

Church of God, The Eternal

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What It Means to Love God

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Dear Brethren:

To all to whom God's love is shed abroad in his or her heart, greetings!

Since I gave diligence to remind you to make your calling and election sure, (*Monthly Letter*, April 2002), I hope above all else that you have prospered in the truth—the knowledge that we should augment the virtue that was added to our faith. In this *Monthly Letter* it is my desire with godly passion, to share some thoughts about the love in which everyone of us should abound. For it is so easy to claim, as most do, they possess love but while in reality live loosely with God's commandments. You can commonly hear people in this world say that the Ten Commandments are all wrapped up in that one word "love" and so leave out of their lives the true essence of the first four commandments, and with fervor go out "to win more souls for Christ" in a missionary zeal to "love" others. To do this, they compromise some vital truths in the first four of the Ten Commandments by espousing some human commandments brought about by their zeal to perpetuate human tradition and culture, so as to "win more souls to God." God's revelation is changed to human speculation, beclouding true knowledge about God and His Son Jesus Christ; which one can only obtain through revelation (Matthew 11:27).

While we should abound in love for fellow man as we love ourselves, we should not discount the fact that the first of the great commandments is "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might" (Deuteronomy 6:4–5; Matthew 22:37). According to our Lord Jesus this is "the first and great commandment" (Matthew 22:38). As enumerated and briefly stated in the first four of the Ten Commandments which He wrote with His own finger on tablets of stone (Exodus 31:18; Deuteronomy 9:10), He expects us to obey and keep them to show we love Him (John 14:15). "If ye love me, keep my commandments." As He gave them in their spiritual intent and wrote them in the tables of our heart in a new covenant with us (Matthew 5:17,18; Hebrews

8:10), let us be wary of that natural inclination to erase them with human intellectual preference. How easily could one drift away if, with human reasoning and intellectual scholarship, he assumes that the commandments were "done away," and instead observes other feasts and celebrations commanded by man and not God. How easily we could be attracted by traditions and popular concepts about God, calling Him by "sacred" names or designating Him as somebody else rather than what Christ has revealed. Let us guard against any drift, in any form, from any of the first four points of the royal law, for doing so would be tantamount to leaving our "first love." Let us learn our lesson from the Church of God in Ephesus.

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; 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: And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted. Nevertheless I have [somewhat] against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. 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. But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 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 (Revelation 2:1–7).

Leaving the First Love

What is the first love that the Ephesian church left? How serious is this spiritual offense? Is this a case of being altogether loveless? Is it leaving the evangelical fervor as some assume? Most Bible commentators say that "first love" refers to the zeal of fulfilling religious piety in observing religious ordinances. In Clarke's Commentary for example, repenting of this shortcoming requires one to perform with "zeal and diligence, watch, fast, pray, reprove sin, carefully attend the ordinances of God."

Notice in verses 2 and 3 above that this church was performing good works. The zeal of the members, in their labor of love, was noted to be unceasing ("... and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted"). They were zealous in some doctrinal truth and made sure no "heretics" could join their ranks ("and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars:"). But the serious offense is that they have left their "first love." Such a short-coming seems to counteract the previous commendations and threatens to remove a very important element in spiritual existence (the candlestick)—the vessel by which the Holy Spirit of Truth resides. Paul warned that the Holy Spirit could be extinguished (1 Thessalonians

5:19) and even admonished the Ephesian members "not to grieve the Holy Spirit" (Ephesians 4:30).

Leaving this first love is a very serious spiritual offense. Unless we have repented of and are doing that first requirement, God will remove the most important instrument He bestowed at baptism—that empowerment He gave every church member by which to overcome—the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Removal of the candlestick is tantamount to withdrawal of the Spirit of Christ which provides us that spiritual inclination to overcome the flesh (Romans 8:5–9). It is a means by which God extends truth to men, reveals His will, and enables men to obey. So the "first love," if left out of one's life, could be a tragic cause for spiritual blindness. Once this happens, and if not corrected or repented of, it could altogether make one's orientation and judgment become natural and carnal, failing lamentably to discern spiritual things (1 Corinthians 2:14). Love which is supposed to be a fruit of the Holy Spirit would only become emotional and sentimental, self-centered and irrational. Just as a friend of mine said, "If you only understand how to be under grace and not under the law, you will see and feel how much more you will love the Lord." He was alluding to his belief that since Christ has done everything for him, he is no longer obliged to obey God's laws. My friend failed to see that true love is not only emotional and sentimental but also requires obeying God by keeping His commandments (John 14:15).

When the Ephesian Church Left Its First Love

A cursory glimpse at some points in church history will show us how the church of God, after all the apostles had died, was led away from the truth, as Paul previously warned:

For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears (Acts 20:29–31).

This departure from the truth in the first century seemed to have focused on the first four points of the Decalogue. It was in the year 321 A.D. that Constantine issued an edict forbidding work on the "venerable day of the Sun [Sunday]" thereby transferring worship during the Sabbath to Sunday in the Western empire. At the council of Nicaea (325 A.D.) the revealed truth about the Father and the Son was replaced by the Trinitarian formulae in contradiction to what God thundered on Mount Sinai: "you shall have no other gods before me." During these years veneration of dead saints and using graven images as objects (visual aids) for worship were introduced. Another major change introduced by the council of Nicaea was that the Passover was

changed into Easter Sunday. How about the different annual festivals of God that were replaced by many so-called "Christian" annual holidays, such as Christmas, Easter, Assumption, Holy Week, Immaculate Conception and all the feasts honoring the dead saints?

These only show how the church has left that first and great commandment of loving the Lord as enumerated by the first four commandments in the Decalogue. "Nevertheless, I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love" (Revelation 2:4).

Brethren, in his recent visit to the Philippines, Mr. Brisby emphasized loving our God above all else. Having anything in between us and God makes us unworthy of Him. Our Lord said that if we love Him less than we love our father or mother, brother or sister, husband or wife, or children, or friends, or even ourselves, we are not worthy of Him.

Our first love will be tested not very long from now. Can we pass the test? Will we avoid leaving our first love and stand firm when being coerced to compromise the truth once delivered? History repeats itself, so to say. A force more cruel than that of the Inquisition, with absolute power and deceit, will persecute and condemn to death everyone who keeps God's commandments.

Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God (2 Thessalonians 2:3–4).

Thus, what is written will be fulfilled: "Here is the patience of the saints; here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus (Revelation 14:12).

Leaving our first love, brethren, is a very serious offense. Unless repented of, it blinds just as though the spirit of truth were removed and a continuous blindness occurs. It happened to ancient Israel and it happened to the first century church and it happened to the end-time church today. It is the same as what is often mentioned as apostasy—a departure from the truth. To quote Mr. Brisby in his recent *Monthly Letter*:

The Bible is very clear that an apostasy—a departure from Truth—would occur in the last-day church of God, even as God's people historically have always departed from the original revelation. The ancient Israelites did it time and time again, never able to remain faithful to what God gave them from the beginning. Neither could the first century church hold on, corrupting the original teachings of the Apostles within the first forty years (Acts 20:28–30). Likewise, the last-day church proved it could be no more faithful than any of its predecessors. "Let no man deceive you

by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away [apostasy] first, . . ." (2 Thessalonians 2:3). As we came to understand, apostasy does not mean departing from membership in a physical organization. It means literally a departure from *the Truth!*

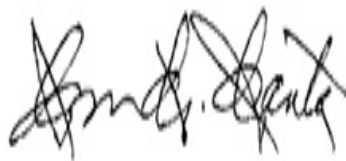
Departure from the truth, especially that which is encompassed by the first great commandment (loving God above all else), in the guise of fulfilling the second (loving others as loving yourself), is a deceptive understanding of "love" as taught by Christ.

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). By example Christ laid down His life for His friends, even for us, and in turn we should love our brethren as much as to lay down our lives for them. But, are we ready and willing to lay down our lives for our love of Him and His Father in times of persecution, and for the sake of God's revealed truth? Polycarp, a disciple of John the Evangelist and Bishop of Smyrna, gave his life by being burned alive for his love for Christ. Many others also gave their lives during those days of persecution among true Christians, and were able to willingly lay down their lives because they loved God above all else.

Our first love, which includes loving God with all our mind (heart) and our soul, might easily be overlooked in this time of apostasy. The focus on a great evangelistic work and seeking after exponential growth in membership, as Mr. Brisby mentioned, seems to be the alluring attraction for one's affiliation with a group. But the fact is, repentance is the way back to our roots and to open our sights to that grandeur of truth we once saw through the Holy Spirit of God, who revealed it to us. The warning is: "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" (Revelation 2:5).

To all begotten children of God, our love and sincere service.

I remain faithfully yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Corsino C. Canta". The signature is stylized and somewhat cursive, with a large initial 'C' and 'C'.

Corsino C. Canta