

Central Baptist Church
May 2023
Revelation 2:1-7

THE CHURCH THAT FORGOT HOW TO LOVE

By Tom Cowan

(SHOW VIDEO TITLE as Tom walks up) When people ask me what I do and I tell them – I am a pastor of a church – get some strange replies. Someone told me – I have my grandmother's Bible at home. Call in Calgary – we were moving – marriage - from a Tim Cowan – above me in phone book – only pastor I know. Often I get a story about how the church failed them – or hurt them in some way. They may tell me that they don't mind Jesus – but forget the church. They are done with church.

The opening chapter of Revelation says in 1:19-20.

(SHOW SLIDE 01) Write therefore what you see – what is now and what will take place later. The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks is this -- the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches – and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

It teaches us about the place of the church in the plan and work of God.

1. Christ cannot be separated from the church. Each line in the vision of Jesus in chapter 1 is picked up and repeated as each church is introduced – this intricate pattern is telling us that Christ cannot be separated from the church. Each church holds its identity from the one who holds the 7 stars in his right hand.

The church exists in a manner which cannot be understood solely in terms of sociology – culture – or politics – It is a supernatural reality that exists only in terms of its relationship to Christ.

2. You cannot separate Christianity from the church. While the gospel is personal – it is not individualistic – it is about community. It is for the creation of a people – a community of the cross.

John also says that the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches. From the rest of Revelation it is clear that angels always refers to supernatural beings – so we have to assume that Jesus is speaking as we might say to the guardian angel of each

Central Baptist Church
May 2023
Revelation 2:1-7

church. So we can assume that there is an angel over Central Baptist Church – who is charged with watching over us -- maintaining godly order over us. These angels are the unseen part of our congregation – they hover over us - they remind us that every gathering is not merely a human gathering – it has a spiritual and a supernatural dimension.

This series – We’ve Got Mail- invites us to read 7 letters to 7 churches. Get a study guide and study along. The first city on this postal circuit as the letters traveled from church to church is Ephesus.

(SHOW SLIDES Scripture reader 02-04) Reader up – Revelation 2:1-7.

Ephesus was the most important of the seven cities.

The city was situated at the mouth of a river, and so it commanded a great trade route. It was one of the great seaports of the ancient world. Three major trade routes crossed at Ephesus.

It was also what was known as a “free” city, meaning that the Roman authorities had granted it the right to self-government. It never suffered the indignity of having Roman troops garrisoned there. It had its own magistrates and its own assembly. It was an assize town, meaning that it was a centre for Roman justice.

Its greatest glory was the Temple of Artemis or Diana. The Temple of Diana was a place of sanctuary. If anyone committed a crime, and could get within one bow shot of the temple, they were safe, or in sanctuary. As we can imagine, this area became home to some of the choicest criminals!

It was a centre for religious superstition. Religion and magic were hopelessly intermingled in Ephesus. “Ephesian Letters” were charms that were supposed to cure sickness and also bring good luck.

Paul stayed longer in Ephesians than anywhere else – 3 years. You can read about his ministry in Ephesus in Acts 19 and 20. One of Paul’s major letters is to the church at Ephesus in which he outlines the vital importance of the church in the plan of God, and also how Christ loves the church as his bride.

If this church was running an ad for a new lead pastor – what Jesus says about it would catch your interest – you might even want to apply for the job.

Central Baptist Church
May 2023
Revelation 2:1-7

(SHOW SLIDE 05) 2:2 I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance.

Three strong words that describe what a typical week in this church is like.

(SHOW SLIDE 06) DEEDS – when you joined this church they had a job for you –It seems that you could not become a member at First Church in Ephesus without being involved in a ministry.

(SHOW SLIDE 07) TOIL – a strong word – people are willing to put their backs into things – these people are committed.

(SHOW SLIDE 08) PERSEVERANCE – at First Ephesus people did not quit – they did not look for a way out -- they stayed until a task was done. I believe there are times to take a break – don't get burned out.

The conclusion is Verse 3 – you have not grown weary.

You have to give this church an “A” for ministry. If this church was in North America – it would be running conferences – pastors and church leaders would be coming from all over to learn about their programs – taking home the latest strategies to get more volunteers – how to get people involved.

So this church gets high marks for its ministry.

This church is also faithful to the truth.

(SHOW SLIDE 09) Verse 2 -- I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false.

Ephesus was awash in religious syncretism – cults grew like weeds. The cultic worship of the Temple of Diana cast a shadow over everything. It was not easy to be a Christian and to stay true to the faith against this kind of pressure – but this church demonstrated it could be done – it stood as an example of faithfulness. When Paul was leaving this church some 40 years earlier – this was his word to their elders/leaders;

Central Baptist Church
May 2023
Revelation 2:1-7

(SHOW SLIDE 10) Acts 20

28 Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.

29 I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.

30 Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.

31 So be on your guard!

This church gets high marks and praise for its strong commitment to orthodoxy – standing for the truth.

You could call this exemplary evangelical church – lots of ministries to meet every need – holding to the truth in the midst of pluralism. In every way it was a flagship church.

But says Jesus – I have this against you. Jesus is the ultimate church consultant – he sees behind the programs and the busyness – he searches for more than orthodoxy. His diagnosis – you have lost your first love.

Ephesus is the picture of a church – any church – that has become busy – proud – rigid – exclusive. Jesus says – I will remove your lampstand from out of its place.

What is our first love?

I have painted this before for you as three concentric circles – **(SHOW SLIDE 11 leave up until slide 12)** the first/the innermost is the most important – it starts always with our love for God. Everything else flows from this centre. This is the call of the Shema – Deut 6 - to love God with heart, soul and mind. Jesus said this was the first and greatest commandment.

This is our first calling. We do that in response to the growing understanding of how much he loves us. We do not initiate love for God – God always takes the first step – this is the gospel – God moves first towards us -- our love is always a response. God leads in this dance with us – we follow his steps.

Central Baptist Church
May 2023
Revelation 2:1-7

Then – **(SHOW SLIDE 12 leave up until slide 13)** the next circle is our love for one another. John 13:33 This is how people will know you are my disciples – in that you love one another.

Then as we move outward **(SHOW SLIDE 13)** – it moves to become incarnate – flesh and blood in our love for the city and the world. We love our neighbors and our neighborhood in the power of the cross. It is not truth that makes us attractive – it is love that makes our discipleship attractive.

What kind of church do we want to be? There are a lot of right ways to answer that – I like to answer it this way and this will give you a new word to describe Central Baptist Church – it is a word that I kind of made up. We will be an **AGAPIC** church—that means a church that pulses with agape which is that love for God – and love of God.

(SHOW SLIDE 14) 1st Timothy 1

5. The goal of this command is love, (AGAPE) which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.

There is a profound warning in this letter to every church – especially within the evangelical community.

Within every strength lie the seeds of its own destruction – so within the vigor of ministry lie the seeds of ruin. When churches become busy – lots going on – programs for every need - We face the danger of –

Spiritual workaholism – ministry without the fuel of love quickly degenerates into mere activity.

There is the danger of spiritual pride – look at all we are doing – all our programs -- the lights are on 7 nights a week.

Then comes spiritual burn out – one day someone just walks away – they just vanish -- and we wonder why.

Ministry done without love becomes mere busyness and activity that can erode into burnout. If you are unsure about that – then think about 1st Corinthians 13.

(SHOW SLIDE 15) 1. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

Central Baptist Church
May 2023
Revelation 2:1-7

2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

3 If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

(SHOW SLIDE 16) Service to God without love for God quickly becomes idolatry.

There is also the danger of orthodoxy for its own sake. We are not hesitant to say that holding to the truth is vital in the times in which we live. We hear today a cacophony of spiritual voices all calling us to believe whatever we want – some of them blatant lies – always easier to recognize -- some are subtle distortions of the truth – always harder to identify –

We make no apologies at Central Baptist Church for our commitment to the Scriptures – a steady and systematic way we will seek to teach it each Sunday – I shudder at the thought of Christians who sit in churches and whose minds have not been fed or challenged – who are still in spiritual diapers – their faith consists of clichés and choruses – a shallow thoughtless Christianity is a disgrace before the Lord.

But – orthodoxy without love breeds a rigid spirit. Orthodoxy without love also breeds a spirit of exclusivism – it becomes narrow-minded legalism. It breeds ugliness – it breeds pride. The church becomes the frozen chosen.

So we can have activity without love – and we can have orthodoxy without love – but the opposites are also dangerous -- If we can have activity/ministry without love – there is also the danger of love without ministry.

The other side of this coin is addressed in 1st John 3

(SHOW SLIDE 17) 18 Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

If we can have orthodoxy without love – then there is the opposite danger of love without orthodoxy – love without truth. Love is not a substitute for truth – it is not one or the other. Just as truth without love becomes pride and exclusivism – so love without truth degenerates into relativism and pluralism which are the parents of heresy.

Central Baptist Church
May 2023
Revelation 2:1-7

Jesus knows and sees the real condition of the church – he can see its heart The First Church of Ephesus was a church that had forgotten how to love. Jesus calls his church back to the centre – back to a first love.

He says – 3 challenges --

(SHOW SLIDE 18) REMEMBER –

If you are married -- remember when you first fell in love with the person who is your spouse? You could not wait to see each other.

We are told today that some 50% of the marriages end in divorce. What causes that?

For the great majority of them it is not a sudden affair – rather it is a silent and steady decline into carelessness and monotony – they settle down into a comfortable pattern – in the smallest of ways we start taking one another for granted – the cards that we used to find and write when we first met and perhaps sent in the earlier years stop – we did not decide to stop – silent erosion ate away at the foundations of care – flowers stop coming – we start to take people for granted – we stop doing the small acts that express love – kind words seem to dry up.

We never really decide to stop caring – somehow we just grew careless with one another. Carelessness quietly erodes our love. Remember what it was like when you first fell in love – recall the fun it was.

Do we start to do the same with God – he has written us a love letter – do we bother to read it – do we bother to talk to him. Remember what it was like when you first fell in love with God – with his word – with His church. Remember how exciting that was.

I grew up in a Baptist church in Glasgow – great youth ministry – no youth pastor – we did it all ourselves – we met every week - The chorus that everyone was singing was - I have decided to follow Jesus – no turning back, no turning back.

The essential purpose of the work of spiritual remembering in Hebrew is not to go back to the good old days – rather it is to bring the vitality and passion we experienced those days forward into today. It is not an exercise in spiritual nostalgia – rather it is the joy of re-living. We will return to that in a moment.

(SHOW SLIDE 19) REPENT – we need to understand what that word really means. We sometimes see repent as a word of emotion – we are supposed to cry and weep – it is

Central Baptist Church
May 2023
Revelation 2:1-7

not really a word of emotion – rather it is a word of decision – someone once said that it does not mean we are sorry – but rather we are sorry enough to change.

We come to an honest confession of where things are really at -- It means to re-think – we stop going in the direction we are going in – and we turn around and set our feet in a new direction. It is to make a radical U-turn in life. We will stop the slide – we will put an end to the silent erosion – we will cease the deterioration – things can and will be different.

(SHOW SLIDE 20) DO – TAKE ACTION - we make decisions and we take steps to change our habits – to get out of the rut we have settled into – we commit to do whatever we have to do to restore intimacy.

These steps are not some easy how-to-do-it technique – rather they form a spiritual process both for the individual and for the church.

There are times as individual Christians – as pastors – as lay leaders – as people – we have to come and remember – repent – to redo.

There is a time for the church to remember – not the good old days – but to remember the sacrifice – to relive the passion – to rekindle the commitment – to renew the vision – to re-establish its identity – to re-energize the mission.

There is a time for the church to repent – to make a corporate U-turn -- to pivot its feet back to where it must go.

There is a time for the church to redo – to make critical decisions that turn it back to its first love – and in so doing give it a fresh impetus for ministry for the days ahead.

We have a final thought still to come – but this call to remember is our place to pause – In Deuteronomy – God tells to remember all He has done – all He has given them.

We come to take communion – it is a place to remember – to remember all that Christ accomplished on the cross – to remember when it became real and alive the first time for you – to remember the excitement you felt those days – to remember when you rose from the waters of baptism – to remember when you fell in love with Jesus – and we do not go back to the good old days – but we bring all the passion and all the power of that time right to today. That is what refreshes us.

Central Baptist Church
May 2023
Revelation 2:1-7

I remember about 60 years ago -- over 100 young gathered and we sang at the top of our voices -- I have decided to follow Jesus -- no turning back -- no turning back.

As You take bread -- remember how much God has poured his love over you -- make it alive and fresh again today -- in this very moment

BREAD:

WINE

As we take this wine -- we remember the sacrifice Christ made for us -- we bring it into our lives afresh -- we fall in love with Jesus once again -- that is what refreshes our soul. Can you do that?

WORSHIP TEAM UP

The final word of Jesus is -- [verse 7]

(SHOW SLIDE 21) to him who overcomes I will give the right to eat of the tree of life which is in the paradise of God.

To him who overcomes -- you know that word *overcome* -- we see it every day it advertising -- perhaps when you put on a pair of running shoes -- it comes from the Greek word -- NIKE. It was the cheer of the crowd as the runners entered the arena to finish the race -- the crowd was on its feet shouting Nike! Nike! The runners' tired lungs and weary legs are given fresh energy for the last stretch to the finish line -- the words of the crowd spur them on -- Nike!

STAND --

And we are spurred on by the promise of Jesus -- that as we overcome we will receive a prize -- it is the right to eat from the tree of life. This tree is in Genesis -- but the way to it is barred and blocked. It appears again in Revelation -- and the way to it is opened for us by the blood of the Lamb.

Closing Song;

Central Baptist Church
May 2023
Revelation 2:1-7

Final Comments

In a few years Central remembers its 100 year anniversary – what was the passion and energy then – what was the vision

100 years ago – can we bring all of that as fresh energy – fresh vision for the years still to come?

So in the life of the church – there is work and ministry to be done – we know that – we hold tightly on to the line of truth – just like the Ephesian church did – no apologies for that – but we would also remember the passion of our first love –