

The Church That Lost Its First Love

Guys, do you remember your first kiss? I'd ask the women, but I have no way of knowing how it was with your first kiss. What I remember is that I wasn't very experienced; but I was highly motivated.

Marriage begins at a high level of passion. There's passion in the wedding preparations (frankly, I'm not sure how some marriages survive the wedding! In premarital counseling I tell couples if they'll put as much work and attention to their marriage as to their wedding, they'll make it.) But, in the beginning there's passion—even in choices like buying furniture... (But, don't ask my wife about that.)

Ten years later: "Where do ya' want to eat tonight?" "I don't care; where do you wanna' eat?" When passion goes out of a marriage, spouses begin to relate on the basis of role expectations: he's the wage earner; she's the cook, baby-raiser, domestic servant... "Me Tarzan, You Jane." When that's all you are to each other, there's not much passion; there's not much marriage.

Passion. I remember a 2001 football game. The Arkansas Razorbacks were in the middle of another mediocre season with another mediocre coach (Google it: 2001); and on November 3, at Oxford, Mississippi, when the game ended in a low-scoring tie, there were yawns all around. Then, the Razorbacks scored 41 points in seven overtimes and beat Ole Miss 58-56. What I remember most about that game was the passion and excitement in church the next day. The normal passion of Saturday afternoon, in the fall, carried over. Worship was lively and energetic; but, I remember wondering whether that enthusiastic worship was for the right God.

Last week we looked at a church that emerged out of paganism. Paul and the missionaries entered Ephesus and preached about a living, loving God, and they were so convincing that many Ephesians gave up idolatry; which hurt the silversmith trade. Silversmiths made their living selling silver trinkets related to the pagan Temple of Artemis.

The Silversmiths held a protest, but all it really accomplished was a lot of noise and a threat to community peace. Now there are valid

ways to stage a peaceful protest; but, like so many in America today, this one ended up, as Luke describes it in Acts 19, with “some... shouting one thing, some another; for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together.”

Eventually, peace was restored and everybody went home; but the damage was done. Paul’s ministry in Ephesus essentially was ended by that event and he moved on to Macedonia. But he left behind a small group of Christians who remained faithful to their calling to follow Jesus, even when “some were shouting one thing, some another; for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together.”

And I closed last Sunday by noting the long-term result of the Ephesian church’s faithfulness. Years later, in a vision recorded in the book of Revelation:

REVELATION 2:1-7 (NRSV) <i>“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands: ²“I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know</i>	<i>that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false. ³I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary.</i>
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That’s where I stopped last week. I’m surprised that I didn’t get called out, because the text doesn’t end there. Listen to the rest of the text.

<i>⁴But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. ⁶Yet this is to</i>	<i>your credit: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.</i>
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The church at Ephesus started off great! But like a lot of marriages, after a few years it was just going through the motions: doing some good work; but it was mechanical; there was no passion in their work. Why? They’d lost their first love.

Some of us are old enough to remember the revivals—a week of church

services every night with a high-powered evangelist preaching 45 minutes and then singing 43 verses of "Just As I Am"... Revivals began losing effectiveness during the 60s, and by the early 70s actually were becoming counterproductive. But in my youth and early adult years those were emotionally charged experiences.

The younger generations might connect to Christian concerts and rallies: three hours of intense, up-beat, heart-pounding emotion; leaving on a spiritual high.

Either case: revivals or concerts, three days later... back to life as usual. I wonder if the Church at Ephesus was experiencing something like that.

Feelings and emotions, in themselves, are neither good nor bad; they just are. And to ignore them or deny them is to risk some serious relational and psychological problems; but those romantic moments spent with your soul mate are just that: momentary. Those exhilarating autumn afternoons when the Razorbacks are winning fade with the next loss. The excitement of taking a new baby home has to make room for 2:00 AM diaper changes. That spiritual high when the praise band rocks your favorite song may not last through the preacher's sermon.

Those feelings and emotions are real, and they are to be taken seriously; but, if they are the basis and foundation of what we experience as love, then love for us is a house built on sand.

In *The Secret of Staying in Love*, John Powell wrote, "Love is not a feeling. Feelings change too much for love to be based on them. Feelings might start off a love relationship, but they cannot sustain it. Love is a decision-commitment. Love involves primarily giving, not receiving. It is a decision to spend time with and follow through on responsibilities made to the loved one. It takes work."

Feelings are not enough. Correct doctrine is not enough. Hard work is not enough; in fact, it's easy to get so preoccupied with "church work" that we lose our first love and are on the road to burnout. The letter to the church in Ephesus is not about "church work"; it's about love. The word, "love" is used 20 times. Passion is all well and good; but sometimes we confuse passion with love. They're not the same thing. [BTW, there also is a significant difference between "church work" and "the work of the church." "Church work" leads to burnout; "the work of the church" leads to a sense of fulfillment and joy. And the difference is love.

Back in the 70s and 80s Jo Lynn and I were active in Christian Marriage

Encounter, and John Powell's phrase, "love is a decision," was a key element in that model for enriching marriage. Our marriage has never been in serious trouble (at least as far as I'm aware—but I'm a guy; sometimes I'm just oblivious), but there always are cycles in any relationship: high points and low points, and Jo Lynn and I find it very freeing to know: "I can choose to love you, even in those low moments when I don't feel loving toward you. And I can do that with confidence, knowing that any negative feelings I may be having will pass, because all feelings pass.

I've no clue how many married couples have come to me fearing their marriage is over: ("we're just not in love any more") when all that's happened is they got stuck at one of those low points in the normal cycle of human relationships, and they were running at the feeling level, and they panicked. And so we talk about "choosing to love," compared to "being in love." Both are important; and when they happen at the same time, that's when that relationship cycle hits the high point.

The church at Ephesus lost its first love. Maybe they were operating on feelings. And here is the message to them: "*repent*". The word means, literally, "turn," or "turn around." There's nothing about feelings there. It's a conscious, intentional choice—a decision: "Remember where you were, and return there." Sounds like a decision, to me.

I don't recall, anywhere in Scripture, that God's people are called to respond to God on the basis of emotion, or feelings. But, in my personal experience, and in sharing with others, when you're being intentional in any relationship and choosing to love, and if it's mutual (and with God, it always is), almost always the feelings are there, too.

In Jesus' name, Amen.