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Revelation #3

What Jesus Says when He Speaks to the Church Revelation 2:1-7

“What Christ thinks of the Church.” That was the title to a short book on Revelation 2-3 by British pastor John Stott. I like that. We need to think about what Christ thinks of us, the Church. We should care profoundly about what Christ thinks of the Church. But I would like to rephrase Stott’s title, if I may, and entitle the seven letters of Revelation 2-3, ***“What Christ SAYS to the Church.”*** My reason for this is found in the opening verse to each of the seven letters. Seven times over we are told that what we are reading are ***“the words”*** of the risen Christ to his people.

There’s something profoundly personal and urgent in that statement. These words in Revelation 2-3 are far more than the words of John the Apostle. They are the very “words” of Jesus himself addressed to his people in seven local churches spread throughout Asia Minor in the first century. But they are no less so the “words” of Christ to Bridgeway today, and to every other local church that professes his name. If nothing else that alerts us to the importance of listening closely to what our Lord and Savior has to say.

If you’ve read Revelation 2-3 you are aware that each of the seven letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor is addressed to an ***“angel”*** (see Rev. 2:1,8,12,18; 3:1,7,14). What could Jesus possibly have meant when he instructed John to send this letter “to the angel of the church in Ephesus”? There have been countless theories about the identity of these angels, and I’ll only briefly mention them.

(1) When I was still an active member of a Southern Baptist church I heard my pastor (who will remain unnamed) argue that the “angel” in each case was the Senior Pastor of the congregation! There is simply not a syllable in the NT that would support that identification.

(2) Another possibility is that the “angel” refers to a prophet or delegated representative of the church. This person may have functioned in an ambassadorial role, or perhaps as something of a secretary who was responsible for maintaining communication with those outside the congregation as well as other tasks that may have been assigned.

(3) Yet a third, more likely option, points to the fact that in Revelation 1:11 (cf. 1:4) the letters are directed to “the churches” (plural). So also at the end of each letter we read: “Let him hear what the Spirit says to the *churches*.” Thus the Lord speaks to the *whole church* and not just to an “angel”. This leads some to conclude that the angel **is** the church, i.e., a personification of the church. The Greek text would certainly allow (but by no means require) this interpretation, in which case we would translate: “to the angel *which is* the church in Ephesus.”

(4) Another theory is that the “angel” of each church is its guardian angel. Angels are described as “ministers” (*leitourgos*), a word that suggests a priestly service (Hebrews 1:7,14; cf. Psalm 103:19-21; Matt. 18:10; Acts 12:15). The most basic and obvious problem with this view is that it doesn’t make sense why Jesus would address the letter to the guardian angel of a church rather than directly to the congregation itself.

To be perfectly honest, I don’t know what the correct interpretation is, and no one else does either.

Why Ephesus?

It’s appropriate that the first of the seven letters was sent to Ephesus, for although not the titular capital of Asia (Pergamum held that honor), it was the most important political center of all. By the time the church received this letter, the city of Ephesus had grown to a population of @ 250,000. By their standards, it was huge. It was, in effect, the New York City of the ancient world.

We *honor* our President and pray *for* him, and rightly we should (1 Peter 2:17; 1 Timothy 2:1-2). But in Ephesus, *worship* of the Roman emperor was mandatory. Prayer *to* him was normative. Scattered across the landscape of America are Presidential Libraries, bearing the names and housing the historical artifacts of men such as Harry S. Truman, John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, and Bill Clinton. Not so in Ephesus. There one would find, not libraries, but ***temples*** dedicated to the idolatrous veneration of men such as Claudius, Hadrian, Julius Caesar, Augustus, and Severus. Every day Christian men and women in Ephesus passed these imposing structures, going about their daily tasks in an atmosphere filled with pagan praise of mere humans.

Worse still, religion and superstition were hopelessly intertwined and the magical arts were widely prevalent (cf. Acts 19:19). ***Ephesus was a seething cauldron of countless cults and superstitions.*** Preeminent among all religious attractions was the Temple of Diana (Artemis), construction of which began in 356 b.c. It was regarded as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

Christianity came to Ephesus with Aquila and Priscilla in a.d. 52 when Paul left them there as he traveled from Corinth to Antioch (Acts 18:18-22). On his next missionary journey Paul remained and worked in Ephesus for more than two years (Acts 18:8,10) and sometime later Timothy ministered there (1 Tim. 1:3).

It’s important to remember, therefore, that the first church to receive a letter from Jesus was located ***in a city that wasn’t even remotely Christian.*** No laws existed to protect their freedom of religious expression. The worship of false deities was institutionalized. The only thing on which the Ephesian believers could rely was God himself and one another.

How would you and I fare in such a pagan atmosphere? I ask this because it often appears to me that many Christians believe the church in America can survive only if it is afforded legislative protection, only if certain Christian candidates are elected to national and local office, only if the next appointee to the Supreme Court is pro-life, only if prayer is restored to our public schools. Make no mistake. I'm eternally grateful for the laws that safeguard our rights. But have we come to depend so desperately on such political blessings, economic liberties, and the legal protection Christianity enjoys that in their absence we fear the destruction of the church and the silencing of our witness?

The church in Ephesus, as with so many other congregations in the first century, knew nothing of a constitution, a first amendment, or a right to vote. Yet they survived, and thrived, in the midst of what strikes us as unimaginable state-sanctioned idolatry and immorality. Before we panic or lose heart at the state of our state, or the condition of our city, we would do well to remember the promise of Jesus: "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18).

Christ's Loving Presence and Power (vv. 1-2)

"The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands" (Rev. 2:1).

I want you to notice how Jesus is described. The letter to the church in Ephesus proceeds from him who **"holds"** the seven stars in his right hand and who **"walks"** in the midst of the seven golden lampstands. The meaning of this symbolism is given in the immediately preceding verse (Rev. 1:20).

When John turned he saw "seven golden lampstands" (see Zech. 4:2,10) which were symbolic of local churches. What is of special note to us is the *advance* made from the description in 1:13,16 to that of 2:1. Jesus not only "has" the stars, he "holds" (lit., grasps) them. He not only "stands" in the midst of the lampstands, he "walks" among them! The Lordship of Christ over his people is not passive, distant, or indifferent. It is active, immanent, and intimate. Our Lord patrols the churches with an intense and ever present awareness of all thoughts, deeds, and activities. Thus it is no surprise that each letter begins with the ominous, "I know your deeds" (2:2,9,13,19; 3:1,8,15).

The move from "has" to "holds" and from "stands" to "walks" is designed to highlight both the sovereignty of Christ over the church and his loving presence and unfailing ministry within it. He "holds" or "grasps" the church because it belongs to him. He owns it. He has redeemed it by his blood. At no time does the church slip from his grasp or elude his grip or operate under its own authority. As difficult as church life often becomes, Christ never ceases to be its Sovereign. As disillusioning as human behavior within the church can be, it ever remains "his" body.

But more important still is the fact that he “walks” among the lampstands. He is present in and among his people. He guards and protects and preserves the church. He is never, ever absent! No service is conducted at which he fails to show up. No meal is served for which he does not sit down. No sermon is preached that he does not evaluate. No sin is committed of which is he unaware. No individual enters an auditorium of whom he fails to take notice. No tear is shed that escapes his eye. No pain is felt that his heart does not share. No decision is made that he does not judge. No song is sung that he does not hear.

Christ’s Knowledge of Our Works (vv. 2-3)

How does *your knowledge of God’s knowledge of you* change your life? If it doesn’t, it should. Consider how David prayed for his son Solomon:

“And you, Solomon my son, know the God of your father and serve him with a whole heart and with a willing mind, for the Lord searches all hearts and understands every plan and thought” (1 Chronicles 28:9a).

Or listen to what the author of Hebrews has to say on this point:

“And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Hebrews 4:13).

So, if sin is strengthened by the illusion of secrecy, what better way to destroy its power than by meditating on the exhaustive and gloriously infallible knowledge that God has of us! Here again is the declaration of Jesus: **“I know your works!”** All the works of the Ephesian believers, and ours too, if done in God’s grace and for God’s glory will never escape God’s gaze. He sees and acknowledges and enjoys our “works” because they testify to his presence in our lives and his power in equipping us to do what is pleasing to him (cf. Heb. 13:20-21).

In a book (Revelation) written to strengthen faith, the emphasis on “works” or “deeds” is important. Works are the criterion of the genuineness of faith. Whoever has true faith, works. Whoever does not, has not. With that understood, note carefully what Jesus says about their works.

His commendation of the church in Ephesus involves three virtues (cf. 1 Thess. 1:3). Under the general category of “works” or “deeds” we find the first two virtues identified as “toil” and “patient endurance.” The word translated “toil” looks to something beyond routine effort and focuses on exertion to the point of **exhaustion**. It refers to a spending of oneself in arduous labor. Apparently Ephesus was a busy, active church. It no doubt had all the “programs” and activities we normally associate with a church that is spiritual and passionate. They were truly diligent and conscientious.

The translation “patient endurance” renders one word in the original text. Jesus is perhaps referring to their diligence in bearing the persecution and hostility of an unbelieving society. Despite the temptations which assaulted them from every quarter, they stood unswerving and firm in their allegiance to Christ.

Therefore, to every faithful servant of Christ who has labored in virtual obscurity in the nursery or in children’s ministry, I say: **“Jesus knows your works!”** To every diligent believer who hands out the bulletin or cleans up in the kitchen or picks up trash following the Sunday service, I say: **“Jesus knows your works!”**

Our Lord is ever mindful of those deeds that are rarely seen and perhaps never acknowledged by other humans. That visit to the nursing home to pray for a lonely widow was for an audience of One. That hot meal prepared for an ailing friend was a fragrant aroma to God. The Lord Jesus may often be the only one who knows, but it is enough that he knows. And I remind you again, he most assuredly knows!

But to each and all of these I also say, “Why do you work? Is it for perks and praise? Is it in hope that your name will be mentioned from the pulpit? Or is your labor and toil and patient endurance pursued for the sake of his name? Is your commitment to the saints and your service for the kingdom motivated by your love for God?” I pray that it is.

Christ’s Commendation of our Orthodoxy (vv. 2, 6)

Jesus had already commended the Ephesians for their hard work and perseverance. He now turns his attention to their **orthodoxy**. Far from being blinded by love, they had 20/20 discernment! They hated evil. Period. No ifs, ands, or buts. Whatever form evil took, whether ethical or theological, they stood resolute in their opposition. No compromise. No cutting of corners. **Their love was revealed in their intolerance**. Unsanctified mercy had no place in the church at Ephesus. We would do well to learn from their example.

This virtue (yes, it *is* a virtue) is described in vv. 2 and 6. This was their most stellar achievement. No heretical concept could ever raise its ugly head in Ephesus without being decapitated by the swift stroke of biblical truth. The orthodoxy of the Ephesian church manifested itself in three ways:

First, according to v. 2a, they refused to bear with men of evil inclination. They firmly resisted those whose lives were outwardly licentious. We’re not talking here about a momentary lapse or an inadvertent sin, but hardened and unrepentant iniquity. And the Ephesians were commendably intolerant of it.

Second, according to v. 2b, they have tried and tested those who lay claim to being apostles. “Evil men” and false “apostles” is a two-fold reference to the same group of individuals, the

former a description of their disposition and the latter of their doctrine. The precise identity of these men is left unstated, but they were probably claiming to be part of the outer circle of apostles, beyond the twelve, which included James, Silas, and Barnabas (see Acts 14:14; 1 Cor. 15:7; Gal. 1:19; 1 Thess. 2:6).

But note well: they rejected them only after “testing” them. This was no knee-jerk reaction. Yes, the Ephesians were strict, but they were fair. They listened, they studied, and above all, like the Bereans (cf. Acts 17:11), they tested the teaching of these men and weighed their claims on the scales of Scripture.

Third, according to v. 6, they joined Jesus in hating the deeds of the *Nicolaitans* (yes, Jesus does *hate* certain things, and so should we). Who were the Nicolaitans? They are mentioned again in 2:15 in the letter to Pergamum and by implication in 2:14 and 2:20-21. The name itself may be derived from two words which mean “victory” (*nikos*) and “people” (*laos*), thus the idea of their consumption or overpowering of the people. They were evidently licentious and antinomian and advocated an unhealthy compromise with pagan society and the idolatrous culture of Ephesus.

The Ephesian believers, however, were not duped. Nor were they so naïve as to believe that Christian charity can tolerate such false teaching. Note also the contrast: they “bear” trials and tribulations for Christ’s sake (v. 3) but they cannot “bear” the company of these evil men (vv. 2,6). They endure persecution, but not perversion.

There are many lessons here, but one in particular stands out: ***Jesus hates moral and theological compromise***. Any appeal to grace to justify sin is repugnant to our Lord. Any attempt to rationalize immorality by citing the “liberty” we have in Christ is abhorrent to him and must be to us. True Christian love is never expressed by the tolerance of wickedness, whether it be a matter of what one believes or how one behaves.

Much is being said today about the extent of the church’s engagement with culture. To what degree should we be involved? How narrowly should we draw the boundary lines for what is permissible, on the one hand, and what is off-limits, on the other? There are no easy answers, but of one thing I’m sure. If “cultural relevancy” threatens in any way or degree to undermine your single-minded, whole-hearted devotion to Christ, end it. To the extent that being “in” the world drains you of the necessary strength to resist its temptations or diminishes the purity of your relationship with Christ, turn and walk away.

Christ’s Commendation of Our Suffering (v. 3)

“I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary” (v. 3)

Let’s be clear about their motivation, the goal in view of which they bore up under oppressive conditions: ***it was for the sake of Christ’s name! That is to say, they endured with a view to***

making known, especially to their persecutors, that Jesus was a treasure of far greater worth than whatever physical or financial comfort their denial of him might bring.

In the case of the Ephesians, undoubtedly some suffered unto death while others experienced the blessing of deliverance. In both instances it was “for his name’s sake.” In dying, some declared, “Jesus is more precious than what I’m losing.” In living, others declared, “Jesus is more precious than what I’m gaining.” In both cases, Jesus is treasured above everything and thus magnified above all.

There’s never an excuse for bad theology. We must continually strive to refine our thoughts and bring them into ever increasing conformity to God’s Word. ***But there comes a time when doctrine isn’t enough!***

Stop! Before we go forward with another word, please do not draw unwarranted conclusions from that statement. Don’t think for a moment that simply because there is *more* to being a Christian than right thinking that being a Christian is possible with *less* than right thinking. When I say there comes a time when doctrine isn’t enough, that in no way justifies theological laxity, compromise, or the embracing of anti-intellectualism, as if the mind did not matter. What I’m saying is that Christianity necessarily entails *both* orthodox belief *and* obedient behavior. It’s inconceivable to me that anyone would suggest that it *only* matters *what* we *believe* or, conversely, that it *only* matters *how* we *behave*. The two are inseparably wedded in the purposes of God and each withers in the absence of the other.

Christ’s Call to Repentance (vv. 4-5)

Having said that, and it was critically important that I say it, we can now proceed to observe that our Lord’s notable commendation of the Ephesians is coupled with an equally incisive complaint: “But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first” (Rev. 2:4).

There’s no agreement among scholars of Revelation as to what “love” the Ephesians had “abandoned” (ESV) or “left” (NAS). The answer depends in part on how one understands and translates the word “first”. Does it mean “first” in terms of time or chronology? That is the view embraced by the ESV, as they render it, “you have abandoned the love you had at first.” The idea would be that this is a “love” they experienced immediately after their conversion and during the early days of their Christian life. Although the ESV rendering doesn’t require it, the implication would be that the “love” they had abandoned was *brotherly* love, love for other Christians in the church.

Others argue that this love was “first” in the sense that it is the ***most important*** love that anyone can experience, that is to say, it is that *primary* love for the Lord Jesus Christ that comes before or takes precedence over all other loves in terms of value. This view is suggested by the NAS which translates, “you have left your first love.” Surely, if the emphasis is on that “love” which is

of preeminent importance, that “love” which must be pursued above all other loves, it is love for Jesus himself.

In his epistle to the Ephesians, written some 30 years earlier, Paul mentioned the fervency of their love for one another (1:15-16) and concluded the letter with a blessing on those “who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible” (6:24). But now, these many years later, their zeal and passion had diminished. But which “love” had they now lost: love for one another or love for Jesus or perhaps love for both?

There are two *contextual* clues that I believe indicate the reference is primarily (but not exclusively) to “brotherly” love. First, how can it be that they’ve abandoned their love for Christ if in the immediately preceding verse (v. 3) Christ himself commends them for enduring patiently for his name’s sake? The latter words imply, if not require, the devotion and affection and love for Jesus that would inspire them to suffer for the sake of promoting and praising his name. If they didn’t fervently love Jesus, they wouldn’t have endured patiently for his name’s sake. And if their endurance wasn’t motivated by this affection, Jesus would hardly have commended them for it.

A second clue comes from what follows in v. 5. There, as a repentant antidote, so to speak, to their diminishing love, Jesus commands them to “do the works you did at first” (v. 5). This would more likely suggest that their lost love was love for one another that can be rekindled by deeds of kindness and compassion and self-sacrifice (see Romans 12:9-13; 1 John 3:11-18 and 4:7-21).

On the other hand, I’m not certain we have to choose between the two. Jesus may well have had both “loves” in view. That the decrease in love for Christ issues in a loss of love for our fellow-Christian is self-evident. In other words, I think Jesus could as easily have said to the Ephesians: “How dare you claim to love me at the same time you close your heart to a brother or sister in the body. And when you do love one another you demonstrate how much you love Me [i.e., Jesus]” (see Hebrews 6:10).

What we see in the church at Ephesus, therefore, was how their desire for orthodoxy and the exclusion of error had created a climate of suspicion and mistrust in which brotherly love could no longer flourish. Their eager pursuit of truth had to some degree soured their affections one for another. It’s one thing not to “bear with those who are evil” (Rev. 2:2), but it’s another thing altogether when that intolerance carries over to your relationship with other Christ-loving Christians!

Our Lord does not leave the Ephesians and their problem without a solution. Note the three terse commands of v. 5. Before doing so, however, observe what he does *not* recommend: he does not suggest that they become theologically lax, tolerant of error, or indifferent toward truth! In other words, don’t try to cure one problem in a way that will create another.

So, then, here's his counsel. **First**, "*remember . . . from where you have fallen*" (v. 5a). Here their love is pictured as a height from which they had descended. To remember is to reflect and meditate on the peak of brotherly affection they once enjoyed. Recall the former fervor and let the memory of its joys and satisfaction stir you again to mutual devotion. **Second**, "*repent*" (v. 5b). Simply put, stop . . . then start. Stop the cold-hearted disregard for one another (and for Jesus) and start cultivating that affection you formerly had. **Third**, "*do*". In particular, do "the works you did at first" (cf. Heb. 6:10).

How important is it that the Ephesians strive by God's grace to cultivate and sustain a passionate affection for both Christ and Christian? I'll let Jesus answer that question. If you don't repent, he solemnly warns, "I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place" (Rev. 2:5).

What this means is that failure to comply will lead to *the imminent termination of their influence or public witness as a body of believers* (cf. 11:3-7,10; see also Mark 4:21; Lk. 8:16). The "coming" of Jesus in v. 5 is not the Second Advent at the end of history but a "coming" in preliminary judgment and discipline of this church (cf. 2:16; the Second Advent, however, is probably in view in 2:25 and 3:11). It may even be that Jesus is threatening the end of this congregation's historical existence. I trust that such is enough to convince us all how important "love" is in the body of Christ!

Christ's Promise for Eternity (v. 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" (2:7).

We must remember that the tree of life isn't an end in itself. We don't "conquer" or "overcome" (Rev. 2:7) simply to gain access to its fruit. The tree of life is a means to a higher and more exalted end, for it is good only so far as it sustains us to see and savor God. Its purpose is to nourish and support our eternal existence so that we might glorify God by enjoying him forever.

The appeal of the tree of life and what its preserving power brings us is cited by Jesus as an incentive to "conquer" or "overcome." Like the conclusion to each of the seven letters, this is an exhortation to heed what has been said. The exhortation assumes a mixed audience, not all of whom will respond positively (cf. Mt. 13:9-17; Mark 4:9,23; Lk. 8:8). When confronted with temptation or the pressure to abandon the faith, Jesus says loudly and clearly: "*Bring to mind the tree of life! Meditate on its provision!* For the one who conquers will eat of its blessed fruit forever!"

But surely something more is in mind than merely plucking fruit from an ordinary tree. There appear to be echoes here of the Garden of Eden, reminding us that *paradise future is the redemptive consummation of paradise past*.

There is something truly profound in the imagery found in v. 7 that may not be evident at first reading. This is where a knowledge of the cultural setting of the biblical text proves so rewarding. Colin Hemer contends that there was something analogous to the tree of life in the cult of Diana and the Temple in Ephesus dedicated to her that makes this promise especially relevant (*The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*, 41-55).

In the first place, the reference to the “tree” (*zulon*) of life may actually be an allusion to the **cross** of Christ. In the book of Acts (5:30; 10:39; 13:29) explicit reference is made to the “tree” (*zulon*) on which Jesus was crucified (likewise in Gal. 3:13 and 1 Peter 2:24). [By the way, the Greek word for “cross” (*stauros*) never occurs in Revelation.]

Hemer also points to the fact that two passages in ancient literature describe the foundation of the Temple of Diana as a **tree shrine**! Inscriptions on coins from that era indicate that the tree, together with the bee and the stag, were distinctively associated with Diana of Ephesus. In addition, the Temple was famous as a place of refuge or asylum for fleeing criminals. What makes this significant is that the word used to describe their experience is the same term used throughout the New Testament for our “salvation” (*soteria*)!

The contrasts are both stunning and encouraging. For the Ephesian believers, “the cross [the tree of life] was the place of refuge for the repentant sinner in contrast with the tree [in Diana’s temple] which marked the asylum for the unrepentant criminal” (Hemer, 55). Diana’s so-called “tree” of refuge gave the criminal immunity and license to continue his life of rebellion and crime. Christ’s “tree” of refuge, on the other hand, grants the repentant sinner eternal forgiveness and the power of the Spirit to pursue holiness.

The so-called “salvation” of the fleeing criminal actually corrupted the city of Ephesus by granting freedom to the wicked to continue in their perverse behavior. When the Ephesian Christians heard Jesus speak this promise to them in Revelation 2:7, they were able to appreciate in a way we can’t the concept of an eternal city pervaded and governed by the glory of God. For of *that* city, the New Jerusalem, not this-worldly Ephesus or any other city, it is said that “nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life” (Revelation 21:27).

Oh, blessed cross, the only tree that truly brings life!