

*Visions From Heaven:
A Study Of “Revelation”*

Love or Law?

*Bible Reading:
Revelation 2: 1-7, 12-29*

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If you are like me, whenever you have heard a series on the book of Revelation it has become a series on the letters to the churches of Asia Minor. Of all parts of the book, these letters are the most understandable. And in a work filled with all sorts of strange symbolism and challenging imagery they almost, dare we say it, seem out of place.

It becomes important, then, that we remember the whole aim of this great prophetic book. Recall what we said last week about the two functions of prophecy:

fore-telling

preparing the people for what God will be doing among them and around them in the future

forth-telling

calling the people towards full obedience to the will of God as it breaks into the present reality of their lives.

The letters to the seven churches, while providing a measure of the former, fall in line with many of the Old Testament prophets in challenging the people with the latter element of prophecy - the **forth-telling** of God's will.

Which is as it should be.

You can't be looking forward, wondering about what God is going to do in the future, when your present is out of step with His Will.

There is no sense about seeking Divine blessing for tomorrow while walking in disobedience or half-hearted complacency today.

So - the seven-fold **forth-telling** prophetic letters to the churches.

Remember the *apocalyptic* meaning of the number 7?

.....for that matter, recall what *apocalyptic* is?

Literature of direction or encouragement to people in a time of crisis, a word that comes with divine authority.

Seven, in that kind of writing, stands for *fullness*.

These seven churches, then are representative of all churches and the sorts of struggles that all church communities go through.

Churches of Asia.... churches around the world.

Churches of the 1st century..... churches in 2002.

Let us hear what the Spirit is saying to the Churches.....

.....to **US**.

We begin today in the city of Ephesus, a major port city on the Mediterranean sea, bustling trade centre of the ancient world.

Ephesus was a city where idol worship was rampant, especially the worship of Diana, or Artemis, the goddess of fertility. There were many attractions and challenges to Christians to compromise their standards.

In Acts 20.29 Paul warns the leaders of the Ephesian church, "*I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.*"

It seems that the Ephesian church had taken Paul's warning seriously and were not going to allow any hint of unorthodoxy within their ranks. People had to toe the doctrinal line with precision or they were tossed out on their ear.

Bishop Ignatius of Antioch wrote some years later to the church of Ephesus, "You all live according to truth, and no heresy has a home among you; indeed, you do not so much as listen to anyone if he speaks of anything else except for the real truth of Jesus Christ." [Stott *What Christ Thinks Of The Church* 26]

In fact, Christ himself complements the church on their refusal to be sidetracked by a group labeled the "Nicolaitans." That comes from the Greek noun *nicolaos* - *destroyer of the people*. They taught that compromise in behavior was acceptable.

"Ya gotta just accept people where they're at. Don't go judging or puttin' pressure on them" they'd say.

"No", said the Ephesian Church, "there are holy standards and we're stickin' to 'em!!"

But in the course of the Ephesian struggle against unorthodoxy and heresy, they lost "their first love."

The initial passion and devotion and care and personal relationship that they had enjoyed with Jesus has gone by the way.

They lost sight of the fact that "to hate error and evil is not the same as to love Jesus Christ" [Stott, *What Christ Thinks of The Church* 29].

And Jesus himself, in this letter, has to remind them of that, and to call them back to the proper priorities.

He reminds them, and he reminds us, of truths that are loudly proclaimed elsewhere in the bible. 1 Corinthians being a prime example. The whole issue of what love looks and behaves like was a constant struggle for the Corinthian congregation, too.

And so the Holy Spirit has to remind them, through St. Paul, that:

"Love is greater than knowledge, because whereas knowledge puffs up, love builds up.....

"Knowledge concerns things, whereas love concerns persons, including the person of God;

"The knowledge of a doctrine is a one-sided static affair, while love is reciprocal and growing (8.1-3).

"Love is greater even than faith and hope....For love is everlasting and indistructable. Prophecy, knowledge, and the gift of tongues are only temporary, but "love never ends.'`So faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love' (1 Cor 13)." [Stott 29]

Says Jesus to the Ephesian church, no matter how right the actions, no matter how great the knowledge, if they are not all surrounded and rooted in strong personal love for Jesus they amount to nothing. And to those who mistake an orthodox obsession with right doctrine for love comes the dire warning:

"If you do not repent I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place."

What about the life and lamp stand of the Christian Reformed Church?

What do we place at the top of the agenda?

How do we approach each other?

What kind of questions do we ask of each other?

What's the proper space and time to ask about:

- knowledge of the Catechism and Church Order
- one's support of Christian Education
- belief in Creation or Evolution
- shopping on Sunday
- personally inviting Jesus into one's heart
- being able to articulate the difference Jesus makes to me personally

Where do those fit?

What comes first, brothers and sisters?

Which of these matter most?

Hear the truth of Scripture:

God **is** love (1 John 4:8).

God demands our love.

Remember the summary of God's entire Law?
Love the Lord your God.
Love your neighbor as yourself (Mk 12:30-31).

Just.....

.....make sure that you understand love properly.

Let's not mistake biblical love with the sort of sentimental and emotional fluff that is often dished up on TV - the fall in and fall out, swoon at first sight kind of heart stopping emotion-driven headiness.

Biblical love bears absolutely **NO** resemblance to that whatsoever.

Biblical love is a concrete **decision of the will** to allow another person, in this case God, to have central stage in the most intimate corner of your life.

It is the **decision** to work for, live for, and desire the very best for the One you love, regardless of anything else. Jesus' love for us drove Him to the cross.

It is the **decision** to be as devoted to God,
to care as much about God,
to give the sort of attention to God,
that in some small way begins to reflect
the attention and care and devotion
that he first showed to you
in creating you
and caring for you
and giving you a purpose for existence on this earth
and forgiving you
and preparing a home in eternal glory for you.

Determined love,
Active love,
Love that shows up visibly in our life as a congregation.

It affects the way we relate to each other.
And it affects the way we structure our actions and affairs.

RELATING TO EACH OTHER

"If anyone says he loves God but 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. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also" (1 Jn 4.20,21).

The popular notion of love is to get.
The Christian notion of love is to give.
The popular notion of love is to feel good.
The Christian notion of love is devoted service.

The church that is so concerned about orthodoxy that it is willing to sacrifice fellow believers on the altar of doctrinal precision and law is the church with an Ephesian lamp stand.

There is a reason why Christ summarized the whole law of God as He did. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all you mind, **and** you shall love your neighbour as yourself....."

STRUCTURING OUR ACTIONS

The second way Biblical love shows up in the Church is in structuring our actions and affairs.

Jesus said "If you LOVE me you will keep my commandments....he who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me... if a man loves me he will keep my word" (Jn 14).

"This is love for God: to obey His commands." (1 John 5:3)

Ever heard people worry out loud something like this:

Are we going to pay attention to love or obedience?

If we preach too much love we will end up losing obedience.

And if we focus on obedience we will end up with stone-cold hearts. Either-or.....

This is a false distinction.

The two,

love and obedience,

belong together.

Read the letter to the Ephesians in the same sitting as the letter to Pergamum and the letter to Thyatira.

We begin with a determined, conscious, will-full decision to love,
and from there end up in a life of obedience.

If you truly love someone you will do your best to engage in actions that
please that person,
delight that person,
bring a smile to that person's face, rather than a painful frown.

If someone's husband **said** he loved her, but spent the majority of his free time with the golf buddies,
managed to direct discretionary family spending on his own toys, rarely provided an intimate touch, and didn't
pitch in with household duties ---

would you blame her for having doubts about his sincerity?

The church which loves Jesus is the church which actively obeys Him.

It can be no other way.

This is what the churches of Thyatira and Pergamum failed to recognize. They lived with what they
thought was a deep personal love for Jesus, but had become paralyzed when they faced those who were
obviously living twisted lives. There was no **action** associated with their stated **commitment**. Their lamp of faith
was in danger of going out.

These two letters have references to three groups of people with influences that were deadly to the Christian
Church. Christ slaps labels on them:

Balaam

The Nicolaitans

Jezebel.

We've already met the Nicolaitans were the "*it doesn't matter what you do as long as you say you love
God*" people. Let's not condemn people.

They were factors in all three churches.

The second group was the Balaamites -

Remember Balaam?

Balaam was an Old Testament figure who was willing to compromise his devotion to God in order to earn
a few extra bucks on the side by casting a curse on the people of Israel.

If he needed to change political sides for a while, so be it.

If the way he talked on the Sabbath was somewhat different than how he walked on Wednesday because that was the simple reality of business, then that's just the way it was going to be. (Num 22-24)

Profit before principles.

"Yeah, I know that's how it's supposed to be. But sometimes reality isn't quite that way. Sometimes a person just has to do what they have to do."

Heard that line?

It's the spirit of Balaam talking.

It's the lie of Balaam.

How wrong it is!!

Think about it believers:

Since when ought we to even **begin** to think that God, who fashioned the Cosmos with Wisdom and the Word, would give us commands that are out of touch with "reality"?

If we begin to think like that, tell me — who's really out of touch?

To the ancient Israelites, who felt they had to compromise on business ethics, devotional purity and cut back on their tithing, God says:

"Test me in this and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it!" (Mal 4:10)

Third group that was twisting and distorting the devoted, active love of the Church is labeled "Jezebel".

Remember her?

She was a foreign Old Testament queen who had married an Israelite King, taking him away from a faith in God and towards a faith in Baal and Asherah.

The culture of Jezebel was concerned with fertility. Baal & Asherah were the god and goddess of fertility; human fertility and economic fertility. Whatever it took to be productive was fair game for Jezebel. And so she was willing to sacrifice someone's life in order to expand her real estate portfolio. Sexual promiscuity was fair game - even expected. (1 Ki 16:31-33; 21:7; 2 Ki 9)

A spirit of economic pragmatism - the bottom line drives the action plan.

A spirit of sexual promiscuity.

That is the spirit of Jezebel.

What a powerful spirit that is.

And how very real this spirit is in Canada!

How many people in business haven't been corrupted by the search to squeeze out an extra bit of profit?

How many leaders, including spiritual leaders, haven't been taken down by sexual scandal?

Nicolaitans.

Balaam.

Jezebel.

Let's not be condemning.

Profit before principles.

Sexual whatever.

Does that sound like our nation..... or what?

Brothers and sisters, these three spirits would challenge our love of Christ.

They stand as an enormous threat to the Church in Canada.

Pergamum and Thyatira didn't know how to respond to these destructive spirits.

They were drowning truth in an ocean of compromise.

In their mistaken notion of love they thought they had to tolerate all kinds of wrongful, biblically-condemned behaviour - **EVEN THOUGH** it put a deep frown on the face of the one they loved, Jesus Christ.

And it is with that frown,

and in pain at being affronted and insulted by having his will so blatantly ignored, that Jesus has to send out warnings to these churches as well.

You see, it cannot be LOVE or TRUTH.

It is not either-or.

It is both-and.

Notice v.23:

Jesus cares about and pay attention to our

- hearts (the emotions)
- minds (the will)
- deeds (the results)

Jesus cares **completely** about us - in full measure.

Not just about a **part** of us!

And so tonight comes from the Word of God a prophetic call to **complete** surrender and devotion to Him.

Love

AND

obedience.

"All to Jesus I surrender; **all** to Him I freely give."

And what results when we live this sort of full-blown devotion to Him?

The personal promise of Jesus is that His very life will flow through us -

becoming their eternal life in the perfect presence of God

- the tree of life in the paradise of God (v.7)

becoming inner nourishment that keeps our lives going in a world that otherwise drains us, tires us, deflates us

- the hidden manna (v.17)

making us new people, purified in Jesus people, people with new identities that are rock-solid

- new names carved on the pure white Rock of Ages. (v.17)

giving an unseen but very real spiritual power and authority to live for the King of Kings, the God of Hosts.

Allowing believers to move boldly forward into all the spheres of creation and claim them for the Sovereign King.

Allowing believers to do battle with the Prince of Evil and proclaim the authority of Heaven over hearts and minds - spiritual warfare

- authority over the nations (v.26)

Love.

Lived in active obedience.

May this be our faith.

May this be our Church.

May Jesus so flow and live through us, too.