

# Have We Lost Our First Love?

***Years in the Faith can take an Inevitable Toll if we are not Careful.  
Even those who Comprised the First Century Church were not Exceptions!  
What Admonition should Christians take from Christ's Assessment of Ephesus?***

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*“Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks;*

*[2] I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars:*

*[3] And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted.*

*[4] Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because **thou hast left thy first love.***

*[5] Remember therefore from whence thou art **fallen**, and repent, and do the **first works**; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.*

*[6] But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.*

*[7] He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.” (KJV)*

Seven very insightful verses from the second chapter of the book of Revelation explain to us that the first century Church of God, despite the benefit of direct contact with God's original Apostles, Prophets and Evangelists, even with those who had personal interactions with Jesus, could and did relax their first love! And, it affected their works!

What isn't fully understood is exactly what that loss was. We tend to deduce, based more on our current situation, that it was primarily a devotional erosion. But can we discern from the texts what the condition in fact was? What aspect of love was it that they had become deficient in? Was it just their emotional regard for their Savior, or did it reflect itself in more practical ways?

We can see from what Jesus said to them in His introductory comments that their devotion as evident in their works, labor and patience without fainting were, to this point at least, exemplary. So, if they were being complemented in these respects, what would, in the same breath, warrant the negative assessment that they had 'fallen' in one important area? Is love exhibited in their works?

## **What Kind of Love?**

Let's consider the possibilities. Was it in their emotion? Was it in their devotion? Was it in their expression of Faith? Was it in their hold on Doctrine, the True Faith? In what area were they so deficient that their 'candlestick', their spiritual legitimacy as the Church of God, was at risk?

In verses 2 and 3 we see their history generously commended. Verse 5 exhorts them to consider their 'first works'. Verse 6 again commends them for hating the Nicolaitan deeds, which He also hates. When we consider their "works, labor, patience and perseverance" (not fainting under duress), we are given generalities that we can't specifically identify with regard to answering the questions in the previous paragraphs. However, He is quite specific in two areas of this passage.

Connected with the commendation in verse 2 is their carefulness in evaluating the apostles with whom they came into contact. They 'tried' those apostles, and found some of them to be imposters! No doubt, they didn't keep their findings secret! This is one of the things the early Church was known for. They also evaluated people that they determined were 'evil' and didn't 'bear' them. In other words, they realized their detriment to the fellowship, and, we can assume, dis-fellowshipped them when it was prudent to do so. That action on the part of the members may seem inappropriate in

our time, but we will consider the propriety of this action in a later paragraph.

Now, we shouldn't assume that with those who didn't 'measure up' that the Church's approach was only exclusionary. It wasn't that they were in the business of throwing them out at the drop of a hat. No, in keeping with other scriptures and clear admonitions of Paul and others, they no doubt would have exhorted their brethren first, to the extent that they could. Only after continuing to resist correction did the matter of their disfellowshipment become a consideration.

Verse 3 reveals that they had been tireless in this activity, that of evaluating their leaders and their brethren. Verse 4 then issues the negative assessment, that their 'first love' (not love in its entirety) was deficient, or at least in danger of becoming so. God could see where their hearts were.

Verse 5 explains what they needed to be doing to restore their former love. It is evident from the dire consequence that it was of great importance. From this verse we can see that it had to do with their fading 'works'. Jesus Himself equated 'first love' with 'first works'! (Rev. 2:5) So we're not looking at some purely emotional expression.

But verse 6 again addresses a matter not unrelated to the one presented in verse 3. We would regard these as addressing 'political' issues. Trying their leadership, even the most prominent among them, and evaluating the true spiritual condition of their fellow members, is certainly a critiquing function. Granted it involves evaluating, based on spiritual and doctrinal considerations, but its primary function was what has to be considered a 'political' activity, one that involved careful discernment. Now, verse 6 introduces a relevant term that had significance in their day, much more so than today, it seems. They hated the Nicolaitan element as does Christ! At least they did in the first century.

Where this component appears again in verse 15, in the message to what is recognized as the 'compromising church', Pergamos, attitudes had changed. By that time, a few centuries later, the Nicolaitan ideas had made inroads, being now referred to as 'doctrine', or at least that doctrine that the Nicolaitan element espoused had become somewhat

acceptable among some believers. Our question is, how could they embrace the hated Nicolaitan ideas and methods and yet remain within God's favor?

What we need to notice is that the warning to the Ephesian Church was sandwiched between two politically oriented commendations. First, the Bereanizing actions of evaluating what they were hearing and rendering a decision as to its validity and the genuineness of the ministry that was presenting it, AND their evaluation of their fellow-members, with due responses toward those who didn't measure up. Secondly, their hatred of a particular way of operating that represented another form of danger among the churches. They kept on top of these matters, at least originally, but apparently that was not to last. Their love, as exhibited in this area, was not so enduring. It forever set the tone for conditions in future ages. God's exhortation was very appropriate.

But it was their **evaluative functions** that were the matters of relevance here. We shouldn't miss that point. What they were doing was essential to them maintaining healthy congregations and a faithful, persevering Church. It played a role in keeping the Church free of compromising elements, something that was soon to overwhelm them from every side. God could see that their zeal in doing so was fading in time. It wasn't their emotional love so much, it was their practical love: exercising their God-given faculties, maintaining doctrinal and practical purity. Did they succeed? Did they heed the warning? No! Their candle did eventually flicker out and their candlestick of legitimacy was removed. They never came back from having lost their 'first love'. Is there a lesson in this for today?

### WHAT Were They Doing?

As stated above, we see that they were evaluating the legitimacy of their ministry, even their top ministry. (v.2); they were evaluating their fellow members and excluding from fellowship those determined to be evil. (v.2); and, they to this point at least, were resistant to the inroads of the Nicolaitan persuasion that sought to establish a controlling echelon within the Churches. (v.6)

What we should also note is that these actions were not the exclusive purview of their ministry. The

**members** were themselves deeply invested in these actions. Evidence of this is the simple fact that the message was to the Church, not to its ministry alone. Further evidence is in the reference to them hating the Nicolaitan element which involved the ministry. Once we understand the full implications of this reference, much becomes abundantly clear.

### How Does Nicolaitanism Factor In?

Another article addresses the matter of what the Nicolaitan consideration involved. (Request “*The Nicolaitan Factor*” or the 23 chapter booklet, “*The END-TIME Church – Ready thru Adversities*” for a more thorough analysis.) To briefly define the term, it involves creating a two-tier system of administration, with a **clergy** ruling over the **laity**. That in order to gain pre-eminent control over the ecclesia. The very name, from its Greek word-components, provides us a definition. The world’s religions, for quite obvious reasons, fail to represent this truth accurately and candidly to its members. The early Church understood what it meant and recognized no such structure.

Nicolaitanism is a system that functioned to impose and then to preserve false doctrines, with the membership no longer having any say whatsoever in restoring important biblical truths, should they ever re-discover them. This is the legacy of that ecclesiastical discipline. Not only does God hate Nicolaitanism, but IT effectively hates God, despite their effusion of ‘professed love’ toward Him!

But it’s in our understanding of this ecclesiastical development that we can see where the loss of their first love was and where it would ultimately lead. As their zeal faded, they would become less and less resistant to that condition which God hates. And, to varying degrees, the Church would succumb to that system’s suppressions of the functions given by Christ to the Saints, that of having an evaluative role. Later it would succumb to apostate doctrines.

There is no better illustration of the Nicolaitan element and the influence it later came to have over Christianity in general than the developments we see written in the pages of history. As the Church apostatized after the second century, an ecclesiastical discipline was embraced that resembled the

structure of religions that had long pre-existed. The second century heretic Marcion, upon being expelled from the faith (perhaps under the residual operation of ‘first love’) is known to have then established his own churches, “*splendidly organized*.” One internet source has this to say of Marcion’s organization: “In Italy, Egypt, Palestine, Arabia, Syria, Asia Minor and Persia, Marcionite churches sprang up, **splendidly organised**, with their own bishops and the rest of the ecclesiastical discipline, with a cult and service of the same nature as those of what subsequently became the Catholic Church. Orthodoxy had not declared for any party as yet, and the Marcionite view had then as good a chance as any other of becoming the universal one.”

### Ecclesiastical Orders Came Later

What this last sentence tells us is that there was no corresponding organizational structure established **as yet** in “orthodox” Christianity. Marcion was not competing with any similar ecclesiastical structure in the true Christian Church of his day. Though his doctrinal errors were not broadly accepted, his organizational form was later embraced, being adapted into that apostate persuasion that later became the Catholic Church.<sup>1</sup> This consideration is most revealing! It tells us that the early Church **did not have** a pope, cardinals, archbishops, bishops, etc., as has the Catholic Church since the fourth century. Marcion had established something new in the Church, a form that gave him controls.

Well, if the Church didn’t have such structure early on, then how did it operate? What worked to keep it ‘on track’? How did Jesus deem that His Church should function? This matter of ‘first love’, when understood, speaks to this question.

An alternate question might be, in God’s Church, what works and what doesn’t? It can depend on what we are trying to achieve.

The natural tendency of mankind is to gravitate toward having some form of ecclesiastical structure. After all, isn’t it the primary function of the clergy to maintain biblical doctrine pure and unadulterated? That would seem logical. They are

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<sup>1</sup> And, at one point in time, the Worldwide Church of God made the astounding allegation that, “the only thing the Catholic Church has right is government.”

the professionals after all. But examining the record of history, we find that the professional 'clergy' tends toward collusion and enforcement of false teachings, more than to seek out and restore the faith once delivered.

Even in an organization, as zealous for the Truth as was the Worldwide organization of a generation ago, once the wrong people gained the chief seats, apostasies were brought in and the Truth was undermined. In time, remaining Truth became the target, and anyone holding to it was treated badly, being slandered and eventually excommunicated. So much for relying on the ministry to be our 'dependable stewards' of the Faith. Did we learn anything from this experience? And, we weren't the first to see this happen. It happened 1900 years ago also, due in large part to the loss of 'first love'!

The question is, was what happened to the Ephesian Church a result of their having 'lost it'? How could we conclude that their ultimately losing the Truths taught by Jesus and the original apostles had no connection? Was their loss of first love the underlying cause of their loss of the Truth? How can we deny that there was a connection?

### Comprehensive Love

We tend to consider the subject of their 'first love' in the context of their **emotional** love for God. When we do that, we overlook two other areas of love that are no less essential. There is also a love of the brethren <sup>2</sup> and a love of the Truth. <sup>3</sup> Many will say that the emotional love toward God is the first and foremost expression, yet we have millions who though they profess a profound love of Jesus, yet will not keep His Commandments! So, is that love expression alone adequate on the part of a responsive Christian? Can the love of God be separated from Commandment keeping? Even more, can the love of God be separated from the love of the Brethren or the love of the Truth?

Not only do we see this phenomenon among the majority of church-going Christians, but some even go so far as to denigrate Commandment keepers as though 'sinners' for doing what they do, claiming

that they are rejecting the efficacy of grace! <sup>4</sup> (The basis of that being their presumption that a person's **only** reason for obedience is to **earn** salvation by their own works! They haven't considered Commandment keeping as being the proper expression of love toward God. "*If you love me, keep my commandments*". (John 14:15) "*He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him.*" (1<sup>st</sup> Jn. 2:4-5) How complicated is that?)

'First love' is not exclusively an expression toward God. This is perhaps what causes so many to miss the point of Christ's exhortation in Revelation 2:4. The Apostle John, writing within the same time-frame as the Book of Revelation, stresses a love of the Brethren as an expression of the love of God.

### Love of the Brethren

Being that John wrote what he did at the time that he did, may we deduce that he was addressing the same condition that was becoming evident at the time at Ephesus? John made major emphasis on that consideration also. Not only that we should, but that love of the Brethren is a direct reflection of our love toward God. "*If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this **commandment** have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also.*" (1<sup>st</sup> Jn. 4:20-21) From this, it is quite apparent that the two are inseparable!

If we truly love God, it will be evident in our love of those whom He has also called and given His Spirit. We will love those whom He loves! In fact, that is an explicit commandment. "*We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother*

<sup>2</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> John 5:3; 1<sup>st</sup> John 4:20-21

<sup>3</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians 2:10

<sup>4</sup> A quote from an evangelical publication presents this: "*To combat 'the gospel of the grace of God', the great deceiver has many false gospels, but they all have **two** subtle rejections of grace in common: ritual and/or self-effort...Ritual makes redemption an ongoing process performed by a special priesthood; and self-effort gives man a part to play in earning his salvation.*" In fact, there is a personal involvement in our attainment of salvation, but we can not 'earn' it.

*abideth in death.*” (1<sup>st</sup> Jn. 3:14) It’s that serious!

*“He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now. He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him. But he that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh in darkness, and knoweth not whither he goeth, because that darkness hath blinded his eyes.”* (1<sup>st</sup> Jn. 2:9-11)

So what is it that would be an underlying cause of brethren losing that sentiment for one another? Well, one very apparent condition is the one we read of in the first three chapters of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians. There, the Church was being stressed and put into a certain degree of turmoil by the carnality of various people aligning themselves behind one particular favorite minister to the disdain of the others. A condition not unlike the previously mentioned Nicolaitan element, in fact, a condition that could lead to it.

### Love of the TRUTH

But love of God and the Brethren of and by itself is not complete either. We have many churchgoers who seemingly do both commendably. But a church exhibiting such love, yet which rejects God’s Truth, can it truly BE God’s Church? No, without a love of the Truth, it is just another religious organization. Commendable in form, perhaps, but devoid of substance.

John, in this later time-frame recognized what the distinction was between those who were the faithful brethren and those who were not. *“I rejoiced greatly that I found of thy children **walking in truth**, as we have received a commandment from the Father. And now I beseech thee, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment unto thee, but that which we had from the beginning, that we **love one another**. And this is the commandment, That, as ye have heard from the beginning, ye should walk in it.”* (2<sup>nd</sup> Jn. 1:4-6)

In another chapter he speaks of another element: *“And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they **received** not the **love of the truth**, that they might be **saved**. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion,*

*that they should believe a lie: That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.”* (2<sup>nd</sup> Thess. 2:10-12) What good is any church that rejects God’s Truth? How can it be said of them that they love God when they profoundly despise His Truth?

This verse tells us that the love of the Truth is something that’s received. Where then is that love received from? And, if this love is essential to our becoming ‘saved’, then may we conclude that it is at least a component within the love of God? What possible value would a form of love toward God have IF a person had no love for His Truth?

### Abandoning Their Mandate

But love must not be without the entire response, not only the verbal expression, ‘in word’ as it says, the practical works, as they’re called, or ‘deeds’ must be present. *“**Hereby perceive we the love of God**, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.”* ... *“My little children, let us not love in **word**, neither in tongue; but in **deed** and in **truth**.”* (1<sup>st</sup> Jn. 3:16 & 18) The love of God is very much expressed in what we do and believe.

But as we’ve seen, the love of God involves doing what He commands. From the message to Ephesus we can discern that evaluating the ministry, watching and Bereanizing their message content, and exposing imposters, both in the ministry and among the fellowship, is a function expressing the love of God in a practical way. Hating and standing against any inroads of a Nicolaitan approach is another point of commendation. Speaking often to one another is an activity also receiving highest praise. (Malachi 3:16-17) And as we see from verse 18, their skills of discernment, honed in the Church environment, will be put to use in the Kingdom!

But as their love faded and as the consequences of that came to bear, the Church took on a different character. It gradually left off performing their evaluation functions, leaving their mandate in the hands of a professional ministry. As a result, in time, their candlestick flickered out.

### Their God-Given Mandate

We can see from the pages of scripture what the

early Church was expected to do. The third chapter of 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy, verse 15, refers to the congregation (the Church) as being “pillars and grounds of the Truth”. In other words, upholding God’s Truth was their congregational obligation.

We see also their responsibility to evaluate their ministry, to discern between the true and the false. They were also to identify those within the fellowship who were false brethren. It fell to them to disfellowship those who were false and who were causing division. Typically, it has become common practice to assign this responsibility to the professional ministry alone, but ‘marking’ as called-for in Romans 16:17-19, is an instruction given to the ‘Brethren’. Titus 3 considers a similar activity. Here again, it is addressed to Brethren, reminding them of their past sinful natures, and admonishing them to maintain a pure state and a unified congregation.

In places such as Acts 15 we can see that the congregation was very much involved in decision-making. In verse 12 we see that ‘the multitude’ had been voicing their input. Verses 22-23 identifies ‘the whole church’ as being a party to the decisions then being made. This wasn’t just a casual formality, it shows us that the recipients of the letter cared that the other congregation was involved and was in agreement. This was not an unimportant mention. They would have been all the more assured knowing that the Brethren in Antioch also concurred. Knowing that there was a consensus added considerable weight to the matter in the minds of the recipients. It was the way things were done early on.

### **Their Labor of Love**

An insightful passage is found in the first chapter of 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians where Paul commends their evangelizing efforts. *“We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers; Remembering without ceasing **your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father; Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God. For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; ... And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received***

*the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost: So that **ye were ensamples** to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia. For **from you sounded out the word of the Lord** not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place **your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing.**” (vs.2-8) What is noteworthy is that this congregation was actively spreading the Word abroad. Credit is not awarded to any prominent minister, but to them! If they even had a resident minister, he isn’t mentioned. Either way, this was a proactive congregation.*

### **Selling Ones’ Birthright**

We might wonder what love (especially that ‘first love’) has to do with the subject Jesus addressed last in His message to Ephesus. What relationship does that Nicolaitan culture have to do with the Church maintaining its first obligation before God? Why mention that in the context of the previous charge against them?

When a people lose their zeal, they tend to step back and let others do the work. They prefer to let a professional ministry make all the decisions, and oversee all that is done so that they don’t have to do the brainwork themselves. This is the vacuum that the Nicolaitan ecclesiastical structure surges into.

### **Nicolaitanism’s Effect**

When an unmotivated membership turns everything over to ‘professionals’, the title ‘minister’ takes on a new pre-eminence, one not previously enjoyed. Under this approach, a subtle change occurs. The term which used to mean ‘servant’, now takes on the definition of ‘master’, someone ruling over the congregation. The whole dynamic changes!

A certain fear factor now enters the picture. Those prerogatives Christ assigned His people are forever forfeited. They become at the mercy of however their ministry chooses to operate. That can be good or it can be bad. Read 3<sup>rd</sup> John 9-10 for one notable example. Under Diotrephes’ regime, the membership was forbidden to have contact with the Apostle John lest they be ‘put out of the Church’!

Then, if there is more than one minister present, inevitably one will see need to exalt himself over

the other(s). Think that doesn't happen? Just read what happened in Luke 9:46; Luke 22:24 and Matthew 20:21. It's the way men are programmed to think. Yes, even the Disciples. So, when there are multiple ministers within any established church, for sake of peace there also needs to be a resolution of who is greater and who is lesser: a ranking system, as we would call it. They become subject to one person, not only to Christ. This in clear disregard of Christ's instructions in places such as Matthew 23:8 that they all (and we) were to regard themselves as 'brethren' (equals).

Also, any say in the determination of who is to be a minister (or deacon or evangelist, etc.) and who is not, is no longer allowed them. In effect, they have no say in this matter either. Originally the membership DID have a say. We see in 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 3 the criteria for considering a person for service. Such appointments were not made without the input of the membership. How else could those approving such appointments know of their character, except by consulting with their local peers? Such consideration is not made under a Nicolaitan approach. This passage too shows that the early Church's **membership** had an evaluative role to play.

Any talents within the congregation are employed at the discretion of the minister. The people serve him and defer to his preferences. He is no longer their faithful servant, but too often their **overlord**. Promotion can be used as a carrot and stick to further the agenda of the minister. Anyone who would not bolster his agenda (play his game) or enhance his prestige simply will not be used. Any Talent that God might give, notwithstanding.

Not only in these matters, but the congregation is also allowed no say in how their financial resources are applied. This is the price. Many are seemingly content to have it be so, but in doing so, have surrendered their 'first love': that which monitors the overall spiritual climate within the Church, its policies and its doctrines. Christ is not pleased, if we understand Revelation 2's intent.

### The Two-Tier System

So with the ministry being given – by default – the responsibilities that ought **also** to be overseen by the membership, the condition exists to establish a ruling class. A class distinction is made between a


'clergy' and a 'laity', with the clergy bearing rule upon the laity. Any misconduct on the part of the minister must be tolerated. Being 'set above' the lowly member, they see themselves as exempt from any membership oversight.

And with that, the benefit of a Spirit-filled membership weighing-in on matters of importance is forfeit. Scripture makes it abundantly clear that "*in the abundance of counselors there is safety*". (Proverbs 11:14) That was the original situation in the Church and it provided an environment among members that's near impossible today. An involved membership, exercising the senses God expects of them,<sup>5</sup> is the best guarantor of a right spiritual environment and of true doctrines.

### Set Them Who Are Least Esteemed

As 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 6 shows, the 'judgment' of the membership, and especially that echelon of it that is 'least esteemed' (in other words, the ones not in high favor with the ministry), is a valuable asset. Paul specifically urged them to set such people in judgment, as their unbiased views would render the more reliable decisions, being less likely to feel a need to curry the favor of the minister. Since Paul is chiding them for not doing things that way, it shows that they were at least familiar with the concept. They ought to have set internal disputes between members before the Brethren for resolution rather than before 'outside' judges.

From all of these situations we can see that the membership played a more involved role in the Church originally. That was their 'first love'. They served to uphold the Truth, they evaluated the administration and their fellow attendees and consulted often with one another to maintain peace, love and unity. They identified false ministers, apostles even, and kept false doctrine at bay. Later generations did not maintain those actions as they should, and we are the poorer for the legacy that it left. By the middle ages, the hold of the Nicolaitan approach had solidified its grip in the minds of worshippers the world over. (Rev. 2:15)

When Christ states so unequivocally that He hates something, shouldn't we do the same? How comprehensive is OUR first love? 

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<sup>5</sup> Hebrews 5:14