CHRISTOlogisch

STUDIES AND STUDY AIDS

Leaving the First Love

Revelation 2 and the life of the church



BIBLE AND CHRISTIAN LIFE

Thinking biblically and entering into conversation

www.christologisch.de

Translation note: All biblical quotations and paraphrases are translated from the German source; they are not presented as the wording of any particular English Bible translation. The author's theological claims and cited sources are preserved.

Leaving the first love

What Jesus really reproaches the church in Ephesus for

Revelation 2:4-5 does not describe a church that had completely abandoned Christ or lost every form of love. The Ephesians defended the truth, endured hardships, and resisted false apostles. Nevertheless, something fundamental had shifted: they had left their first love.

“First love” probably does not refer exclusively to an earlier feeling of enthusiasm for Jesus. Rather, the expression encompasses love in its original quality, priority, and practical effectiveness. This includes both love for Christ and the love for other people that flows from it, especially for fellow believers.

Jesus's call to repentance requires a careful distinction: the church is first to repent, that is, to change its thinking and inward attitude before Christ. It is then to return to its former conduct and once again do the corresponding works of love. These works are not repentance itself but its visible fruit. Like Matthew 3:8 and Acts 26:20, Revelation 2:5 therefore distinguishes between inward repentance and the deeds that flow from it.

Contents

1. An exemplary church with a life-threatening deficiency

2. What “first love” means

3. How commitment to truth and love can drift apart

4. Clearly distinguishing repentance, turning, and works

5. Why the loss of love threatens the lampstand

6. The way back to the first love

1. An exemplary church with a life-threatening deficiency

The message to the church in Ephesus begins not with criticism but with remarkable praise. Jesus knows its works, its labor, and its endurance. The church cannot tolerate evil people. It tests people who call themselves apostles and exposes those who are not. It has borne hardships for the sake of Christ's name and has not grown weary (Rev 2:2-3).

This is no spiritually indifferent church. These are not Christians for whom doctrine, holiness, or faithfulness have become meaningless. At first, Ephesus seems almost a model of a vigilant, resilient church capable of doctrinal discernment.

Then, however, comes the divine “But”:

> **“But I have this against you: you have left your first love” (Rev 2:4).**

This single deficiency is so serious that Jesus threatens to remove the lampstand if the church does not repent (Rev 2:5). This shows that love is no soft addition to the real work of the church. It belongs to the essence of a Christian church.

A church may:

- recognize false teaching,
- expose false teachers,
- reject moral deviations,
- stand firm under pressure,
- work tirelessly

and still be developing in a spiritually life-threatening direction.

> **Doctrinal orthodoxy does not automatically protect a church from losing its true spiritual center.**

Jesus contradicts none of the positive judgments he has previously pronounced. The Ephesians really have endured. Their testing of doctrine really is correct. Their resistance to evil really is commendable. Yet correct doctrine and great resilience cannot compensate for the loss of love.

2. What “first love” means

The twofold meaning of “first”

The Greek word prōtē can have both a temporal and a qualitative meaning. “First love” can therefore refer to the love that characterized the church at the beginning. At the same time, it can mean the love that ought to hold first place.[1]

This is therefore not mere nostalgia. Jesus does not call the Ephesians to recreate artificially the emotional high of their early days. Rather, the term includes an evaluation: the love that once shaped them and had priority no longer occupies that position.

The church had not simply “lost” love, as though it had disappeared unnoticed. Jesus says that it had “left” it. The verb used can denote deliberately leaving behind or abandoning something. This does not necessarily assert that the church one day explicitly decided to love less. But it had allowed other concerns to come so strongly to the foreground that love lost its former place.

Love for Christ or love for people?

Interpreters often ask whether first love refers mainly to love for Christ or to love for fellow believers.

There are good reasons for both possibilities.

Love for Christ is supported by the fact that Christ himself is Lord of the church. All truly Christian love originates in the relationship with him. Where love for Christ grows cold, obedience, worship, and love of one's neighbor will sooner or later also be impaired.

Love for other people is supported especially by the connection with the “first works.” Jesus calls the church to do again what it did before (Rev 2:5). In the Johannine writings, love demonstrates itself precisely in concrete action toward others:

> **“By this we have known love: he laid down his life for us; and we too ought to lay down our lives for the brothers” (1 John 3:16).**

John explicitly warns against love consisting only of words:

> **“Children, let us not love in words or with the tongue, but in deed and truth” (1 John 3:18).**

Dennis Johnson therefore considers it more likely that love for other people in particular had declined in Ephesus.[2] Craig Koester also connects the required first works with practical acts of service to other believers.[3]

Why the two forms of love must not be separated

However, the choice between “love for Christ” and “love for people” must not be drawn too sharply. In Johannine theology the two are inseparably connected.

Whoever loves God should also love his brother (1 John 4:20-21). Conversely, love for God's children is connected with love for God and obedience to his commandments (1 John 5:1-3).

Love for Christ is the source. Love for fellow believers is one of its necessary expressions. We can therefore say:

> **The first love is love directed toward Christ that becomes visible in selfless, active love for other people.**

The emphasis of Revelation 2:5 probably falls on the lost practical form of this love. Nevertheless, it would be artificial to detach these works from the inward relationship with Christ.

3. How commitment to truth and love can drift apart

A church under constant pressure

The church in Ephesus did not live in a calm, conflict-free environment. It had to test false apostles, reject evil people, and identify false teachers. The later reference to the Nicolaitans also shows that the church faced teachings and practices that Christ hated (Rev 2:6).

A church under continual attack understandably develops protective mechanisms. It begins to look more closely. Statements are tested. Teachers are assessed. Dangers are named.

Initially, this is right and necessary. Yet vigilance can gradually turn into an attitude of fundamental distrust. A church can become so focused on detecting error that it suspects apostasy behind every inaccuracy. People are then no longer regarded first as brothers and sisters to be served but as potential sources of danger to be examined.

The walls intended to protect the church from false teaching can become so high that warmth, fellowship, and mercy can hardly get through either.

Truth without love becomes harsh

Paul had explained to this very church in Ephesus how Christian maturity develops. The church must not be driven about by every wind of doctrine. At the same time, it is to “hold fast to the truth in love” and thus grow toward Christ (Eph 4:14-15).

Truth and love are not competing values. Love must not dissolve truth, and truth must not displace love.

- Love without truth becomes sentimental and directionless.
- Truth without love becomes cold, proud, and destructive.
- Truth in love serves the other person by saying the right thing in the right way and with the right aim.

The Ephesians had evidently taken seriously the apostolic call to test doctrine. Yet they had become unbalanced. They defended the truth, but the love in which that truth was to be held had lost its former strength.[2]

Love does not mean tolerating error

Jesus's rebuke must not be understood as though testing doctrine and drawing boundaries were themselves unloving. Jesus expressly praises the Ephesians for testing false apostles and hating the works of the Nicolaitans (Rev 2:2,6).

The solution therefore does not consist in testing less carefully or tolerating false teaching out of a misunderstood love. Jesus does not demand:

“Stop fighting false doctrine.”

Rather, he demands:

“Return to an attitude in which your struggle for truth is sustained by love.”

> **Rediscovering the first love does not mean weakening the truth. It means treating the truth once again as service to God and to people.**

Doctrinal clarity becomes unloving when it mainly serves self-affirmation. It remains loving when it seeks to protect, correct, win, and build people up.

4. Clearly distinguishing repentance, turning, and works

The precise structure of Revelation 2:5

Jesus gives the church three closely connected commands:

1. “Remember, then, from where you have fallen.”

2. “Repent.”

3. “Do the first works” (Rev 2:5).

This sequence is theologically significant. Jesus does not simply demand better activities. The church is not to replace what has been lost inwardly with increased busyness.

First it must recognize what has happened. Then it must repent. From this repentance the first works are to emerge again.

What repentance means

The verb used in Revelation 2:5 is metanoeō. It denotes a change of thinking, evaluation, or inward attitude. In biblical usage, this does not mean a superficial change of opinion. The church is to reassess its conduct in the light of Christ's judgment and acknowledge that his judgment is right.

Until now it may have pointed to its doctrinal faithfulness, resilience, and separation from evil. Jesus shows it, however, that these strengths do not excuse its lack of love.

Here repentance means:

- acknowledging that Christ is right in his rebuke,
- no longer minimizing one's own development,
- judging the abandonment of the first love to be sin,
- inwardly rejecting the previous attitude,
- submitting afresh to Christ's will.

Repentance is therefore neither mere sadness nor mere regret. A person can regret the consequences of his behavior without really changing his perspective. Biblical repentance involves adopting God's judgment.

> **Repentance begins where a person stops defending himself and acknowledges that Christ's judgment is right.**

Repentance is not the same as the works of repentance

Immediately after the command to repent comes the call: “Do the first works” (Rev 2:5). Repentance and works are thereby distinguished both grammatically and in substance.

Jesus does not say:

“Repent by doing the first works.”

He gives two connected commands:

- Change your inward attitude.
- Then act accordingly again.

The first works are therefore not repentance itself. They are the visible consequence and practical realization of repentance.

This distinction also appears in the preaching of John the Baptist:

> **“Bear fruit worthy of repentance” (Matt 3:8).**

The fruit is not identical with repentance. It is the result that corresponds to repentance. John does not demand works by which people are to earn God's acceptance. Rather, he calls for conduct showing that the repentance they profess consists of more than words.

A tree does not become alive by having fruit tied to its branches. Because it is alive, it bears fruit. Likewise, works are not the inward change of mind itself. They make visible that such a change has become practically effective.

The meaning of epistrephō

Another important biblical term is epistrephō. The verb literally means to turn around, return, or turn toward someone. Whereas metanoeō particularly emphasizes a change in thinking and judgment, epistrephō often describes the resulting change of direction.

The two terms must not be forced into a rigid scheme. Their semantic ranges overlap, and the particular context determines the precise emphasis. Nevertheless, a basic distinction can be made:

- metanoeō: a change of thinking or inward evaluation,
- epistrephō: turning toward, returning, or changing the direction taken,
- works: the concrete conduct corresponding to this new orientation.

Acts 26:20 connects these elements especially clearly. Paul describes his preaching as calling people:

> **“to repent and turn to God, doing works worthy of repentance” (Acts 26:20).**

The sentence contains three distinguishable but connected aspects:

1. Repenting: changing one's previous attitude and judgment.

2. Turning to God: changing direction and turning toward God.

3. Doing works corresponding to repentance: living practically in a way that accords with the changed attitude.

The works do not cause repentance. Nor do they replace repentance. They are to flow from it.

The corresponding movement in Revelation 2:5

Although the verb epistrephō does not explicitly occur in Revelation 2:5, the train of thought contains a movement of return in substance:

- The Ephesians are to remember from where they have fallen.
- They are to repent.
- They are to do their former works again.

The call to the “first works” thus describes the practical return to an abandoned way of life. The church is not merely to recognize that something has gone wrong. It is actually to leave the direction it has taken and act again in works of love.

> **Repentance without a corresponding turning remains ineffective. Works without prior repentance remain outward imitation.**

No condition for receiving eternal life

The context concerns an already existing church. Jesus speaks to people who have worked and suffered for his name and tested false teachers. The call to repentance is therefore not a call to unbelievers to earn eternal life through works.

Eternal life is received through faith in Jesus Christ (John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47; 20:30-31). Revelation 2:5, by contrast, deals with the fellowship, faithfulness, and witness of a local church.

The Ephesians do not have to prove or reacquire their new birth through works of love. As a church, they must respond to their Lord's rebuke.

Their works are:

- no payment for eternal life,
- no addition to Christ's finished work of redemption,
- no subsequent basis of their justification,
- but the obedience a church owes its Lord.

Christ does not threaten to withdraw the believers' eternal life. He threatens to move the church's lampstand from its place (Rev 2:5). The issue is its continued existence and function as a local witness.

5. Why the loss of love threatens the lampstand

The lampstand belongs to Christ

The churches are depicted as lampstands in Revelation 1:20. Christ walks among them (Rev 2:1). A church therefore does not carry its light by its own strength. It has received its position and task from Christ.

The lampstand is not simply a symbol of people meeting for religious gatherings in a particular place. It signifies the church in its Christ-given calling to bear his light visibly.

Jesus can remove this lampstand. A church can continue to exist organizationally, own buildings, hold events, and retain its name while having lost its spiritual function before Christ.

Truth alone does not fulfill the commission

The Ephesians may have thought that their doctrinal purity automatically secured their future. Christ contradicts this assumption. A church bears Christ's light not only by recognizing error but also by reflecting his character.

Christ is full of grace and truth (John 1:14). A church embodying truth without love therefore does not bear a complete witness to him.

It may correctly present the content of certain doctrines. Yet if its treatment of people is marked by harshness, pride, distrust, or indifference, its visible attitude contradicts the truth it defends in words.

> **A church can possess the right message and yet obscure it by its unloving form.**

A downward development

Gerhard Maier points out that the Ephesians need not be described as completely loveless. They may still have possessed much love compared with other churches. What is decisive, however, is the direction of their development: love was decreasing, and the first love had already been abandoned.[1]

Jesus's rebuke therefore addresses not merely an end condition already reached but a tendency. Christ sees where a path leads long before the church itself recognizes the full implications.

A small error of course initially seems harmless. If it is not corrected, however, after many kilometers the ship will be far from its destination. Likewise, a church can continue to do many right things and nevertheless move away from its spiritual center step by step.

6. The way back to the first love

Remembering

The first command is: “Remember, then, from where you have fallen” (Rev 2:5).

The church is to compare its present situation with its former condition. This is not sentimental recollection but spiritual diagnosis.

It should ask:

- How did we treat one another before?
- What sacrifices were we willing to make for one another?
- Which people did we visit, support, or help out of love?
- How did we speak the truth?
- Why do we now do some things only from duty, habit, or a need to distinguish ourselves from others?
- Where has vigilance turned into harshness?
- Where has discernment turned into distrust?
- Where has zeal for truth turned into enjoyment of quarrelling?

Remembering reveals the distance between what was and what has become.

Repenting

Then the church is to judge its development as Christ judges it. It must not excuse its lack of love by pointing to its doctrinal orthodoxy.

Repentance may therefore mean confessing before Christ:

- We wanted to be right rather than win people.
- We noticed faults more quickly than needs.
- We spoke about false teachers but prayed too little for those led astray.
- We defended truth without always truly loving.
- We performed the ministry but lost sight of the person.
- We protected Christ's name but did not sufficiently reflect his character.

Such insight must not turn into a general self-accusation without concrete content. Real repentance names what Christ objects to.

Doing the first works

Repentance is followed by a practical turning. The church is to act again.

The “first works” can become visible wherever love takes concrete form:

- visiting burdened fellow believers,
- recognizing material need,
- accompanying the sick,
- patiently bearing with the weak,
- gently correcting those who have strayed,
- not unnecessarily intensifying conflicts,
- granting forgiveness,
- praying for one another,

- sharing time, strength, and possessions,
- speaking truth with the aim of restoration.

These works must not be misunderstood as an outward technique. A church can introduce programs to cultivate fellowship and still remain inwardly cold. The first works must flow from renewed love.

> **Christ does not call for an artificial staging of earlier feelings. He calls for a renewed attitude, a real return, and the deeds flowing from it.**

Holding fast to truth in love again

The solution for Ephesus consists in restored love, not less truth. The church is to continue testing false apostles and rejecting the works of the Nicolaitans. Yet this must happen with an attitude corresponding to Christ.

Love does not mean:

- approving error,
- minimizing sin,
- recognizing every doctrine as equally valid,
- abolishing necessary church discipline,
- avoiding clear boundaries.

Love means:

- seeking the other person's good,
- not using truth as a weapon for self-exaltation,
- treating even opponents as human beings,
- directing correction toward restoration,
- fighting for those led astray as well as against deception,
- opposing one's own pride with the same determination as the errors of others.

The lasting warning

The message to Ephesus addresses more than a first-century church. Every church faithful to Scripture faces this danger.

Churches that take doctrine seriously, test error, and resist the spirit of the age especially need to hear the rebuke of Ephesus. Their strengths can imperceptibly take on a life of their own. Doctrinal faithfulness can turn into intellectual pride. Separation can become an end in itself. Steadfastness can combine with emotional coldness.

Christ does not set truth and love against each other. He requires both.

> **A church must hate error without despising people. It must defend truth without abandoning love.**

The first love is not restored merely by remembering earlier times or forcing a lost feeling. Jesus's way is clear:

1. Recognize from where you have fallen.

2. Change your thinking and acknowledge that Christ is right.

3. Turn away from the wrong direction.

4. Do again the works corresponding to renewed love.

The distinction thus becomes clear:

- Repentance is the inward change of judgment before Christ.
- Turning is the actual change of direction.
- Works are the visible actions flowing from this turning.

None of these elements may be played off against the others. Works without repentance become religious playacting. Professed repentance without turning remains empty. Turning without corresponding works remains invisible and without practical consequences.

The Lord of the church does not demand an emotional return to an idealized past. He demands a present, concrete, obedient return to love.

> **The first love is not merely the love that was present at the beginning. It is the love that must hold first place.**

References

[1] Gerhard Maier, Die Offenbarung des Johannes: Kapitel 1-11, edited by Gerhard Maier et al., Historisch-Theologische Auslegung Neues Testament (Witten; Giessen: SCM R.Brockhaus; Brunnen Verlag, 2015), 139-140.

[2] Dennis E. Johnson, Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001), 72.

[3] Craig R. Koester, Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, edited by John J. Collins, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2014), 38A:269.