



The Sermons
to the
Seven Churches
of Revelation

A COMMENTARY AND GUIDE

JEFFREY A. D. WEIMA

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Ephesus

The Church of Loveless Orthodoxy

The Christ Title (2:1b)

In each of the seven sermons, the message opens not with the words of Christ through John to the particular congregation but with a title that Christ gives himself. More than one title is typically given, and virtually all of them are taken from the impressive vision of Christ that opens the book of Revelation (1:9–20).

In the sermon to Ephesus, the first of the two Christ titles identifies the one who is about to speak as “the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand.” This title conveys Christ’s *power* and emphasizes that power in two ways. First, whereas the opening vision portrays Christ in 1:16 as merely “having” (*echōn*) the seven stars, here Christ is “holding” (*kratōn*) the seven stars. This verbal change is significant because the latter term conveys greater power and has a variety of meanings, including “to take control of someone or something” (BDAG 564.3). Jesus not only “has” the seven stars, in the sense of possessing them; he “holds” the seven stars, in the sense of exercising sovereign control over them, which graphically reveals his power.

Second, Christ’s power is further stressed by holding the seven stars “in his right hand.” Since most people are right-handed, using this hand more

than the left, their right hand naturally becomes stronger. This common cross-cultural phenomenon explains why the right hand appears repeatedly in Scripture as a metaphor for power and authority. Both the OT and the NT frequently allude to God's sovereign control and power by referring to his "right hand" (Exod. 15:6; Pss. 16:11; 17:7; 18:35; 44:3; 45:4; 63:8; 98:1; 118:15; 139:10; Isa. 41:10; 48:13; Matt. 22:44; Acts 2:34; 7:55; Rom. 8:34; Heb. 1:3).

The power of Christ conveyed in the first title is stressed even further by the opening main clause, "he says these things" (*tade legei*). As noted in the introduction, this fixed expression occurs over 250 times in the LXX, where it appears as part of the fuller Hebrew phrase "thus says the LORD (Almighty)." By John's day, however, this construction sounded old-fashioned, like the English expression "thus saith" would today (Aune 1997: 141). It would catch the attention of John's audience, however, not just because of its old-fashioned sound but, more important, because it evokes divine power: like the One who spoke this formula in the OT, Christ is the divine and powerful God. Although "he says these things" introduces all seven of the sermons, its presence here supplements the notion of power conveyed by the first Christ title.

It is difficult to determine with certainty the meaning of the seven stars that Christ holds in his powerful right hand. Although the preceding chapter tells us that "the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches" (1:20), this answer simply raises another highly disputed question about what the word "angel" means here. This Greek word for "messenger" (*angelos*) is often used in the NT for God's special envoys, angels. Proposals for what the word means here in Rev. 1:20 fall into two broad categories: *angelos* refers to (1) human beings, either messengers to or leaders of each church, or to (2) supernatural beings, either guardian angels who lead and protect each church or personified heavenly counterparts of the prevailing spirit of each church. Key considerations in this debate include the fact that elsewhere in the book of Revelation *angelos* always (69×) refers to a supernatural being, early Christian texts rarely use *angelos* to refer to a human being, and Jewish writings from this time period frequently depict heavenly angels as guiding and safeguarding the actions of earthly kings and nations (e.g., Dan. 10:13, 20–21). Therefore, the "seven stars," which are the seven "angels," most likely symbolize the guardian angels of each congregation (for a fuller discussion of the options and their relative strengths and weaknesses, see Aune 1997: 108–12; Osborne 2002: 98–99). Happily, our understanding of the first Christ title does not depend on resolving this disputed question. Regardless of what the seven stars refer to, the Christ title in the Ephesian sermon is intended to highlight Christ's sovereign power. The one who is about to

speak does not merely possess but firmly grasps the seven stars in his all-powerful right hand.

The power of Christ spotlighted in the first Christ title likely involves a polemic against Rome. Its emperors liked to present themselves on coins as demigods whose power extended beyond earth to control the planets and the stars. After the death of his ten-year-old son in AD 83, Domitian declared that the boy had become a god and that his wife, Domitia, became the mother of a god. He issued a coin to honor his deceased son (*RIC* 2:213) that portrays him sitting on a globe in a position of power over the world. Depicting his heavenly dominion over the whole universe, he holds seven stars, representing the seven planets, in his outstretched arms.

The later emperor Hadrian (AD 117–138) issued a coin (*RIC* 2:202) with his image on one side and with a crescent moon and seven stars on the other. The not so subtle message is that Hadrian is powerful enough to control not only earthly events but also what happens in the heavens among the moon and seven stars.

Christ’s depiction in the first title as “the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand” should therefore be seen as a challenge to Roman power. The Jesus who has already been identified earlier in the book of Revelation as “the ruler of the kings of the earth” (1:5) is once again portrayed as the one whose cosmic power exceeds the claims of Rome. As Beasley-Murray (1978: 70) notes, “When John declares that the seven stars are in Christ’s right hand, he is claiming that the sovereignty over this world resides not in the Caesars of Rome but in the Lord of the Church” (for more on the polemic here against Rome, see also Krodel 1989: 95; Beale 1999: 108).

The second of the two Christ titles identifies the speaker as “the one who walks in the middle of the seven golden lampstands.” While the first title conveys Christ’s *power*, this second title conveys Christ’s *presence*. This presence is emphasized by another subtle change from the opening vision of 1:9–20. In



Figure 1.1. *Left*: Domitia, wife of Domitian. *Right*: Deceased son of Domitian seated on a globe and surrounded by seven stars.



Figure 1.2. *Left*: Wreathed head of Hadrian. *Right*: Crescent moon with seven stars.

1:13 Christ is seen simply as being in the midst of the seven golden lampstands (the Greek text has no verb); here Christ “walks” (*peripatōn*) among them. The opening vision identifies the seven lampstands with the seven churches (1:20); the second Christ title therefore portrays Jesus as intimately present with the congregations of Asia Minor and walking among them. He has power over life both on earth and in the heavens, and his sovereign control exceeds that of any Roman emperor; yet he is not a ruler who is distant and removed but is present and near his churches, including the Ephesian congregation.

Christ’s presence contains a dual aspect of both comfort and challenge. On the one hand, the believers in Ephesus are comforted by the knowledge that they are not alone: the all-powerful Christ is present and “watches over” them as they face false apostles, unorthodox teachings, and other threats to their spiritual well-being. On the other hand, they are challenged by the knowledge that the all-powerful Christ is present and “watches” them, which gives him an intimate knowledge of their spiritual condition (2:2, “I know . . .”) and reinforces his warning about the potential need for him to come and remove their lampstand (2:5).

The Commendation (2:2–3, 6)

Christ typically begins his address to each particular church by commending its members for what they are doing well, a pattern that begins here. Yet his praise of the Ephesian congregation is hardly a perfunctory act or token note of politeness before he turns to what he really wants to say in the complaint. Instead, the commendation in the Ephesian sermon is fulsome and strong, and this fact ought not to be downplayed (as, e.g., Wall 1991: 69, who claims that Ephesus, perhaps along with Laodicea, is the most severely condemned of the seven churches). Although Christ commends the church for a number of things, the ultimate characteristic that connects these items of praise together concerns the Ephesian believers’ *orthodoxy*—their passion for the truth and aggressive effort not to be misled by the wicked, whether they be false apostles or the Nicolaitans.

The Main Commendation (2:2–3)

The commendation begins with what will become a standard opening formula for all seven sermons: “I know.” The choice of the word for “know” is regarded as significant by some. They claim that the verb used here (*oida*) refers to “full or complete knowledge” in contrast to another Greek verb

(*ginōskō*) that “speaks of progress of knowledge” (Thomas 1992: 133). However, this distinction in meaning is not supported by the use of these two verbs in the rest of the book of Revelation (*oida*: 2:2, 9, 13, 17, 19; 3:1, 8, 15, 17; 7:14; 12:12; 19:12; *ginōskō*: 2:23, 24; 3:3, 9). Nor must we rely on the verb to convey the idea of Jesus’s “full or complete knowledge.” The second Christ title has already introduced Jesus as the one who is walking among the seven lampstands, that is, the seven churches, and this means that he is fully aware of the situation of each church and thereby wholly justified in his commendation and his complaint. The object of this complete knowledge of Christ is “your works.” This same object is used with this opening formula in all seven sermons except two (2:9, Smyrna; 2:13, Pergamum). To Protestant ears, the word “works” may be associated with “deeds” as opposed to “faith,” to what people do in contrast to what people believe. Yet it is clear from the seven sermons as a whole that the word “works” refers to both. This is understandable when we remember that actions are intimately connected to beliefs. Therefore, all seven sermons deal not only with right and wrong conduct but with the right and wrong thinking that lies behind such conduct.

The works of the Ephesians that Christ fully knows are clarified as “your labor and perseverance.” The Greek text lists all three nouns in a simple sequential manner that literally reads, “I know your works *and* labor *and* your perseverance.” Based on its similarity to 1 Thess. 1:3, where these three nouns are listed in the same order, some see here not just a triad but “a traditional Christian triad” (Beasley-Murray 1978: 74; see also Aune 1997: 142; Michaels 1997: 70). However, there are compelling reasons not to view the three terms equally as objects of what Christ knows but instead to see the second and third terms as specific explanations of the first generic term: (1) “works” occurs in the plural, in contrast to “labor” and “perseverance,” which are in the singular; (2) none of the four subsequent sermons that have “works” as the object of what Christ knows include both “labor” and “perseverance” (see 2:19; 3:1, 8, 15); (3) the personal pronoun “your” is included with the first and third terms but not with the second, suggesting that it applies to the last two terms and that the terms belong together (“your labor and perseverance”); and (4) the second and third terms are picked up and repeated in the immediately following clauses, but the first term is not. Therefore, the conjunction (*kai*) that appears before the second term almost certainly has an explanatory function (BDAG 495.1.c) so that the commendation should read: “I know your works, *namely*, your labor and perseverance” (as many commentators agree).

This conclusion is not merely a technical grammatical point but an important clue for understanding the structure of the rest of Christ’s commendation

of the Ephesians, as the two explanatory terms are further explicated. The word “labor” is explained in the rest of 2:2, which deals with the church’s *active* response to those challenging orthodoxy, and the word “perseverance” is elucidated in 2:3, which describes the church’s *passive* response to the situation they face (so Charles 1920: 49; Thomas 1992: 133; Osborne 2002: 112). Forms of these two terms appear in subsequent verses (the noun “labor” in v. 2 has the same root as the verb “to grow weary” in v. 3; “perseverance” in v. 2 is repeated in v. 3). Likewise, the double use of a third term (“to endure” in v. 2 also appears in v. 3) lends lexical coherence to this subunit (i.e., the commendation of 2:2–3) within the sermon. All of these observations strengthen the case that the structure proposed above is not merely imagined by modern exegetes but was intended by the ancient author. This two-part structure of the commendation can be seen more easily when the text is presented as follows:

“Labor” refers to the Ephesian church’s *active* response to those challenging orthodoxy, which is explained in the rest of verse 2: “and you are not able to endure wicked people, and you tested those who call themselves apostles—and they are not—and you have found them false.”

“Perseverance” refers to the Ephesian church’s *passive* response to those challenging orthodoxy, which is explained in verse 3: “and you have perseverance and you have endured [wicked people] on account of my name and have not grown weary.”

The labor of the Ephesian church is first explained as “You are not able to endure wicked people.” This church’s concern for orthodoxy is revealed in their refusal to tolerate anyone who can be called “wicked.” The congregation in Ephesus does not succumb to the temptation to avoid conflict by simply putting up with those in their midst whose character and conduct are evil; instead, the church’s passion for the truth makes them unable to endure such folks.

The depth of the Ephesian congregation’s defense of orthodoxy becomes even clearer in the second way that their labor is explained: “You tested those who call themselves apostles.” The word “apostle” has three different meanings in the NT and early Christian literature. (1) It sometimes refers narrowly to the twelve disciples of Jesus (see Rev. 21:14)—a meaning that is impossible here in 2:2, since it is far-fetched to believe that anyone at this late date would try to pass themselves off as one of the original disciples or that Christ would commend the Ephesian church for discerning such an obvious falsehood. (2) On a few occasions, the word “apostle” refers to those who are simply messengers without any extraordinary status other than the authority

of the person or church sending them on a mission (John 13:16; Phil. 2:25; 2 Cor. 8:23). (3) The term “apostle” most often, however, refers to “highly honored believers with a special function as God’s envoys” (BDAG 122.2.c). Such apostles include not only well-known leaders such as Paul, James (Gal. 1:19), and Barnabas (Acts 14:14) but also more obscure figures such as Andronicus and Junia (Rom. 16:7) as well as unnamed individuals who claimed divine commissioning and authority (see 2 Cor. 11:5; 12:11). Those whom the Ephesians tested claimed to belong to this third category. They were not merely messengers but missionaries who called themselves “apostles,” thereby invoking divine authority for their teachings.

The danger faced by the Ephesian congregation was common in the early church. The Letter of 2 John exhorts its readers not to welcome into their house-church gatherings itinerant preachers “who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh” (2 John 7; see also 1 John 4:1–3a). The Letter of Jude addresses the problem of “shepherds” (i.e., leaders, Jude 12) from outside the local church who “have secretly slipped in among you” and “who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality” (Jude 4). The Letter of 2 Peter warns its readers that, just as “there were false prophets” among the people of God in OT times, so also “there will be false teachers among you” (2 Pet. 2:1). The *Didache*, an anonymous Christian treatise dating to the late first century or early second century, provides instructions on how the church should welcome visiting apostles and how to distinguish the false prophet from the true by their behavior (Did. 11.3–11). False prophets in the early church were not only a common danger but also a predicted problem. Some forty or so years earlier, Paul warned the Ephesian elders in his farewell address that “after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock” (Acts 20:29). Paul’s prophetic warning of heretical outsiders came true, and so the Ephesian church is commended by Christ for not naively accepting the apostolic claims of all itinerant missionaries but instead putting them to the test and finding some to be false—a finding with which the author of the sermon agrees in a parenthetical comment (“and they are not”).

Who were these false apostles? Answers to this question vary widely. Some claim that they were legalists like the opponents whom Paul faced in Corinth, whom he similarly describes as “false apostles” (2 Cor. 11:13; see Spitta 1889: 251; Hort 1908: 21). Others reach the completely opposite conclusion, arguing that “the context suggests that self-appointed apostles were antinomians rather than legalists” (Mounce 1977: 87; Hemer 1986: 40). Still other interpreters have viewed these false apostles as Gnostics who appealed to the heavenly Christ over against the earthly Jesus and whose negative view of the flesh led to an anything-goes ethic, thus justifying the earlier description of them as

“wicked people” (Beasley-Murray 1978: 74). These three proposed identifications all suffer from a lack of compelling evidence.

Many instead connect the false apostles with the Nicolaitans mentioned later in the sermon, viewing the two groups as identical (so, e.g., Charles 1920: 50; Thomas 1992: 136–38; Kistemaker 2001: 113). There are several reasons, however, why this proposal is also unconvincing. First, each group seems to have threatened the Ephesian church at different time periods: the congregation in Ephesus “tested” and “found” (past tense) these apostles to be false, whereas they “hate” (present tense) the works of the Nicolaitans. Second, the strong adversative “but” (*alla*) that introduces the Nicolaitans in 2:6 more likely marks the beginning of a new reason for commendation rather than a restatement about the false apostles mentioned in 2:3 (Aune 1997: 147). Third, if the Nicolaitans were in fact the same as the false apostles, this would render 2:6 redundant: there would be no need for Christ to commend the Ephesians for hating the practices of the Nicolaitans if he had already praised them a few verses earlier for testing this group and finding them to be false. Fourth, those claiming to be apostles have come from outside the Ephesian church, whereas the Nicolaitans appear to be heretical insiders. It is most probable, therefore, that the “false apostles” and Nicolaitans are two separate subgroups of the larger category of “wicked people” whom the Ephesian church is not able to tolerate.

Identifying the false apostles is less important to the commendation than highlighting the Ephesians’ demonstrated track record of defending orthodoxy. This concern for truth was not a fleeting interest but a long-standing passion of the Ephesian church: they demonstrated it in the *past* by testing false apostles (note the past tense of “tested” and “found”), in the *present* by not tolerating wicked people in general and the practices of the Nicolaitans in particular (note the present tense of “not able to endure” and “hate”), and even into the *future*. A short time later (perhaps only a decade), the church father Ignatius of Syrian Antioch cites the bishop of Ephesus, Onesimus, who praised the Ephesian church because “all of you live according to the truth and no heresy resides among you. On the contrary, you no longer listen to anyone, except one who speaks truthfully about Jesus Christ” (Ign. *Eph.* 6.2; Ehrman 2003). In the same letter, Ignatius further writes, “I have learned that some people have passed through on their way from there with an evil teaching. But you did not permit them to sow any seeds among you, plugging your ears so as not to receive anything sown by them” (Ign. *Eph.* 9.1; Ehrman 2003). The “labor” of the Ephesian church for which Christ commends them, therefore, concerns their orthodoxy—their passionate and persistent defense of the truth.

After fleshing out the first key term, “labor,” Christ’s commendation goes on to explain the second key term, “perseverance”: “And you have perseverance, and you have endured on account of my name, and you have not grown weary” (2:3). The word “perseverance” (*hypomonē*), which occurs six other times in the book of Revelation (1:9; 2:2, 19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12; the verbal form does not appear), refers to “the capacity to hold out or bear up in the face of difficulty” and can be variously translated as “patience, endurance, fortitude, steadfastness, perseverance” (BDAG 1039). Just as the general term “labor” in 2:2 is clarified by the clause that immediately follows, so also here the general term “perseverance” is made clearer by the next statement: “and you endured on account of my name.” The verb “endure” is repeated from the preceding verse, where its object was “wicked people.” Even though no object is explicitly stated here in 2:3, the same object can be assumed: “and you have endured *wicked people* on account of my name.” The perseverance for which the Ephesians are being commended, therefore, does not refer broadly to any and all types of hardships (so the NIV) but instead specifies the danger of visiting missionaries and itinerant preachers who claim to be authoritative apostles. The final clause “and you have not grown weary,” expressed in the emphatic perfect tense, suggests that “the problem of false teachers faced by the Ephesian Christians was no temporary crisis but one that exerted a severe test of their steadfast adherence to the gospel. Here was a church outstanding for her doctrinal purity” (Ladd 1972: 39).

The Additional Commendation (2:6)

Literary, grammatical, and contextual considerations all show that the commendation comes to a close in 2:3. Literary evidence for this is found in the *inclusio*—the framing device—formed by cognates of the key term “labor.” The noun form (*kopos*) opens this section (2:2), and the verb of the same root (*kekopiakes*, you have not grown weary) closes this section (2:3). Yet as noted above, this unit also repeats a second key word (the noun “endurance” and the verb “to endure”), thereby giving this commendation lexical coherence. A new unit in the sermon starts in 2:4, as signaled grammatically by the strong adversative “but” (*alla*) and contextually by the shift from commendation to complaint (“I have this against you . . .”). With these boundaries of the commendation so clearly marked, it is surprising to find a resumption of Christ’s praise for the Ephesian church later in 2:6: “But you have this, namely, you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.” This resumption of the commendation is signaled not only by Christ’s words of praise but also by the linking key word “works”: the “works” that Jesus knows and for which

he commends the Ephesians in 2:2–3 (“I know your works . . .”) include the fact that they hate the “works” of the Nicolaitans.

The additional commendation of 2:6 reveals even further the depth of the Ephesian church’s preoccupation with orthodoxy. Compared to the earlier descriptions of their response to those advocating falsehoods, their passion for the truth comes out in the more intense language of the verbs used here. Not only were the believers in Ephesus “not able to endure” wicked people and actively putting “to the test” those claiming to be apostles, but they were also aggressively hating the works of the Nicolaitans. As Osborne (2002: 119) notes, the language here “is much stronger than 2:2–3. There they found the false teachers to be ‘false,’ but here they ‘hate’ their ‘works.’”

In our contemporary pluralistic and relativistic society, such a response may seem intolerant. Christ’s commendation of the Ephesian church’s hatred may also appear to contradict Christ’s complaint in the preceding verse that they have “abandoned the love [they] had at first” (2:4). But Christ is praising the believers in Ephesus for their hatred, not of the Nicolaitans themselves, but of their “works.” The common distinction between “hating the sin” and “loving the sinner”—though criticized as illegitimate by some and not always practiced by those who too glibly cite it—nevertheless appears to be supported by this sermon. After all, Jesus not only praises the Ephesians for hating the works of the Nicolaitans, but he himself hates what they hate. There is no justification from any NT text for pitting Christ’s emphasis on love for others against his hatred of the sinful acts that people do. God said of his Son: “You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness” (Heb. 1:9). The same Jesus who commanded his followers not to hate but to “love your enemies” (Matt. 5:43–44) is also described as an “avenger” who will one day return to punish people for their sin (1 Thess. 4:6). Similarly, there is an appropriate way for followers of Jesus to demonstrate love for others while at the same time hating the sinful actions of others. Christ thus further commends the Ephesian church for demonstrating their orthodoxy by their hatred of the works of the Nicolaitans.

Who were the Nicolaitans, and what was the nature of their hate-inducing works? They are mentioned only twice in the Bible, both instances occurring here in Rev. 2. The present reference in v. 6 to “the works of the Nicolaitans” is cryptic, and the mention in 2:15 of “the teaching of the Nicolaitans” in the sermon to Pergamum is similarly obscure. Although Rev 2:6 offers no clues about the identity of this group, 2:14–15 connects the Nicolaitans with the behavior of Balaam, who caused Israel to eat food sacrificed to idols (the sin of idolatry) and to commit sexual immorality. The immediately following sermon to Thyatira refers to Jezebel, another infamous OT villain, who

likewise caused Israel to commit these same two sins (2:20–23; the order of these closely linked sins is reversed), so this text is also potentially relevant for understanding the identity of the Nicolaitans.

After the two references in the book of Revelation, Irenaeus contains the earliest mention of the Nicolaitans. He claims that they were followers of Nicolaus, one of the seven “deacons” of Acts 6:5, and that they led lives of “unrestrained indulgence” (*Against Heresies* 1.26.3). But Irenaeus describes their libertine lifestyle by citing the two sins mentioned in Rev. 2:14, which suggests that he did not have any additional information about the Nicolaitans beyond what is given in the Pergamum sermon. Other church fathers also make comments about the Nicolaitans (see Hilgenfeld 1963: 408–11), but their claims involve “a heavy mixture of legend and imagination” (Aune 1997: 149) and so are not much help in determining the identity of this heretical group that existed within the churches of Asia Minor.

Irenaeus elsewhere asserts that the Gospel of John was written to repudiate the error of Cerinthus and his Gnostic cosmology, adding that this error was held “a long time previously by those termed Nicolaitans, who are an offset of that ‘knowledge’ falsely so called” (*Against Heresies* 3.11.1, ANF 1:426). The “knowledge falsely so called” is an allusion to 1 Tim. 6:20 and refers originally to erroneous teachings in Ephesus, about which Paul was warning Timothy; yet Irenaeus attributes the same *gnōsis* or false knowledge to the Nicolaitans. The reference in the Thyatira sermon to “the so-called ‘deep secrets of Satan’” (2:24) may indicate a Gnostic background for the teaching of Jezebel and thus also of the Nicolaitans. These are some of the reasons why many modern scholars have concluded that the Nicolaitans were Gnostics (so, e.g., Harnack 1923; Schüssler Fiorenza 1973; Prigent 1977; Beasley-Murray 1978: 74).

But though Gnostic—or more precisely, proto-Gnostic thinking like that opposed in 1 and 2 John and the Pastoral Letters—is a possible characterization of the Nicolaitans, there is too little reliable information available to be certain about the teachings of this group (see the concerns raised by Hemer 1986: 93–94; Aune 1997: 148–49). Furthermore, a Gnostic theology is not necessary to explain what we can be certain about, which is their practices. The Pergamum sermon makes clear (2:14–15), as does the Thyatira sermon (2:20), that the Nicolaitans encouraged others to join them in two activities explicitly forbidden at the Jerusalem Council: eating food sacrificed to idols (the sin of idolatry) and committing sexual immorality (see Acts 15:20, 29). Their justification for doing such things likely involved reasoning similar to that of the Corinthians who engaged in the same two forbidden activities. They claimed that because there is only one true God and that all other so-called gods do not really exist, all who possess knowledge of these truths have a

right to participate in cultic meals with impunity (1 Cor. 8:1–11:1, esp. 8:4–6). About the Nicolaitans, Mounce (1977: 89) states, “Broadly speaking, they had worked out a compromise with the pagan society in which they lived.”

What must not be lost sight of in the debate over the precise identity of the Nicolaitans is that their actions were hated by the Ephesian church, and Jesus commends them for this hatred. In sharp contrast to some in the Pergamum church “who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans” (2:15) and others in the Thyatiran church “who tolerate that woman Jezebel” (2:20) and her Nicolaitan-like practices, the Ephesian church aggressively rejected the works of this heretical group, thereby providing further evidence of their passionate pursuit of orthodoxy.

The Complaint (2:4)

After commending a church for what it is doing right, Christ typically follows with a complaint that highlights what it is doing wrong. This shift from commendation to complaint is marked by the stereotyped phrase “But I have [this] against you” (*alla echō kata sou*). The complaint formula occurs in the first (Ephesus), third (Pergamum), and fourth (Thyatira) sermons (2:4, 14, 20) but is missing from the fifth (Sardis) and seventh (Laodicea) sermons because these latter two messages have no commendation with which the complaint contrasts; Christ simply proceeds directly to spelling out what grievances he has against these two churches. Similarly, the complaint formula is missing in the second (Smyrna) and sixth (Philadelphia) sermons, but in those cases it is because Christ has nothing to criticize about these two churches.

Christ’s lengthy commendation of the Ephesian church is followed by his brief but pointed complaint: “But I have this against you: you have abandoned the love you had at first” (2:4). The key exegetical issue concerns the object of this abandoned love: Has the Ephesian church abandoned its love for God and/or Christ or its love for fellow believers?

Several, mostly older commentators, choose the first of these two options. Tait (1884: 147), for example, asserts: “Now the Angel, as the representative of the Church at Ephesus, is reminded of the early devotion of that Church to God.” Walvoord (1966: 55) similarly concludes about the Ephesian congregation that “though they had not departed completely from the love for God, their love no longer had the fervency, depth, or meaning it once had had in the church.” Proponents of this view frequently appeal to the many years that had passed since the founding of the Ephesian church and how the subsequent generation of believers did not possess the same passion as

the original converts. Hendriksen (1940: 61) explains the historical situation as follows:

Thus it will be evident that the church at Ephesus was more than forty years old when Christ dictated this epistle. Another generation had arisen. The children did not experience that intense enthusiasm, that spontaneity and ardor which had been revealed by their parents when the latter first came into contact with the gospel. Not only this, but they lacked their former devotion to Christ. A similar condition occurred in Israel after the days of Joshua and the elders (Judg. 2:7, 10, 11). The church had departed from its first love.

Similar comments can be found in Thomas (1992: 141) and Kistemaker (2001: 115).

Some (Brighton 1999: 68n13) further argue that the reference to the “first” love recalls “the greatest and *first* commandment,” which is to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matt. 22:37–38).

Although the first option (loss of love for God and/or Christ) remains a possibility, there are compelling arguments in support of the second option (loss of love for others), leading us to conclude with a high degree of confidence that the actual problem in the Ephesian congregation was their lack of love for fellow church members.

First, there is the fulsome and strong character of the commendation (2:2–3, 6). It seems unlikely that Christ could so warmly praise the Ephesian church if it had lost its love for him or his Father. It also seems unlikely that the Ephesian church would have such strongly negative feelings toward wicked people—unable to put up with false apostles, hating the practices of the Nicolaitans—if it had abandoned its original devotion to God and/or Christ. Those whose love for God and/or Christ has waned are typically more tolerant or apathetic toward evil.

Second, the correction Christ offers (2:5a) seems more appropriate as an antidote to a lack of love for others than a lack of love for God and/or Christ. Although the first and second commands in the correction to “remember” and “repent” could fit either problem, the third command to “do the works you did at first” answers better the failure to love fellow believers. If the problem were failure to love God and/or Christ, the corrective command would more likely be something like “Believe in God!” or “Return to me!” The noun “works” earlier in the sermon (2:2) refers to the actions of the Ephesian believers toward other people rather than God, and the same object is likely in view here in the command to “do the works you did at first.”

Third, love for others is a theme stressed in Johannine writings. It is not in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, or Luke but only in John that we hear Jesus say: “A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34–35). The letter of 1 John repeatedly exhorts its readers to demonstrate love to fellow Christians, often doing so in strong language: “Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister” (1 John 4:20–21; also 2:9–11; 3:11–14; 4:16). The brevity of 2 John does not prevent this letter from affirming the same theme: “And now, dear lady, I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we love one another” (2 John 5). The equally brief letter of 3 John commends its recipient, Gaius, for his loving act of hospitality extended to faithful itinerant preachers: “Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers and sisters, even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love” (3 John 5–6a).

Fourth, the adjective “first” can refer either to time (“earlier, at first,” BDAG 892.1) or to rank (“foremost, most important,” BDAG 893.2). “Your first love,” then, has two possible meanings: (1) the love that the Ephesians had at an earlier time (“the love that you had at first”) or (2) the love that is most important, such as the Ephesians love for God and/or Jesus. The adjective “first” in the immediately following verse (2:5a, “Do the first things!”) almost certainly refers to time (“Do the works you did *at first*”; so virtually all translations) rather than rank (“Do the most important works!”), and the close connection between these two verses (“first works” paralleling “first love”) strongly suggests a temporal meaning for the adjective “first” in both places.

Fifth and most significantly, the specific content of the commendation—not merely its length and warm tone—supports the second option. We have noted several times how the commendation reveals the passion of the Ephesian church for the truth. While its commitment to orthodoxy is a virtue for which the Ephesian church is praised by Christ, it was also apparently a vice of this congregation. What is true of people can also be true of churches: their greatest strength can paradoxically become their greatest weakness. The Ephesian church was so preoccupied with identifying wicked people, exposing false apostles, and rejecting the sinful practices of the Nicolaitans that a spirit of suspicion and mistrust permeated their fellowship, making it impossible for them to be the caring, compassionate community that they had been in

the past. In short, they were a church of *loveless orthodoxy*. Caird (1966: 31) describes their situation like this:

The one charge against the Ephesians is that their intolerance of imposture, their unflagging loyalty, and their hatred of heresy had bred an inquisitorial spirit which left no room for love. They had set out to be defenders of the faith, arming themselves with the heroic virtues of truth and courage, only to discover that in the battle they had lost the one quality without which all others are worthless.

Ladd (1972: 39) identifies the problem in Ephesus in the same way:

The Lord had taught that mutual love was to be a hallmark of Christian fellowship (John 13:35). The Ephesian converts had known such a love in their early years; but their struggle with false teachers and their hatred of heretical teaching had apparently engendered hard feelings and harsh attitudes toward one another to such an extent that it amounted to a forsaking of the supreme Christian virtue of love. Doctrinal purity and loyalty can never be a substitute for love.

Love for fellow believers, of course, can never be completely disconnected from love for God. The intimate link between the vertical and horizontal dimensions of love is clear from the famous summary of the law (Matt. 22:37–39; Mark 12:29–31; Luke 10:27) and other key texts such as 1 John 4:20–21, cited above. Some commentators, therefore, argue that both dimensions of love are intended in Christ’s complaint against the Ephesian church. Michaels (1997: 71), for example, interprets this verse as referring to “their love toward God and their generosity toward each other. . . . Here as everywhere in the Bible, love for God and love for one another are inseparable.” Other exegetes similarly highlight both dimensions of love but rightly recognize that in this context love for others is primarily in view. Mounce (1977: 69–70) comments:

The Ephesian church had forsaken its first love. The expression includes both love of God and love of humanity at large, but here it seems to refer mainly to the love that the Ephesian converts had for one another (as in 2 John 5). . . . Love for other believers was the distinctive badge of Christian discipleship, but at Ephesus hatred of heresy and extensive involvement in the works appropriate to faith had allowed the first fresh glow of love for God and one another to fade.

Jesus warned his followers about a coming time involving a twofold danger: a time when “many false prophets will appear and deceive many people” and that “the love of most will grow cold” (Matt. 24:11–12). The Ephesian

church was commended for its faithful response to the first of these dangers but condemned for the way it fell victim to the second (Michaels 1997: 71). As important as orthodoxy may be to the overall mission of the church, it must never come at the expense of love for others.

The Correction (2:5a)

Christ does not merely rebuke the Ephesian church and then abandon them in their state of condemnation, leaving them to remedy their own sinful situation. Instead, he graciously provides a solution to their fundamental problem: “Therefore, remember from where you have fallen, repent, and do the works you did at first!” (2:5a)

The close connection between the correction and the complaint is signaled by the inferential particle “therefore” (*oun*): the three commands to “remember,” “repent,” and “do” all logically follow from the church’s problem of failing to love others as they had done in the past. The first command in this three-step recovery program is to “remember.” Remembering one’s past can be a particularly powerful agent of moral change. For example, when the prodigal son was so hungry that he longed to eat the food he was feeding the pigs, he remembered his former life of abundance at home and then “came to his senses” and returned home, repentant and prepared to ask for his father’s forgiveness (Luke 15:17–18). Paul, attempting the difficult task of unifying the church in Ephesus, which was seriously divided along ethnic lines over the issue of circumcision, commands his gentile readers to remember their former status: “At that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:11–12). Some forty years later the Ephesian church is again commanded to remember its past. This time the challenge comes from Christ, who urges them to recall the concrete acts of love—kindness, compassion, empathy—that once characterized their fellowship.

The interrogative adverbial clause that follows the command to remember is rendered by most translations as “*how far* you have fallen,” which highlights the great gap between the Ephesian church’s past demonstrations of love and their current state. Some commentators further exaggerate this gap with poetic overstatement: “Pure love resided on the cliff high above, as it were, and they [the Ephesian church] had fallen deep into the valley below” (Thomas 1992: 142; see also Robertson 1933: 6.299). But though there was a significant difference between the church’s past and present manifestations of mutual

love, the interrogative adverbial clause more simply means “*from where* you have fallen” (BDAG 838.1). The use of the rarer perfect tense stresses the current condition of the church: their production of works of love had fallen off in the past and was still very much a present reality.

The second command of the correction is to “repent.” This Greek verb (*metanoēō*) is made up of two parts and literally means “to change one’s mind.” In colloquial terms, it involves engaging in a mental U-turn—recognizing that one’s old way of thinking is wrong and that a new perspective is needed. For the Ephesian church, repentance means realizing that their passion for the truth, though commendable, must not come at the expense of their passion for loving others. The importance of repentance, despite the natural human reluctance to admit error, must not be downplayed, since a change in thinking logically leads to a change in conduct. The Ephesians will not act in more loving ways until they first recognize the error of their old way of thinking and the need for change. The indispensability of repentance for initiating change is reflected in the fact that every one of the five problematic or unhealthy churches is called upon to repent: Ephesus (2:5 [2×]), Pergamum (2:16), Thyatira (2:21 [2×], 22), Sardis (3:3), and Laodicea (3:19). The specific complaint in each church varies, but the correction is the same: Repent!

The Ephesians’ change in thinking ought to lead naturally to a change in conduct, and so the third command of the correction not surprisingly reads, “Do the works you did at first!” The fact that the climax of the three-step recovery program involves a call to “do” rather than “believe” or some other relational verb reinforces the conclusion that the complaint involves primarily a lack of love for others rather than a lack of love for God and/or Christ, even though these two aspects of love must not be too sharply distinguished. The Greek text places the direct object at the head of the sentence to stress the “first works” that the Ephesian church must do. The believers in Ephesus need to put love into action and demonstrate the kind of compassion and care for others that originally characterized their communal life and fellowship.

The Consequence (2:5b, 7b)

Each sermon closes with Christ spelling out the potential consequences that the church faces for its behavior. There are always two consequences: the first is normally negative, what punishment will ensue if the church fails to follow Christ’s correction, and the second is always positive, what reward awaits the church if it repents and with Christ’s help conquers its particular sin(s).

Negative Consequence (2:5b)

The negative consequence is presented as two conditional (if-then) clauses, with the second of the two appearing in reverse order, forming a chiasm:

- A But if not, (protasis)
- B I am coming to you (apodosis)
- B' and will remove your lampstand from its place (apodosis)
- A' if you do not repent. (protasis)

The payoff for recognizing this literary pattern is that the chiasm provides a clear answer to what verb is omitted and thus implied in the opening elliptical formula “But if not.” This idiom, common in both Classical Greek and the NT, introduces an alternative possibility to something just said (BDF §376; BDAG 278.6, s.v. *ei*) and so could potentially refer to all three commands (remember, repent, and do) from the preceding correction. With its balancing clause (A’), however, the chiasm shows that it is the second of these three actions (repent) that is implied in the opening clause (A). The Pergamum sermon confirms this interpretation because its correction “Therefore repent!” is likewise immediately followed by the same elliptical formula “But if not” (2:16). Further corroboration is found in the Thyatira sermon, where the negative consequence is similarly stated as “If they do not repent” (2:22). The double reference to repentance in both the correction and the consequence (a triple reference, if one includes the implied verb) of 2:5a and 2:5b provides additional grounds for our assertion about the indispensability of repentance for correcting sinful conduct.

There are two key questions concerning the negative consequence: (1) What is the nature of the judgment threatened against the Ephesian church, and (2) what is the timing of that judgment?

THE NATURE OF THE THREATENED JUDGMENT

The first question deals with whether Christ’s warning (“I will remove your lampstand from its place”) refers to the destruction, loss of witness, or movement of the Ephesian church. In the opening chapter of Revelation, the seven lampstands are said to represent the seven churches (1:20), which leads most commentators to understand the removal of the lampstand as referring to the *destruction* of the Ephesian church. Beasley-Murray (1978: 75) states, “The bluntness of the words must be allowed full force; . . . that will mean the end of its existence as a church of Christ.” Aune (1997: 75) similarly affirms, “This is nothing less than a threat to obliterate the Ephesian congregation as an empirical Christian community.”

The book of Revelation later describes the two witnesses who will prophesy for 1,260 days as “the two lampstands” (11:4). This, along with the metaphor of a lampstand casting the light of testimony (Mark 4:21; Luke 8:16), has caused a few exegetes to argue that the negative consequence here for the Ephesian church is their *loss of witness* to the nations (Beale and Campbell 2015: 56; see also A. Johnson 1981: 434–35; Thomas 1992: 146–47). The destruction of the Ephesian church would obviously also result in the loss of their witness, but the evangelistic task of this congregation is not mentioned anywhere in the immediate context.

An alternative interpretation highlights the literal meaning of the verb *kineō* (2:5), which refers not to destruction but to *movement*: “to cause something to be moved from its customary or established place, *move away, remove*” (BDAG 545.1). This view was championed over a century ago by Ramsay (1904: 169–71, 184–86; 1994: 176–78), who argued that the background for this judgment against the Ephesian church was the three times this famous city and its strategic harbor had to relocate. Silting in the Cayster River was a constant problem for shipping, requiring the city’s frequent relocation and leading ultimately to its abandonment. After reviewing this history of locational change, Ramsay (1994: 178) concludes:

A threat of removing the church from its place would be inevitably understood by the Ephesians as a denunciation of another change in the site of the city, and must have been so intended by the writer. Ephesus and its church should be taken up, and moved away to a new spot, where it might begin afresh on a new career with a better spirit.

Others similarly appeal to the city’s frequent locational changes but come to a more metaphorical interpretation of the threat to the Ephesian church. Hemer (1986: 53) argues, “The danger was that the great harbor-city and its vigorous church would be moved back under the deadening power of the [Artemis] temple.” Wilson (2002: 262) asserts: “A less harsh, and perhaps better, reading is that Christ will move the Ephesian lampstand from its leadership position as an apostolic church among the Asian churches and pass its authority along to another congregation.”

This softer judgment appeals to modern sensitivities, but it exaggerates the importance of the city’s changes in location for citizens living at the end of the first century AD. The last major “movement” of Ephesus had been almost four hundred years earlier, under Alexander the Great’s general Lysimachus, who relocated the city a short distance from one side of Mount Pion to the other. Even though the harbor continued to face the threat of silting in

this new location, requiring dredging operations and other ultimately futile solutions, the location of this important port did not change during the late Hellenistic and Roman periods. Furthermore, the “movement” interpretation is undermined by Ramsay himself, who concedes that although the threat to “remove your lampstand from its place” was “natural and plain” in meaning to the Ephesians, “no other of the seven cities would have found those words so clear and significant” (1994: 178). Also, the verb *kineō* can have the meaning of eradication or destruction, as seen in Josephus’s use of this word to describe critics of the Jewish faith who try to pressure Jews not to “move” their laws but to “remove” them (*Against Apion* 2.272). Finally, as R. H. Charles (1920: 52) observed a century ago: “That the threat in our text implies not degradation nor removal of the Church to another place, but destruction, seems obvious.”

Though a severe judgment, Christ’s destruction of the Ephesian church is no harsher than judgments found elsewhere in this sermon (e.g., his hatred of the works of the Nicolaitans) and in the messages to the other four unhealthy churches: he will make war against some in Pergamum with the sword of his mouth, will strike dead the children of Jezebel in Thyatira, declares the church in Sardis dead, and will vomit out the church in Laodicea. Instead of being offended at such a strong judgment, modern hearers should be sobered by this powerful reminder of the importance Christ places on the command to love others. If “the punishment fits the crime,” then the potential destruction of the Ephesian church reveals how crucial it is for the body of Christ to be characterized by mutual love.

THE TIMING OF THE THREATENED JUDGMENT

We turn now to the second question raised by the threatened negative consequence, which asks how Christ’s opening statement “I am coming to you” sheds light on the timing of his judgment against the Ephesian church. Does this refer to the parousia—the second coming of Christ at the end of time in order to inaugurate the final judgment of all people—or to an earlier, special coming of Christ to execute a preliminary judgment on the Ephesian church alone? Since virtually every sermon refers to the coming of Christ (2:5, 16, 25; 3:3, 11, 20), most often to punish a wayward church rather than to comfort a faithful one, this same question of timing is relevant for subsequent sermons as well. A compelling case for either position can be made, so it is not surprising that scholarly opinion is evenly divided, with a slight preference for a special coming of Christ distinct from his final parousia (so, e.g., Charles 1920: 52; Lenski 1935: 90; Caird 1966: 32; Ladd 1972: 39–40; Mounce

1977: 89; Beasley-Murray 1978: 75; Kistemaker 2001: 116; Beale and Campbell 2015: 56–57). In this debate, we should remember the important observation of Osborne (2002: 118): “Scholars often find too great a dichotomy between present and future judgment in the book. There is an inaugurated force in passages such as this one. Christ’s coming in judgment in the present is a harbinger of his final coming. In this context, Christ’s displeasure will be felt both in the present and at the final judgment.”

Positive Consequence (2:7b)

Each sermon ends not with a negative tone of judgment but a positive note of victory, always expressed with the key verb *nikaō*, “to win in the face of obstacles, *be victor, conquer, overcome, prevail*” (BDAG 673.1). This word is important in John’s writings, occurring some twenty-four times (Rev. 2:7b, 11b, 17b, 26a; 3:5, 12, 21 [2×]; 5:5; 6:2 [2×]; 11:7; 12:11; 13:7; 15:2; 17:14; 21:7; 1 John 2:13, 14; 4:4; 5:4 [2×], 5; John 16:33), with only four instances in the rest of the NT. This pattern of usage caused Swete (1911: 29) to observe, “The note of victory is dominant in St. John, as that of faith in St. Paul.” The word “victory” (*nikē/nikaō*) is actually equated with “faith” (*pistis/pisteuō*) in 1 John 5:4–5: “And this is the *victory* that *conquers* the world—our *faith*. Who is the *victor* over the world but the one who *believes* that Jesus is the Son of God?” The description in Rev. 2:7b of “the one who is victorious,” therefore, does not refer to a special class of Christians such as martyrs, believers who end up losing their life for following Jesus (so several commentators: e.g., Charles 1920: 54; Mounce 1977: 33; Harrington 1993: 57). Rather, it refers to all true Christians, not just those in Ephesus and in the other churches of Asia Minor. The plural in 2:7a makes this clear: this is what “the Spirit is saying to the churches.”

Nikaō can function as a metaphor for either athletic contests or military conflicts, and a form of the word is the name of the female deity “Nike,” the goddess of victory, whose image is found widely in the ancient world. She is always portrayed holding a palm branch in one hand and having wings, which allow her to fly anywhere and give to the victorious athlete or conquering general the victory wreath, which she holds in her other outstretched hand (see fig. 1.3).

Although athletic contests were extremely popular in the ancient world, including in Asia Minor, the larger context of Revelation suggests that the military aspect is being evoked here (so also Aune 1997: 151; Osborne 2002: 122). The rest of the book depicts several battle scenes: the dragon against the child of the woman, two beasts out of the earth and sea against the Lamb, and



Figure 1.3. Marble relief of Nike, the winged goddess of victory, holding a wreath in her outstretched hand. Ephesus.

Babylon against the heavenly warrior. The struggle in the Ephesian church with the sin of loveless orthodoxy is but one manifestation of this larger spiritual battle. Charles (1920: 53) notes: “The word *nikaō* implies that the Christian life is a warfare from which there is no discharge.” But though the metaphor of a military battle is sobering for the believers in Ephesus, they can be encouraged by the knowledge that they can emerge from this fight victorious.

Yet this victory is not so much something the Ephesian readers will accomplish as it is something Christ will graciously give them. This idea of victory as divine gift rather than human achievement is conveyed in two ways. First, it is explicitly stated in the phrase “I will give to that person.” The victory that the Ephesians will ultimately enjoy is not the result of their giftedness or effort but of Christ’s generosity. About “the one who is victorious,” Lenski (1935: 95) rightly observes, “We may say that this reward is won by him, yet not as the spoils of victory from the enemy, but as a gift from the Lord, a gift of the Lord’s abounding grace.” Second, this idea is also implicitly conveyed by the subtle but significant difference between the “victory formula” found here in the sermon to the Ephesians and that found in the sermon to the Laodiceans. Although all seven messages refer to “the one who is victorious,” only the final message includes the important addition “just as I was victorious” (3:21). In other words, the believer’s victory is ultimately due not to one’s own talents

or persistence but to Christ's previous victory. It is only by virtue of their relationship to Christ and his empowering Spirit that believers can overcome sin and be victorious.

The reward that Christ will give to his victorious followers is "to eat from the tree of life." The OT background to the imagery evoked here would have been easily understood by the original hearers. It refers to one of the two special trees that God planted in the garden of Eden: the "tree of life" and the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen. 2:9). Adam and Eve were permitted to eat fruit from the first tree but not from the second (Gen. 2:16–17). After they disobeyed God by eating fruit from the second tree, they were prohibited from eating any fruit from the first tree. God drove Adam and Eve out of the garden and placed angels and a flaming sword at its entrance to prevent them from eating from the tree of life and obtaining immortality (Gen. 3:24). In Jewish apocalyptic writings, the tree of life became a common symbol of the blessedness of eternal life given to God's people (1 En. 24.3–25.6; 2 En. 8.3; 2 Esd. [4 Ezra] 2:12; 8:50–52; T. Levi 18.9–11; T. Dan 5.12; 3 En. 23.18; Apoc. Elijah 5.6). This is what the tree of life represents at the end of the book of Revelation, where it is mentioned three times as part of the description of the new heaven and new earth (Rev. 22:2, 14, 19). Eating from the tree of life, therefore, represents more than having everlasting life; it represents participation forever in the blessedness of the end time when God and humankind and the whole creation again experience the perfect fellowship and peace that existed before the fall.

There is also a pagan background to the imagery of the tree of life that, though secondary, makes the text even more relevant to its Ephesian readers. The tree of life likely functions as a polemic against the local Artemis cult, which originally involved a tree shrine (see esp. Hemer 1986: 41–47). Before a temple was erected in honor of the goddess, the religious site was marked by a sacred tree. Callimachus (ca. 300–240 BC), a writer and librarian at Alexandria, describes how the Amazons set up an image to Artemis and worshiped her under an oak tree (*Hymn to Artemis* 237–39). Dionysius Periegetes, author of a 1,200-line poetical description of the then-known world that is variously dated between the second century BC and the second century AD, similarly refers to how the Amazons built a temple to Artemis at a site formerly marked by an elm tree (*Description of the Inhabited Earth*, lines 825–829). It is also significant that a date palm—along with a bee and a stag, other typical emblems of the goddess—appears on many coins from the pre-Roman period as a characteristic symbol of Ephesus and its patron deity Artemis (see fig. 1.4).

There is a strong likelihood, therefore, that the tree of life was intended to contrast sharply with the Artemis cult and so functioned as a reward that was

particularly relevant to the Ephesian church (so also Osborne 2002: 124). In the other sermons, the positive consequence is closely linked to the specific, local situation of the church, making it likely that this is also true here for Ephesus. For example, the crown of life is a fitting reward for those in Smyrna who face death, and manna is an appropriate reward

for those in Pergamum who resist the temptation to eat meat sacrificed to idols. Beale (1999: 236) is correct but too tentative when he states, “Perhaps the OT tree of life was chosen as emblematic of Christian reward because a tree image was long associated either with the goddess Artemis or with Ephesus, where the great Artemis temple flourished. What paganism promised only Christianity as the fulfillment of OT hopes could deliver.”

The final words of the sermon identify the location of the tree of life as “the paradise of God.” As was true of the tree-of-life image, here too the OT background is primary, with possibly a secondary pagan background. The word “paradise” is the term used in the Septuagint to refer to the garden of Eden. So this reference, like the tree of life, evokes a reversal of the fall and a restoration of the blessedness that originally characterized the life Adam and Eve enjoyed in the garden. And like the tree of life, the reference to “the paradise of God” may also serve a polemical function against the local Artemis cult. In the city of Ephesus, the goddess was first worshiped around a tree shrine and then later at that same spot in a temple, but she was also worshiped at a grove or garden near Ephesus called Ortygia, which was believed to be the spot where Artemis was born. This sacred grove or garden of Ortygia was called a “paradise.” Not just Ephesians but people elsewhere in the ancient world were familiar with this sacred grove as the birthplace of Artemis. In the first century AD, an annual festival with great pageantry was held here to honor the goddess, and the site drew pilgrims throughout the year (Strabo, *Geography* 14.1.20). So the relative clause “which is in the paradise of God” may be intended to intensify and sharpen the contrast with the Artemis cult initiated by the reference to the tree of life. Modern readers inclined to question any local allusion to the city’s patron goddess must remember that “Artemis permeated the consciousness of the Ephesians to the point that it was a rock-bottom element in their collective and individual identities” (Murphy-O’Connor 2008: 16). After noting the possible allusion to the sacred



Figure 1.4. Tetradrachm coin from Ephesus (390–380 BC) bearing symbols of Artemis: bee, palm tree, and stag.

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grove of Artemis, Wilson (2002: 263) spells out the positive consequence for the Ephesian readers: “The paradise available to the worshippers of Artemis paled in comparison to the coming paradise of God.”

The Contemporary Significance

Introduction

“Too much of a good thing.” This well-known saying suggests that some things in life that are typically good can become not so good when taken to excess. For example, exercise is a good thing, and we should generally encourage each other to do it more. But if you overdo it and end up pulling a muscle or damaging some part of your body, exercise becomes not a good thing. Likewise, dessert is a good thing. In fact, some of us think that it’s the best part of any meal! But if you eat too much dessert, it becomes not a good thing, and you have to think more seriously about doing the first good thing we mentioned—exercising!

The saying “Too much of a good thing” is a helpful way to think about the sermon to the Ephesians. The church in Ephesus is doing a good thing: they are commended for their *orthodoxy*. Don’t be intimidated by this big word. “Orthodoxy” simply means “right belief” or “true teaching.” Christ commends the Ephesian congregation for maintaining its orthodoxy in the face of false teachers with their misleading ideas and sinful actions. But the church became so obsessed with orthodoxy and so worried about the danger of false teachers negatively influencing their congregation that a climate of suspicion permeated their Christian community, and they were not able to be the loving church that they had been at first. And so in our message for today, I introduce you to the church of Ephesus, or as it can justly be called, “the church of loveless orthodoxy.”

The Christ Title (2:1b)

If you compare all seven sermons side by side, it quickly becomes clear that they all follow the same structure or outline. The first item in each of the sermons is the Christ title. Before Jesus says anything to the church through John, there is first given to him a title. In fact, two titles are typically given to him. These titles are drawn from

the vision of Christ given in the opening chapter of the book of Revelation (1:9–20). John reaches back to the earlier vision of Christ in chapter 1 and carefully selects two titles to describe Christ, titles with special relevance to the church being addressed.

The sermon to the Ephesian church starts off in an expected way with two Christ titles, the first of which goes like this: “These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand” (2:1b). If you lived in Ephesus or in any city in the first century AD and heard these words, you would recognize a claim to Christ’s *power*. This claim to power would be understood from the fact that in the earlier vision, Christ simply “has” (1:16) the seven stars in his right hand, whereas here in the sermon to Ephesus Christ “holds” the seven stars in his right hand. What’s the difference between “having” something and “holding” it? Actually, there is an important difference, since in the Greek language the verb “to hold” something means that you don’t merely have it but you also control it and thus have power over it.

Jesus’s power is further revealed by the fact that he holds the seven stars very specifically “in his right hand.” Most of us are right-handed. Given a choice of which hand to use, we automatically choose our right hand, and as a result our right hand becomes stronger than our left. The Bible repeatedly refers to God’s right hand to stress his power, and that’s what is happening here in this reference to Christ’s right hand.

Another way in which the first Christ title stresses his power involves a polemic against Rome and its power. For the original audience, the reference to Christ holding the seven stars would have brought to mind the image of seven stars that often appeared on Roman coins. The Roman emperors put an image of their face on one side of a coin and the image of seven stars on the other side. They wanted people to believe that they were demigods, men who were partly human but also partly divine, men whose power was so great that they could control the seven stars. If you lived in Ephesus or any other city within the Roman Empire in the first century, these coins signaled that Rome and its leaders were all-powerful, not only on earth but also in the heavens.

One day, however, a messenger arrives at the Ephesian church with a sermon from Jesus Christ given to John on the island of Patmos. Before he shares the sermon, however, he first describes Jesus as the one who doesn’t merely “have” the seven stars but rather “holds” them in his powerful right hand. Jesus is the one whose power is greater than Rome’s, the one who is all-powerful, not just on earth but also in the heavens. The Christ followers in ancient Ephesus as well as Christ followers today should pay careful attention to what their all-powerful Savior is about to say!

The second Christ title further identifies the one who is about to speak as “the one who walks in the middle of the seven golden lampstands.” While the first title emphasizes Christ’s *power*, the second title emphasizes Christ’s *presence*. The earlier vision of Christ in chapter 1 makes clear that the seven lampstands are the seven churches (1:20). Thus the second Christ title portrays Jesus as being intimately

present as he walks among the various churches in Asia Minor. Although Jesus is so powerful that he controls things not just on earth but also in the heavens, and although his power is greater than that of Rome and its emperors, he is not a distant and remote ruler. Quite the opposite: Jesus is very near his churches and present in their midst.

However, this presence is both comforting and challenging. On the one hand, it is comforting to the Ephesian believers and to us today to know that we are not alone but that the all-powerful Jesus Christ is present and *watches over us*. Jesus knows what we are going through; he knows our worries and fears. This is comforting! On the other hand, it is challenging to the Ephesian believers and to us today to know that the all-powerful Jesus Christ is present and *watches us*. Jesus knows our true spiritual condition, the ways in which we fail to live properly as his followers, especially the ways in which we “have abandoned the love we had at first.” This is challenging!

The Commendation (2:2–3, 6)

The second item typically found in each of the seven sermons is the commendation. Long before the saying ever became popular, Jesus apparently knew the adage “if you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all!” Jesus typically begins each sermon with something nice to say: he commends each church for what it is doing right.

What are the Christians in Ephesus doing right? What does Jesus commend them for? The short answer is that Jesus commends them for their *orthodoxy*. Jesus gives a thumbs-up to the Ephesian church when he says: “I love your passion for defending the truth, for rejecting the false teachings of wicked people, for exposing false apostles, and for hating the sinful practices of the Nicolaitans. Great job, Ephesian church!”

The main commendation is found in verses 2–3. The Ephesian church’s passion for the truth is seen first of all in Christ’s statement “You are not able to tolerate wicked people.” Almost every church today has one or two members who live questionable lives and whom the church nevertheless tolerates. Because these questionable members typically don’t come to the services every week and, when they do come, usually leave immediately after the service is over, it is often easier for a church simply to put up with such folks. But that’s not how the Ephesian church handled this situation. This very conservative church took orthodoxy so seriously that it was “not able to tolerate wicked people.”

Second, the Christians in Ephesus passionately guarded the truth by testing “those who call themselves apostles.” Most churches today are so excited about anyone wanting to join their congregation that they eagerly and quickly welcome them as members. And if the person who wants to join is someone important, the congregation is usually even more eager to welcome them. But this was not the case in the

Ephesian church. Even when important Christian leaders claiming to be apostles visited them, the Ephesian church's first reaction was not to welcome them but to interrogate them. They said, "We have a few theological questions that we want you to answer first, and only if you pass our orthodox test will we let you be part of our fellowship."

Third, the Ephesian church's passionate defense of the truth is evident in an additional commendation that Christ gives them later in the sermon. In verse 6 Jesus says, "But you have this in your favor: you hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." It is not easy to determine with certainty who the Nicolaitans are and the nature of their practices. The little evidence we have suggests that they are "compromisers"—a group within the church that compromised the faith by engaging in pagan practices forbidden by Christ. The conservative Ephesian church, focused on orthodoxy, did not find the compromising theology of the Nicolaitans convincing and reacted very negatively to what they were doing. Our text clearly states that the Ephesian believers hate the practices of the Nicolaitans.

We contemporary Christ followers may wince at the strong language of "hate" and be uncomfortable at the Ephesian church's seemingly intolerant response. But we must not miss the fact that Christ is not rebuking the Ephesian congregation for this kind of hatred but is commending them! Orthodoxy, after all, is a good thing. Defending the truth rather than merely accepting what others, even leaders, are saying, putting their claims to the test, and guarding against false teaching that leads to sinful practices—this continues to be important to the mission of the church today.

The Complaint (2:4)

The third item that typically occurs in the outline of each sermon is the complaint. After commending a church for what it is doing right, Jesus normally follows with a complaint that spells out what they are doing wrong. In the sermon to Ephesus, the rather long and fulsome commendation is followed with a complaint that is short and not very sweet: "But I have this against you: you have abandoned the love you had at first" (2:4).

One possible way to interpret this verse is to see it as referring to the church's failure to love God and/or Christ. According to this view, the Ephesian church's current love for God and/or Christ was not as strong or deep as it had been in the past. Because this congregation was now forty to fifty years old, and the first generation of Christ followers had died and others had taken their place, some argue that their love for God and/or Christ was not as intense or enthusiastic as it had been when the congregation was founded.

Although this interpretation of the complaint is *possible*, it is not *probable*. In fact, several pieces of evidence suggest that the complaint deals with the Ephesian

church's lack of love for one another: they have failed to be the loving, caring, and supportive community they were previously.

The first piece of evidence is that love for others is a theme stressed in the other writings attributed to the apostle John and thus is likely to be found also here in the sermon to Ephesus. It is not in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, or Luke but only in John that we hear Jesus say: "A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34–35). The letter of 1 John repeatedly exhorts its readers to demonstrate love to fellow Christians, often doing so in strong language: "Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister" (1 John 4:20–21; also 2:9–11; 3:11–14; 4:16). And both 2 John and 3 John, despite their short length, nevertheless also stress the importance of loving fellow brothers and sisters (2 John 5; 3 John 5–6).

The second and weightier piece of evidence is the especially long and fulsome character of the commendation (Rev. 2:2–3, 6). It is hard to believe that Christ would so warmly praise the Ephesian church if it had lost its love for God and/or Christ. It also seems unlikely that the Ephesian church would have such strong negative feelings toward wicked people or false apostles or the Nicolaitans if it had abandoned its devotion to God and/or Christ. As the intensity of a church's love for God and/or Christ begins to fade, the church generally grows more tolerant of those with whom it formerly disagreed or becomes more apathetic about them.

The third and final piece of evidence indicating that Christ is complaining about the Ephesian church's loss of love for others is the most important. We have already seen how the commendation reveals this congregation's concern for orthodoxy—its passion for defending the truth and its intolerance of wicked people and their sinful practices. But while orthodoxy is a good thing for which Christ commends the believers in Ephesus, "too much of a good thing" is not a good thing and can also be the reason why Christ criticizes the believers in Ephesus. What is true of people can also be true of congregations: their greatest strength can paradoxically become their greatest weakness. The Ephesian church was so preoccupied with identifying wicked people, exposing false apostles, and rejecting the sinful practices of the Nicolaitans that a spirit of suspicion and mistrust permeated their fellowship, making it impossible for them to be the caring, compassionate community they had been in the past. As our sermon title succinctly puts it, they were "the church of loveless orthodoxy."

Of course, love for fellow believers can never be completely disconnected from love for God and/or Christ. Our love for others is a natural consequence of our love

for God and Christ, an expression of our gratitude for what God has done for us. But the emphasis in the sermon to Ephesus is on love for others—not the vertical dimension of our love for God and/or Christ but the horizontal dimension of our love for those around us, especially our spiritual brothers and sisters.

During his earthly ministry, Jesus warned about a coming time when his followers would face two dangers: first, “many false prophets will appear and deceive many people,” and second, “the love of most will grow cold” (Matt. 24:11–12). Now many years later, Jesus commends the Ephesian congregation for how they are responding to the first of these dangers but also condemns them for how they are responding to the second of these dangers. As important as orthodoxy is to the overall mission of a church, it must never come at the expense of love for others.

The Correction (2:5a)

The fourth item found in the outline of each sermon is the correction. Christ does not rebuke a church for what they are doing wrong and then leave them to figure out how to fix their sinful situation on their own. Instead, he graciously provides a solution to his followers’ spiritual problem. In the sermon to Ephesus, Christ’s gracious correction goes like this: “Therefore, remember from where you have fallen, repent, and do the works you did at first!” (2:5a).

The first step in Christ’s three-step recovery program is to “remember.” Remembering something from the past can change how we act in the present. This can be seen in the well-known parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32). After partying hard and ultimately losing all his money and friends, the prodigal son finds himself so hungry that he is ready to eat pigs’ food, but then his memory kicks in. He remembers the steak-and-caviar meals of his earlier life, the comfort of his home, and most of all, the love of his father. Because of these memories from his past, the son’s actions in the present change. The Ephesian church similarly needs to have their memories kick in: they need to remember the concrete acts of love—the kindness, compassion, and empathy—that characterized their life together in the past and make sure that these same acts of love are evident in their life going forward.

The second step in their recovery program is to “repent.” None of us likes to be told to repent because it implies that we have been doing something wrong. But if we don’t first recognize how we are failing to love others truly and fully, then we will never live differently.

The third step is to “do.” Christ commands “Do the works you did at first!” It isn’t enough for the believers in Ephesus or for believers today merely to piously affirm the importance of love. No, Christ commands us to “do”—to put love into action and demonstrate in clear and tangible ways our compassion for others.

The Consequence (2:5b, 7b)

After the Christ title, the commendation, the complaint, and the correction, each sermon closes with the potential consequences that the church faces. There are always two consequences: the first is normally negative—what punishment the church faces if they fail to repent and follow Christ’s correction; the second is always positive—what reward awaits the church if they repent and conquer their particular sin with Christ’s help.

Negative Consequence (2:5b)

The negative consequence comes first and in the sermon to Ephesus goes like this: “But if not, I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand from its place, if you do not repent” (2:5b). In chapter 1 it is clearly stated that “the seven lampstands are the seven churches” (1:20). So when Jesus warns the Ephesians that he may remove their lampstand, it means that he may remove their church—that is, the church will die off and disappear. The reaction that most of us have to that negative consequence is “That’s harsh!” And it is indeed a harsh punishment. But if the punishment fits the crime, then it reflects the importance Jesus attaches to love as the defining characteristic of his followers. We are not only to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength but also to love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves. The continued existence of our church depends on our loving one another.

Positive Consequence (2:7b)

Thankfully, each sermon ends not with a negative tone of judgment but with a positive note of victory. The sermon to Ephesus thus comes to a close with this positive consequence: “To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (2:7b). The Greek verb for “victorious” here is a form of the word *nikē*, like the sporting goods company. Nike chose their name so that we would associate their products with victory, with winning, overcoming, and conquering. This same Greek verb is used at the end of each of the seven sermons, “To the one who is victorious [*nikōnti*].”

The important question that our text raises is this: “Are you a Nike Christian? In other words, are you a victorious Christian? Are you and I together as a church able to overcome the sin of loveless orthodoxy and be the caring, compassionate community that Christ has called us to be?” The good news of the gospel is that the answer to this important question can be a resounding “Yes!” You and I can be Nike Christians and win the victory over our sin—not because we are so talented or so hardworking but because Christ has already won the victory, and we who belong to Christ have

his Spirit living in us. This divine Holy Spirit gives us the power to be loving Christians and to be a loving church.

What reward does Christ promise Nike Christians? Christ says that he will graciously give us “the right to eat from the tree of life.” The book of Revelation, including the seven sermons in chapters 2–3, is saturated with allusions to the OT, and here we meet a clear reference to the Genesis story about the garden of Eden. God planted two special trees in the middle of that garden: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:9). After Adam and Eve disobeyed God by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they were driven out of the garden of Eden and prevented from eating from the tree of life. Fallen humanity continues to be prevented from eating from the tree of life until a special time in the future described at the very end of the book of Revelation, a time when Christ will return and establish a new heaven and new earth (Rev. 21:1; 22:1–2, 14, 19). The promise that the Ephesians will eat from the tree of life, therefore, offers a wonderful prospect for the future—a blessed time when Christ followers will enjoy the kind of paradise-like life that is barely imaginable now, a time when we will have perfect fellowship not only with God and Christ but also with each other in a new or restored creation.

The promise of eating from the tree of life would have been especially meaningful for the Ephesian Christians because it appears to allude to the local pagan cult of Artemis. Artemis was the patron goddess of the city of Ephesus, and worshipers from all over the world brought sacrifices to her famous temple in Ephesus. The Artemis temple was an architectural masterpiece, four times larger than the Parthenon in Athens, and considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The citizens of Ephesus were so passionate in their devotion to Artemis that one day they sat in the city’s 24,000-seat theater, shouting for two full hours: “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” (Acts 19:28). Many in that day believed that Artemis’s temple was built on the exact spot where she had previously been worshiped around a sacred tree. People told stories of how worshipers originally honored Artemis at a tree shrine in this location. Old coins from Ephesus often depicted Artemis standing beside her holy tree and accompanied by a deer. The Ephesian Christians will be rewarded with access to a special tree—not the tree of the city’s patron goddess, Artemis, but the tree of life of the one and only true God.

Conclusion

A thermometer can tell us whether we are *physically* healthy or sick, but how can we tell whether we are *spiritually* healthy or sick? Particularly, how can we determine the spiritual health of our local church? One effective measurement is the “truth test.” If we are consistently learning the truth revealed in God’s Word and are concerned about speaking the truth, teaching the truth, and defending the truth, it is a sign that

we are spiritually healthy. Concern for the truth, for orthodoxy, is a good thing. It is an especially good thing because we live in a society saturated with untruth. The messages our culture gives us about what is important and where we should invest our time and effort are often false. In such a context, orthodoxy is a good thing. Christ commends the Ephesian church for its orthodoxy, and he is likewise calling us today to be passionate about the truth.

But “too much of a good thing” is not a good thing. There is the danger that our passion for the truth may come at the expense of our passion for loving others. And so there is a second way to determine whether we are spiritually healthy or sick, the “love test.” Do we exhibit a pattern of loving those around us? Do we listen empathetically as others describe the hurt and pain in their life and then try to minister to them in their time of need? Is our congregation a caring and compassionate community? Do we readily accept repentant sinners and warmly welcome them fully into the fellowship of the church? Christ challenges the Ephesian church to be the loving community it had been in the past, and he is also calling us today to be passionate about demonstrating love toward others.

“Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches!”—not only to the ancient church of Ephesus but also to the church of Jesus Christ today.