

Revelation 2:1-7 The Honeymoon Is Over

Introduction:

We've all had the experience. Initial enthusiasm gives way to persistent dissatisfaction. Of course it happens in marriage and that's where we get the saying. A marriage filled with love and excitement takes work to stay filled with love and excitement. If hardness of heart sets in, the marriage can end in divorce. And so it is with other things. People try really hard to get a certain job and eventually quit from anxiety or frustration. It almost doesn't matter what it is, the shine wears off; the new becomes routine; the fabulous becomes the familiar. The honeymoon is over.

And so it is in churches. And so it can be in each of our lives when we examine our faith in Christ. The things that once impressed us we now take for granted. A vibrant faith relaxes into loveless orthodoxy. The Statement of Faith hasn't changed. The creeds are still believed and the activity may still be there if only out of tradition or routine, because "That's what churches (or Christians) do." But the passion for Christ – the vital connection with Him and with others – has somehow gone missing. The honeymoon is over. We have left our first love.

So it was with the church of Ephesus. It may be the same with us.

Revelation 2 & 3 contain 7 letters to 7 churches. These are unlike other NT letters, in which, while under the Holy Spirit's inspiration, a given author writes what he personally thinks is needed to a given audience. In these letters John is more or less taking dictation. At the end of Chapter 1 we left him in the presence of the glorified Christ. **Revelation 1:19-20** provide our introduction.

Some thoughts on the Seven Stars and the Seven Lampstands:

Seven Lampstands = Seven Churches. Each of the churches would be the church as a whole in a given city. But remember how the church looked at that time. It would not have been one huge megachurch. There would have been a number of congregations, all of which still met in homes or borrowed public places – as when Paul taught in the School of Tyrannus in Ephesus. Each group may have had its own leader, but there would not yet have been a true hierarchy with one bishop presiding over all the pastors or elders in the city. The elders would have all been considered equals and only taken priority over one another due to gifts or natural relationships.

Why a lampstand makes a good image:

- Lampstand as a source of unified light. 7 individual lamps. One light source.
- Lampstand as a source of constant light. Unlike a flashlight, which we intentionally shine now and then. Not like a meteorite or shooting star.

“There is much good done in the world by direct, conscious effort. There is perhaps more done by spontaneous, unconscious shining, by the involuntary influence of character, than by the lip or the pen. We need not balance the one form of usefulness against the other. We need both. But, Christian men and women, do you remember that from you a holy impression revealing Jesus ought to flow as constantly, as spontaneously, as light from the sun!” – Alexander MacLaren (1826–1910)

Seven Stars = Seven Angels or “messengers” There are two ways to look at seven stars and both of them hinge on the literal meaning of the word “angel.” In both Greek and Hebrew, the word angel literally means “messenger.” We’ve adopted the Greek word in English to mean a supernatural or heavenly being. Most of the time that works just fine in the Bible, because the context shows clearly whether the “messenger” in question is of the divine or human sort. Here is one place – perhaps the only place – where that meaning is not quite clear.

o If we think of the angels as men, it eliminates the weirdness of John receiving a message from Jesus to then give to angels as supernatural beings, who must then communicate back to churches. Angels often have messages for people, but not vice versa. How sensible to rather have John speak to “messengers” who speak to the churches in their home cities. This also eliminates the awkwardness of angels being told to “repent.” It seems clear that the messenger is at least partially responsible for the state of the church.

o Though it makes sense to think of the messengers as men, it should not be imagined that they were pastors in exactly the sense we have today. It’s important to remove all the clergy/laity distinctions. We should also not think of them as “bishops” because to do so is to impose the idea of a hierarchy on the text that didn’t yet exist when it was written. They were leaders in the churches. Maybe they were visiting John on Patmos together as a group.

Final Points on the Seven Letters to the Seven Churches:

- They were real churches in real places in John’s day. The message Jesus gives them pertains to the actual state of that church at that time.
- Probably Jesus meant these seven to be a representative sample for the church in all ages. In other words, these are the messages that churches need to hear. The problems addressed are the problems that arise in churches from Christ’s point of view.
- We should apply the message to our own church. If it is not immediately applicable, at least it will be instructive.
- Finally, we should think of ourselves individually. Biblically speaking, Christians belong to churches, and churches are made up of individuals. Who we are as individual Christians has a bearing on who we are as a church.

2:1 Jesus holds the stars in His right hand, indicating His authority over them. He walks among the lampstands indicating His personal nearness to each church. He knows each of them intimately.

2:2-3 This church has been doing a lot right. They are doctrinally sound, active in ministry and persevering under trials. Any church should want to get an assessment like this from Jesus.

In **Acts 20** Paul warned the Ephesian elders that false teachers would rise up from among them. Later we find Timothy dealing with this exact thing. John, in his other letters is concerned about false teachers who have made their way into the churches and then separated from them. He calls them deceivers and antichrists.

This church is doing a lot of good and working hard at it. What could possibly be wrong? Now comes Jesus' loving bit of criticism.

2:4 The honeymoon was over in Ephesus. This is not the condemnation of an enemy. It is the counsel of a trusted friend. Jesus died to bring this church, this lampstand, into existence. No one desires it to shine brightly more than He does.

So what happened? A few thoughts:

*“The love of first conversion had waxed cold, and given place to a lifeless and formal orthodoxy.
– Henry Alford (1810–1871)*

“Something was missing in the relationships among these Ephesians, but this only reflects a deeper need. Most basically, their love for Christ had grown cold, causing the relational problems, and it is this root problem that is primarily addressed. ... Some vital element that had characterized initial relationship to their Savior had now disappeared.” – Robert L. Thomas

2:5 Jesus gives them a three step process to correct what has gone wrong.

- 1. Remember**
- 2. Repent**
- 3. Do the first works**

1. **Remember** Think back as to what that initial relationship with the Lord was like. There may have been changes in priorities that took root in your life at that time that have since rolled aside as life has gotten the best of you. What did you enjoy most about those early days of growing in Christ. There may be things that you see missing now.

2. **Repent** Repentance can be described as a change of mind that leads to a change in priorities. If you only think back on the early days of you Christian life and regret them, you haven't yet done enough. A “turning” is needed. It can't be a merely nostalgic longing for the good old days. Something has to change. How can we determine what?

3. **Do the first works** This is how Jesus sees it. Go back to those early activities.

“There must be in every declining Christian a practical repentance. Do not be satisfied with regrets and resolves. Do the first works; do not strain after the first emotions, but do the first works. No renewal is so valuable as the practical cleansing of our way. If the life be made right, it will prove that the love is so. In doing the first works you will prove that you have come back to your first love. The prescription is complete, because the doing of the first works is meant to include the feeling of the first feelings, the sighing of the first sighs, the enjoying of the first joys: these are all supposed to accompany returning obedience and activity.” – Charles Spurgeon

We cannot bring back those early emotions by sheer force of will. We have to do those first things. The emotions will follow. A vibrant walk with Christ will result in feelings of excitement.

What does Jesus mean when He tells them that He will “remove your lampstand from its place?”

At least three options are available. (Spurgeon leaned toward all of them being true in order.)

1. **He may take away the ministry of the Word.** Sometimes a church grows tired of the Scriptures; they grow tired of sound teaching. This church in Ephesus was still zealous for the truth, but we cannot turn from our love for Christ, the Word, and continue to love God’s written Word for very long. Sometimes godly ministers are raised up in churches, the churches grow cold, the Lord removes them and a new minister arrives who merely follows the current fads. The church experiences a famine for the Word of God. The light no longer shines where it once did.
2. **A church may lose its usefulness.** Activity is no substitute for effectiveness. If the love is absent, activity can remain, the doors to the church can still be open, people may attend services, but lives will no longer be changed. Little impact is really made. The reputation may last for a while, but as in Sardis in Chapter 3, the church is essentially dead.
3. **Finally, the church may cease to exist.** When Christ says He will build His church, that is true in an overall sense. The church in Ephesus was once perhaps the strongest, most dynamic church in all the world. Now the city itself is nothing but ruins. The pattern has been repeated in various cities and various nations. The church as a whole will not die, but Christ is not obliged to continue working through any particular local expression of His bride.

To ensure that our church remains a living source of the light of God’s Word, to ensure our future usefulness, and even our future existence – we must return to our first love.

- 2:6** This is another positive point. Not much is really known about the **Nicolaitans**, but the name indicates that their leader was named Nicolas. Some very early writers identify him as the Nicolas that we first see in Acts 6, one of the original seven deacons. Some say he later led a movement that encouraged immoral behavior. Maybe there is some truth to it. Still, we don’t find any first hand teaching of a group by this name to verify the explanation.

A more recent explanation has taken the name **Nicolaitans** and pointed out that it means “victory over the people” (Nike + Laos) This view says that the Nicolaitans were early advocates of a strong hierarchy in church government – one with a serious clergy-laity distinction.

On the one hand, we can be pretty sure that this is not how the first readers would have understood it, so it’s not a very commendable way to interpret the verse.

On the other hand, it’s true that a strongly hierarchical view of the church – with a strong clergy-laity distinction – is an unhealthy thing. So while I don’t believe this is what the verse is teaching, I definitely agree with the point.

We need to support the priesthood of all believers, meaning that everyone has a part in the ministry. All need to discover and make use of their gifts. Further, the leadership of the church is raised up out of the mass of normal believers and mostly depends on the capacity in which people serve. Leadership results from a combination of gifts and faithful service – not position in a hierarchy.

2:7 Each letter ends on a similar note. Jesus said something like this in the Gospels.

Mark 4:9 *And He said to them, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”*

All of us are meant to hear the message that Jesus has to each of the seven churches.

The **overcomer** is simply the believer who perseveres. The true Christian doesn’t “undergo” trials; he or she “overcomes” them in the end. We can all be happy about that.

The **tree of life** is an image from the Garden of Eden. It will reappear at the end of this book, as Jesus says, in the midst of paradise. The paradise that Adam lost will be restored and even improved upon. If we remain faithful to Jesus, we will all eat of the tree of life and live forever.

As we get to the end of the book, we’re going to find that eternity begins with a wedding. I’m under the distinct impression that the honeymoon love we enjoy with Jesus is only going to get stronger as eternity goes on and on.

Takeaways:

Jesus cares deeply about His church. We may be tempted to doubt it, but the Lord of glory knew each of these churches personally and addresses their precise situation. In each letter, Jesus tells John to write to and about particular people, locations and events. He encourages these believers, giving them credit for their faithfulness and telling them how to correct their failures. Just as Jesus cared for each of these churches, he cares for us. He wants this church to reach its fullest potential. Working together, we are Christ's instrument for changing the world. We need to take that point as seriously as Jesus does.

We have to be careful of an attitude that has a firm grasp on doctrine and a poor grasp on what it means to love Jesus and love one another. Jesus does not belittle the sound doctrine of the Ephesians. He does not condemn their diligent effort. Nonetheless, in the battle to maintain sound teaching or moral and doctrinal purity, we can neglect a charitable spirit. When we get tired of getting beat up by the world, it can our ability to endure and dampen our love. Love must stay a high priority.

The honeymoon may end but the first love needs to continue.

The first days of our Christian lives may be described as zeal without knowledge. Unfortunately, the later days may be described as knowledge without zeal. This need not be the case. Knowledge and zeal are truly needed if we are to keep our love for God strong and spotless. Examine your own life. Do you love God with the same fervor as you did in those early days?

Loving God must permeate all we do. Christ commended the church at Ephesus for many things:

1. working hard
2. persevering
3. resisting sin
4. critically examining the claims of false apostles
5. enduring hardships without becoming weary.

Every church should have these features. But all these good things should be permeated with a love for Jesus Christ. Both Jesus and John also stressed love for one another as an authentic proof of the gospel.

Think about your own walk with Christ. **Is the honeymoon over?**

1 Corinthians 13:1-3 ¹Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. ²And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.