seems they lived with it.
- “You found them to be false” – **when these false prophets rode into town, you’ve said, “Wrong.”**

This idea is picked up again in verse 6:

V. 6 – “**you hate the works of the Nicolaitans**” (more false apostles, who promoted a syncretism and perhaps antiomianism, resulting in idoltry and immorality)

So this is a good thing.

- Oh, that the Lord would say this of us... “**You labor in my truth.**” “**You seek to be precise.**” “**You recite it. You see it. You sing it. You pray it**”
- We want that, don’t we?
- **This is why we plant churches, right?**
- **We want Kauai to be saturated with sound doctrine.**

B. Correction (v. 4)

“**But I have this against you.**” What’s the problem?

- **You have abandoned (lost your grip; turned away from) your first love.**
- **So much time fighting doctrine that in the process, you’ve become an angry church.**
- **A story is told about an American general watching the soldiers the enemy saying, “How I love it so.” Not the flag. Not America. Not Freedom. Not troops. But *the fight*.**
- **Christians can take on that same demeanor.**
- **You can smell it on them:** They love to fight. They love to divide.
- **A doctrinal fight is not to be loved, but waged when necessary with an end in mind.**

“**You lost the love you had at first.**” Love for whom?

(1) **love for people (esp. one another); (2) love for Christ?**

The text doesn’t specify. Both objects of love are possible.

- I think it’s best to keep them together.
- It seems that a general attitude is being addressed. The attitude that they had at conversion, which included love for God and people.
- The Bible keeps these two together; and 1 John 4 is a great parallel:
1 John 4:19–21 (ESV): 19 We love because he first loved us. 20 If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. 21 And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.
- **key phrase, “at first” - read Acts 19; Eph 1:15.**
- **They were marked by zeal and love at their conversion.**

Grant Osborne:

They had lost the first flush of enthusiasm and excitement in their Christian life and had settled into a cold orthodoxy with more surface strength than depth. The second generation of the church had probably failed to maintain the fervor of the first. They had fulfilled Christ's prophecy in Matt 24:12: "The love of many will grow cold." It is clear that the Ephesians loved truth more than they loved God or one another. This does not mean they were not believers or they had no love at all, for the commendations of verse 2-3 would be impossible in that case. Rather, their early love had grown cold and been replaced with a harsh zeal for orthodoxy.

Is that you, Christian? Has your love grown cold? Is that us, IDC?

So see this.

- Being a Christian is about "loving Jesus and one another"
- Being a faithful church involves "loving Jesus and one another."
 - We must beware of being the church of "loveless orthodoxy."
 - A church with right doctrine of Christ but devoid of rich fellowship with Christ and great love toward others.

It is significant that Paul ends his previous letter to the Ephesians this way:

"Ephesians 6:24 (ESV): Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible. [Amen]

- Some thirty years passed since this benediction.

Stott: "They toiled with vigor, but not with love. They endured with fortitude but without love. They tested the message of their teachers, but had no love in their hearts."

**Without love, labor is drudgery. Endurance is joyless.
And our theology produces arrogance.**

- **The labor comes easy when it arises from love ...**
 - Jacob – worked 7 years but it only seemed like a few days because of his love for Rachael.
 - I didn't go to musicals until I married Kimberly. Now we have season tickets.
 - Giving is easy when it comes from love.
 - Mary of Bethany – a year's wages on Jesus' feet and wiped them w her hair
 - Extravagant love in the Christian life means the person can't give too much, serve too much, attend too much, encourage too much.
- Endurance is joyful when motivated by love (Heb 12:1-2)
- Theology makes us humble and warm and loving when love is in the heart.
- Let's labor passionately, endure gladly, contend for truth humbly & compassionately.

But without love, we become grumpy, self-absorbed, arrogant, and cold.

- You can see it in a marriage.
- Couples can just sort of not recognize each other and co-exist.

- I heard about a guy who left his wife at the gas station and drove forty miles before realizing she wasn't in the car! It wasn't until he turned and asked her for a mint that he recognized she was gone! (VR)
- We must guard against the slow drift of coldness, of going through the motions in our relationship the Lord.
- It's possible to affirm the right things; be doing good things; and have wrong loves.
- **You can do the right things for the wrong reasons, and that's a problem.**

Consider the commendations of verses 2-3 again. We should ask:

- What drives your **hard work**?
 - Is it motivated by pride or desire for praise rather than love for Jesus?
 - 1 Cor 13 – you can do a lot of things but without love they're worthless
 - I can prepare a sermon without loving people!
 - Chapell, "Love the people."
- What drives your **doctrinal discernment**?
 - Is it that you enjoy being right, or is it a love for the gospel and a love for people to know it?
 - Do you just like pointing out the errors in others?
 - Are you a "heresy hunter" with no friends?
 - Are you an online truth warrior who has no relationships in the church?
- What is motivating that **perseverance**?
 - Is it because you want people to think highly of you, or is it motivated by your love for Christ?

Let's think not just about actions and behavior but our hearts.

Before moving to the exhortation, notice how jealous Jesus is for his bride.

- **He has not lost his passion!!!**
- **He knows only one way to love: wholeheartedly!**
- He wants our hearts.

#3: The Appropriate Exhortation (2:5-6)

How does Jesus feel about loveless orthodoxy?

He says, if you don't heed my word, "**I will remove your lampstand**"

- It will lose its status as a church. It may have the machinery of a church but it won't be a church.
- The one who walks among the lampstands can blow the flame out.
- Like the silting of the harbor, the church was fighting for its life.

3 Actions

Remember – from where you've fallen.

- Memory is an important aspect of renewal.

- Throughout the OT we read of the call to “remember.”
- Luke 15 – he remembered
- But this memory is not just “recall the glory days for a few moments.”
- The idea is *remember it so that you can actualize that same kind of experience.*
- Make your past love your present love!
- **Keep remembering that day when the cross meant everything to you.**
- Remember when you were singing with all your heart.... Get back to that.

Repent

- Make a decisive break with your previous situation.
- Not, “Wait until something moves you.”
- Right now – repent. Make a break with it now!
- Repentance involves a change of action, not merely a confession of wrong.

Resume

- **Do the things you used to do when love was passionate!**
- This does **not** mean give up doctrine.

Don't distort this message to “a little less doctrine” and “a little more love”

- We need 100% of both!!!!
- Don't turn to **sentimental ignorance.**
- Love for people **never** means acceptance of their sin.

We need an **informed mind and an enflamed heart.**

V 6 – He returns to the subject of doctrinal integrity perhaps because he anticipates this sort of thing.

- He says you have this going for you – you hate what I hate.
- In some circles today there is no such thing as heresy.
 - **A Buddhist can teach the NT; an atheist can teach theology.**
- **But God is not passive when it comes to false prophets/apostles.**
 - False teachers destroy people's lives.

Love rejoices in the truth;
it does not embrace error or evil.

It's like Christ is saying: “You are hating what I hate” – false teaching – **but why are you hating it?”**

“Is it out of love for me and people; or because you like to fight,
or because you want to be viewed as intellectually superior.”

Nicolaitans – It's hard to define because so little is said here and again in **2:15.**

- But the fruit of their doctrine is pretty clear.
- If you take the Nicolaitans, the teaching of Balaam (2:14) and Jezebel (2:2) as describing the same movement (with Balaam and Jezebel being Old Testament

figures that are illustrating the movement), then the two sins mentioned in Pergamum and Thyatira are **idolatry and immorality stemming from syncretism**.

- The Nicolaitans taught you could accommodate to the Pagans by participating in the practices of Emperor worship and the antinomian practice of libertinism (showing freedom from the law by doing whatever you want).
 - Under Domitian the Emperor cult was big and Christians were pressured to conform, or else face ostracism, loss of jobs, persecution, etc.
 - Further, sacrificing to pagan deities was a requirement for membership in the trade guilds.
- So the Nicolaitans rode into town and gave you a way out by distorting sound doctrine: “The worship to these false deities doesn’t mean anything, because an idol is nothing, so go ahead. Or, “Paul told us we are free in Christ, it’s okay to indulge in cult idolatry and prostitution.”

However they reasoned, the practices that were promoted involved idolatry and immorality.

Jesus says, “You are doing this right, church. You hate the works of the Nicolaitans.”

So we are back again with the challenge to have an great love for Christ and people, while also holding firmly to the truth and being courageous in a world that wants to edit God’s word or dismiss it all-together.

#4: The Awe-Inspiring Conclusion (2:7)

Each of the seven letters in Revelation 2–3 ends with a promise drawn from the end of the book.

Tree of Life

- To eat from it is to enjoy God’s kind of life, to enjoy eternal life.
- Paradise lost – they sinned against God and was expelled from the garden with no access to the tree of life, to paradise with sweet communion with God.
- This tree reappears again in Revelation **22:2**: it is Paradise regained.
- Access into God’s presence and blessing is possible through Jesus, and one day will be enjoyed fully at the eschaton.
- Jesus invites us to it.

Who gets to eat from that tree?

- The one who **overcomes/conquers**.
- Specifically, they are called to overcome loveless orthodoxy with a persistent, lifelong devotion to Jesus Christ.
- According to Ignatius, the church did heed this warning, repented, and became a thriving church.

Do we love him?

- How do we increase our love? How might our love be quickened.
- Not by looking at ourselves first.
- But looking first to him.
- “We Love because he first loved us.” (1 Jn 4:19) Meditate on that until your affections are warmed.
 - See his great love for you demonstrated at the cross.
 - This is how we know what love is: he laid down his life for us” (1 Jn 3.16)
 - “The cross is the blazing fire at which the flame of our love is kindled, but we have to get near enough to it for its sparks to fall on us.” (Stott)
 - Get near this love.
 - “Forget not all his benefits” (Psalm 103)
- “For every look at ourselves take ten looks at him.” (M’Cheyne)
- Don’t look within; look at him.