

LOVE OR DIE

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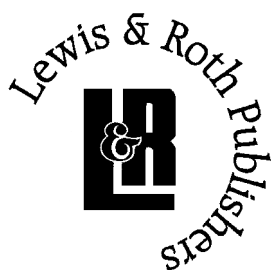
Men and Women: Equal Yet Different

A Christian Leader's Guide to Leading With Love

LOVE OR DIE

Christ's Wake-Up Call to the Church
Revelation 2:4

Alexander Strauch



Love or Die

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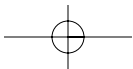
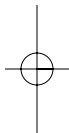
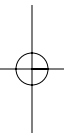
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Introduction

Pursue love....

1 Cor. 14:1

My first encounter with the biblical principles of love started in a negative way during my early years as a born-again Christian. I was surprised when I saw true believers fight, display angry attitudes, and separate from one another. To make matters worse, the conflicts I witnessed weren't about lofty, eternal theological issues of the gospel, but rather, personal preferences and church traditions. To me, as a young believer, fighting among older, godly believers was quite discouraging.

To deal with my disillusionment, I began to search the New Testament for answers as to what should really be important in the life of the local church. What are correct Christian priorities and attitudes? How can true believers disagree without mutual destruction (Gal. 5:15)? What I discovered, among other things, was what I called, at the time, the moral (or Christlike) character of the church. The church is to be a family of brothers and sisters characterized by humility, gentleness, peace, forgiveness, forbearance, faith, hope, and love, with love being the supreme, overarching virtue. "And above all these," writes Paul, "put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (Col. 3:14).

First Corinthians 13, in particular, spoke to me about the fact that there is a "more excellent way" of thinking and behaving, and that the greatest theological knowledge, the most extraordinary spiritual gifts, and most sacrificial services are profitless—even hurtful—if not motivated and colored by the spirit of Christlike love. As a result of my Bible study, I realized the priority of love in all that we do and say.

My next life-changing encounter with Christian love came several years later when a friend gave me a biography of Robert Cleaver Chapman. R. C.

Chapman was known for living a life of love without compromising the truths of Scripture. His life of love has been an inspiration and challenge to many of God's people. His biography confirmed in my mind what I had already seen in my study of Scripture: Love is essential to everything we do in Christian life and ministry.

My third memorable encounter with love came while studying the Book of Ephesians and using the acclaimed commentaries of D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, once preacher at Westminster Chapel in London. As I studied Ephesians 3:18-19, I experienced a life-changing realization of the love of Christ for me. Paul's prayer that we might know intellectually, personally, and experientially the immeasurable love of Christ for his people had a powerful impact on me:

I bow my knees before the Father...that...he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being,... that you...may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth [of Christ's love], and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. (Eph. 3:14-19)

As a result of these encounters, I developed a life-long interest in the subject of biblical love; I have subsequently written several books on love, *particularly as it applies to developing loving church leadership and a loving church community*. (See Appendix A for a list of these books on love.) Although my interest in this thrilling subject continues to grow, I always feel a terrible sense of inadequacy in trying to write about Christlike love. Unlike writing about other biblical subjects, writing about love constantly exposes one to his or her failures to love God and neighbor as a Christian should. It is a very convicting subject that touches every aspect of life. I pray that my efforts awaken Christians to the need for our personal lives and our local churches to be marked by the love of Jesus Christ.

Part One

The Problem of Lost Love

You have abandoned the love you had at first.
Rev. 2:4

By means of satellite imagery and software programs that can find almost any address on the planet, I can see almost any church building in the world from my study at home. If, for example, I want to see a certain church in South Africa, I can open a software application and a spectacular picture of our blue and green planet spinning in space appears on my computer screen. I type in *Africa* and the spinning planet rotates to the giant continent of Africa. I then type in *South Africa* and zoom in on the country of South Africa. I type in *Barberton* (a city west of Swaziland), and in seconds I see the entire city. Finally, I type in the address of the church. Before I know it, I'm looking down at the roof of a church building 9,800 miles (15,680 km) from my home.

As powerful and amazing as this technology is, however, I still can't see inside the building. I see only the roof. I cannot see or hear God's people as they worship, nor can I look into the hearts and minds of the people who gather there. But there is one who can see perfectly into every human heart. He can perceive the corporate spirit of a church. Not only can he see into every church and every heart, he can walk among the churches on earth without being detected! And he does it all without the benefit of our feeble computers, cameras, or satellite imagery.

In fact, Christ has been walking among the churches for almost two thousand years. Near the end of the first century, Jesus Christ peered into seven specific churches. He did not just look down at rooftops. He examined the corporate spirit of the church and probed the mind and heart of each

believer. Then, in the last book of the Bible, the Revelation to John, Christ reveals his evaluation of each of these seven churches.

Imagine if Christ were to look down at your church, walk in your midst, and give you his evaluation. It would be unnerving to say the least! But in a sense, Christ has already done this. Through the letters to the seven churches

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about church-growth
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of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), he addresses the problems and victories, strengths and weaknesses that are common to local churches today.

Therefore, Christ's evaluation of these seven churches should be of paramount concern to us. His evaluation is perfect. He cannot be deceived. He has eyes "like a flame of fire" (Rev. 1:14) that penetrate the deepest recesses of the heart. All things are open to his scrutiny. Without his evaluation, we are easily deceived and blinded to our errors. Too often we care more about church-growth strategies or the latest trends than we do about what Jesus Christ thinks. But as John Stott reminds us, Christ's evaluation of a church is what ultimately matters. Christ alone "is the church's founder, head, and judge."¹

We can learn much from Christ's evaluation of each of the seven churches of Asia Minor, but we will focus this study on his evaluation of the church in Ephesus. It addresses the issue of love, particularly the problem of love that has grown cold. This issue is of utmost importance because love is vital to the survival of our local churches today. The text of Christ's evaluation is found in Revelation 2:1-6:

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: "The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

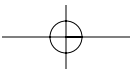
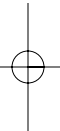
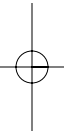
"I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against

¹ John R. W. Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1-3* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 7.

The Problem of Lost Love

5

you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.”



Chapter One

Christ's Commendation and Complaint

It wasn't easy being Christ's lampstand in a dark, pagan city like Ephesus. Expositor R. H. Charles comments that "Ephesus was...a hotbed of every kind of cult and superstition."² The pagan temple of Artemis (Roman Diana) dominated the city and was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Emperor worship (the imperial cult) thrived in Ephesus and was a required duty of every citizen. Moreover, the city was a prosperous trade center and an immoral port city.

Knowing all this, the Lord graciously acknowledges their "toil" and "patient endurance." He praises this church because it had no tolerance for those who profess the Christian faith but justify an immoral lifestyle: "I know.... You cannot bear with those who are evil." Jesus also praises them for testing "those who call themselves apostles and are not." Like the Berean believers, the Ephesians examined "the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so" (Acts 17:11). When self-proclaimed apostles came to teach, the church tested their claims of apostolic authority and found them to be false. Consequently, the church found the teachers to be self-deceived agents of Satan—not representatives of Christ—and rejected them and their teaching. You can be sure this took courage and determination.

We know, then, that the church at Ephesus was a doctrinally discerning church. It loved truth and hated, as did Jesus, "the works of the Nicolaitans," an immoral, heretical Christian sect (Rev. 2:6). Please take note: Jesus commends them for hating the corrupt teachings and practices of this false sect.

² R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John*, ICC (New York: Scribner, 1920), 1: 48.

Their hatred of the works of darkness was a demonstration of their love for Christ and God's Word. Churches today need to understand that hatred of evil and falsehood is not a contradiction of love, but an essential part of genuine Christian love (1 Cor. 13:6). Love abhors "what is evil" and clings "to what is good" (Rom. 12:9). The Ephesian believers, then, were role models of theological vigilance. They were defenders of the truth and lovers of the gospel. They were uncompromising in their stand for biblical principles, and for this our Lord highly praises them.

There was much to commend the church in Ephesus, and we should prize all of its exemplary qualities.

We also know that the Ephesians had faced great conflict. They had resisted the agents of Satan and patiently endured many other trying circumstances. So the Lord praises them, saying, "You are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake and you have not grown weary." What

a display of their loyalty and dedication!

There was much to commend the church in Ephesus, and we should prize all of its exemplary qualities. The church could have written a best-selling manual on successful church ministry. However, all was not well. Something was fundamentally wrong, and Jesus Christ puts his finger right on the problem: Loss of love. In light of all the commendable qualities of this church, we might think of Christ's complaint as trivial, but in his eyes, the church had "fallen." It had abandoned the love it once had. To the one "who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood" (Rev. 1:5), this is no small matter. Thus our Lord says, "I have this against you."

A Failure of Love

Our Lord's complaint against the church at Ephesus is "you have abandoned the love you had at first." Literally translated, the text reads: "You have abandoned your love, the first." Emphasis is placed on the adjective *first*, so the love they abandoned refers to their love as it was first expressed at the beginning of their life together as a church body.

Jesus doesn't say, "You have no love." He says, "You have abandoned the love you had at first." Their love was not what it used to be. While they still had some measure of love because they were, for the most part, true Christians and enduring hardship for his "name's sake" (Rev. 2:3), they no

longer possessed the kind of love they had in their early years as a church. They still loved the Lord, but not like they did at first. They still loved one another, but not like before.

Their love for Christ and for one another had once motivated all they did. It brought joy, creativity, freshness, spontaneity, and energy to their life and work. But now their energy source was depleted. Their work had become mundane, mechanical, and routine, and their lives the picture of self-satisfaction. Instead of their love abounding, it had been lacking. Instead of being motivated by love from the heart, their works had become perfunctory. Even certain "works," which sprang from their former love, vanished. For this, Jesus rebukes them and calls them to do those works again (Rev. 2:5).

The object of their lost love is not stated. The text does not say love for Christ or love for fellow believers. It is best, then, to understand Jesus to mean Christian love in general, which would include love for God, love for one another in the church, and love for the lost. According to our Lord, love for God and neighbor are inseparable companions (Mark 12:29-31; Luke 10:27). It is impossible to love God and not love his people or to love his people and not love God (1 John 4:7-5:3).

Jesus uses strong words in his complaint against the Ephesians. Jesus squarely places the responsibility at their feet when he says, "you have abandoned" or "given up"³ the love they once had. They can't blame anyone else for this loss. They have had every advantage provided by years of good teaching, access to almost all of the New Testament Scriptures, and the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. No wonder Christ expresses extreme displeasure with the situation in Ephesus. Their loss of love is their fault. They have failed to "keep" themselves in the love of God (Jude 21). They must now face this fact and respond to Christ's criticism and counsel.

³ BDAG, s.v., "*aphiēmi*," 156.

