

First Love



David Wilkerson February 1, 1986

Many Christians avoid the book of Revelation because it seems so mysterious. Yet John wrote, "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near..." (Revelation 1:3 NAS).

Though written by John, it is the Revelation of Jesus Christ (Revelation 1:1). It is the heart of God revealed to Christ and shared by John.

John was one the three pillars in the church at Jerusalem. Much of what we know about him was recorded by Irenaeus, who got it first hand from Polycarp, a student of John.

We know John outlived Paul, who was martyred by Nero somewhere between 64 and 69A.D. It is believed that Paul founded at least two of the five churches in Asia and that, after his death, John lived out his days in Ephesus. From his letters to the churches in Asia, it appears that John was superintending the churches there. He was most probably exiled to Patmos by the Emperor Domitian and, after his release, returned to Ephesus.

At the writing of Revelation, the Roman Empire was in turmoil. Nero was suspected of burning Rome in order to rebuild it in royal splendour and name it after himself. He was despicable in his treatment of Christians and blamed them for the fiery holocaust.

On one occasion he hung numerous Christians on poles in his royal garden, covered them with oily tar and had them set on fire. One historian claims he rode his horse in wild glee through the smelling burning flesh that lit up the night with ghastly images. Many were martyred for their unshakeable faith in Jesus Christ.

In his exile, John shared in the sufferings of the body of Christ. Shut alone with God, the awesome revelation of Jesus Christ came to him.

The messages to the seven churches were directed to "the angel" of the churches, meaning the pastors, leaders or messengers. John is saying, "What I share with you is what every minister of the church ought to know and preach. This is the heart of God revealed against sin and apostasy - see that you hear the words, heed them, then preach them."

All true Revelation Begins With a Vision of Christ's Dread And Majestic Holiness.

In John 13:23 we read, "There was reclining on Jesus' breast one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved." It was this same John, intimately cradled in the bosom of the Son of God. John had known Him in His humanity as few others did.

But on Patmos, John sees Christ in His astounding holiness - "His hair white like wool... Clothed in a robe reaching to His feet... a golden girdle across His breast... His eyes a flame of fire... His feet like burning bronze, caused to glow as in a furnace... His voice like many waters..." (Revelation 1:12-15).

John did not lay his head on His bosom now. This is not Christ in His humanity now - it is Christ in His holiness! John said, "When I saw him, I fell at his feet like a dead man..." (Revelation 1:17).

Daniel had the same vision of the dread holiness of Christ. It drained him of all human strength and left him with a deathly pallor. "I lifted my eyes and looked and behold there was a certain man dressed in linen... girded with a belt of pure gold... his eyes like flaming torches ... his feet like gleaming bronze... the sound of his words like a roaring tumult..." (Daniel 10:5-6).

Daniel said that "dread fell on the other men, and they ran to hide... I was left alone... no strength was left in me... my natural colour turned to a deathly pallor... I fell into a deep sleep on my face, with my face to the ground..." (Daniel 10:7-9).

We are living in a time of evangelical flippancy and Charismatic comedy. The Word says people perish where there is no vision. I take that to mean a vision of the majestic holiness of Christ. When Isaiah saw Christ in His holiness, he cried out, in effect, "Woe is me... I'm a man of unclean lips... I am ruined... the congregation has unclean lips... for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts..." (Isaiah 6:1-5).

How many shepherds are there in these times who come to the pulpit with a deathly pallor, having spent hours with their face to the ground because they have caught a glimpse of the dread holiness of Jesus Christ? Yes, there is a beauty in that dread sight - but it must produce in us what it produced in John, in Daniel, in Isaiah, and in every servant of God who has ever seen that vision. It must produce a true fear of God, a fear of taking His name lightly, a fear of being shallow and comedic in His holy presence, a fear of not hallowing Him in the eyes of the people.

What some are calling intimacy today, I call impudence. How brash and rude some Christians have become in His house. How brazen some preachers are now - pouring forth their clever silliness, their foolish dreams, their sacrilegious jokes - from the sacred pulpit. We have brought Christ down to our own low level, making Him out to be one of us. What we desperately need is one look into His flaming eyes - one devastating vision of His consuming holiness - and never again could we be arrogant or foolish in His presence.

A True Vision of His Holiness Exposes Our Lack of Love.

In his letter to the seven churches, John deals first of all with the Ephesian condition. "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this. 'I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot endure evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false... Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate'" (Revelation 2:1,2,6 NAS).

The Ephesian condition is one that the Lord partially compliments. Here is a body of believers who toil and persevere for the gospel; they can't endure wickedness; they have discernment and are not carried away by false prophets; they endure for His name's sake; they have not grown weary; and most of all, God could say of them, "You hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate."

God took note of their hatred for the deeds and doctrine of the Nicolaitans. Twice in John's letter to the churches, Christ speaks of God's hatred for the teaching of these apostates [see Revelation 2:15].

Nicolas is first introduced in Acts 6:5, as one of the seven men chosen to oversee the daily provisions for widows. "And the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, 'It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.' And the statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them" (Acts 6:2-6 NAS). [Emphasis is ours.]

The church saw him as a spiritual man, full of the Spirit and wisdom. Hands were laid on him by the apostleship. What happened to Nicolas and his followers to bring down such a divine anathema upon their teaching and manner of life?

The church fathers had two cardinal rules for believers - do not eat meat offered to idols and avoid fornication.

Nicolas evidently fathered a doctrine that led to idolatry and fornication. The society of that day winked at sexual promiscuity. Nicolas and his followers invented a doctrine of false security that eventuated in mixture with the world and an undercurrent of sensuality in their teaching.

Clement of Alexandria said of the Nicolaitans, "They abandoned themselves to pleasures like goats, in a life of shameless self indulgence." They lost their fear of God; they refused to separate from the world; and they covered the altar with tears while committing adultery and fornication! They could talk so sweetly about their love for Christ, while all the time their hands and hearts were polluted with sin.

The Nicolaitan spirit is still with us. It is the doctrine of the so-called Christian rockers and punkers who drag the holy name of Jesus Christ through the muck and mire of the demon-controlled world of music. They write to me with sweet and pious words about how much they love Christ, about taking Jesus where no one else can take Him. But they are so blinded by pride, fame and sensuality; they either don't know or refuse to admit that Christ will not go with them to places He Himself has banned. The letter only kills - it is the Spirit of God who gives life. If they go to the devil's territory, bringing a dead word, a word the Holy Ghost refuses to anoint - they are ministering death. And one day they must all stand before a holy King, whose flaming torch-like eyes will pierce their arrogant pride, and answer for using God's own Word to kill so many with a dead letter.

These modern Nicolaitans have the audacity to suggest that a dreadfully holy Christ will bless their timid little ditties, their camouflaged sermonettes, their painless, costless invitation. Never! They are ashamed of my Lord! Ashamed to sing out a clear, unmistakable message of repentance and the absolute lordship of Christ. They are spitting in the face of our beloved Lord - they are deceived and they are deceiving an entire generation of young believers. God says, "If they were my servants they would show the people their sins."

They tell me they are the new prophets of this age. But Jeremiah said of them, "From the prophets of Jerusalem pollution has gone forth into all the land..." (Jeremiah 23:15).

It frightens me to learn that many of these rockers and punkers are members of Pentecostal churches, and they are blessed and encouraged by these pastors. Have our shepherds become that blinded - can they shut out Ezekiel's thundering message to ministers, "They shall teach my people the difference between the holy and the profane, and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean!" (Ezekiel 44-23)?

Pastors, wake up! Saints, wake up! This is the Nicolaitan doctrine God so hates. We must hate it too!

It Is Possible to Lose First Love - Even While Fighting Sin And Working Hard for the Lord's Cause.

The Ephesians thundered against sin; they exposed all that was false; they never once entertained a thought of quitting on their faith in Christ. But God had something against them, "I have this against you, that you have left your first love..." (Revelation 2:4).

God takes this matter of first love so seriously, He threatened to remove His anointing from them if they did not repent and go back.

This is one of the most misunderstood Scriptures in all the Bible. We have failed to realise that Christ is talking about His church.

Christians spend a lifetime trying to recapture early experiences with the Lord. They mistakenly believe going back to first love is going back to the zeal, the fervour and excitement when first saved. They grieve over having lost some kind of youthful enthusiasm for the Lord. It's true, many Christians have grown cold and dry - but going back to a more innocent time is not enough and does not express the deeper truth of this text.

Some should never go back to what they were at first. Some get saved out of selfish interests - to escape the wrath of God or to get blessed or healed or simply because they want peace of mind. I don't want to go back to my early days. My love was immature; it lacked wisdom and experience; and my zeal caused much pain. It was more emotion than it was devotion. I would not want to return to anything less than I now have, by His grace.

Why would the Ephesians go back to what they once were? Christ said they had not grown weary. They had not lost their perseverance. They had not lost zeal, respect for His name nor had they slacked off in their work for the Lord.

It Is the Church That Has Lost Its Apostolic Love for Christ.

Christ is here revealing to His church how far it has fallen from the love of the first apostolic church. He is saying, "You have correct doctrine; you are committed to doing My work; you are grounded in the Word as to not be fooled by the false; you have retained all the ordinances; you do commendable, charitable deeds - but you have lost apostolic love for Me!"

We are clinging to all the works of the first church but have lost the passionate love for Christ that motivated it. That first love was manifested in very practical ways.

The love of the first church manifested itself in a yearning for the soon return of Jesus Christ. They longed for the perfected union with Him in a life of immortality and glory. It was a spiritual longing for His return so it would bring to them that holy likeness to Him and perfect communion in His presence. They prayed to be "with Him, and to behold His glory!"

Now we see a gradual forgetfulness of the promises of the Lord as to His speedy return and a loss of faith in their fulfillment. We have cast aside our Lord's warnings not to be ensnared with worldliness, and we have forgotten to watch and pray. Are we now "standing fast, with loins girded, and lamps burning, as servants waiting for their master"? No - His coming is no longer our chief desire - we are too engrossed in our ocean of materialism. We have forgotten His Word that a change is coming "in the twinkling of an eye."

We are weary of cross-bearing - impatient about His return. Having put His return out of mind or way off into the future, we feel no need for vigilance, for watchfulness. Consequently, all the virgins sleep. Is it any wonder we see so much idolatry and carelessness among Christians?

I will debate no one about the doctrine of the rapture. All I know is that I tremble when Christ calls him an evil servant who says, "My Lord delayeth His coming" (Matthew 24:48). I believe Him when He says He is coming suddenly, as a thief in the night. I know there is a crown of righteousness awaiting those who "love His appearing" (2 Timothy 4:8).

I believe God's people are going to suffer much for Christ; I believe great sorrow and tribulation is coming and God's people need to be warned and prepared. But I also believe in the unexpected return of Christ in a cloud of glory to receive to Himself His bride.

The church has lost that first love that caused a cry to erupt in them, "Even so Lord Jesus, come quickly" (Revelation 22:20). The first church preached, "Be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming" (Matthew 24:42). We now hear the message, "The Lord has delayed His coming. He is not coming at any hour, unexpectedly". But from the lips of Christ Himself, we hear, "For this reason you be ready... for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will..." (Matthew 24:44).

He who has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit is saying - go back to apostolic love for Christ's appearing! Live righteously, expectant, yearning, watchful - and whether or not the people of God do or do not go through the great tribulation will not matter, for you will be ready at all times for all things.

The truest test of apostolic love was put to Peter by the Lord Himself, "So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love Me more than these?' He said to Him, 'Yes Lord; You know that I love You.' He said to him, 'Tend My lambs.' He said to him again a second time, 'Simon, son of John do you love Me?' He said to Him, 'Yes Lord; You know that I love You.' He said to him, 'Shepherd My sheep.' He said to him the third time, 'Do you love Me?' And he said to Him, 'Lord, you know all things; You know that I love You.' Jesus said to him, 'Tend My sheep." (John 21:15-17 NAS).

To Be Passionately Devoted to Christ Is to Feed the Sheep

Jesus was not talking about teaching or preaching to the sheep. I think Jesus was saying to Peter, "Your denial of Me took something out of your brethren. It shook them to see your lack of devotion, your cowardice. Now, let your love for Me be such that it will feed them. Let it feed their hope, their needs."

The church needs more examples of totally devoted lovers of Christ upon which to feed. I feed on the example of

holy men and women of God. That kind of love is so beautiful it affects me; it feeds something very deep in me; it feeds my hunger for God. Their absolute devotion and love for Christ creates hope in me. So much so that I get more spiritual food from one who lives holy and devoted than from all the preachers and teachers who preach one thing and live another.

Some Christians leave me empty and dry - their lack of love for Christ makes me feel depressed. They are lukewarm; they affect my spirit like a glass of ice water in my face on a cold day. Their drooping spirit takes something out of me. They have nothing to give - they feed no one.

Jesus Christ is the Bread of Life. When you love Him with all that is in you - you are the feeding kind. He who truly loves me as a brother is the one who loves the Lord with all his heart. I love the lost by loving Him the most. His love in us becomes a beacon of light - a hope - an invitation - a life-giving example.

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