

**John, Take A Letter
Ephesus
Revelation 2:1-7**

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We now move on to the next section of John's outline from Revelation 1:19.

The things which are

The seven churches that Jesus addresses here in the book of Revelation are real churches that existed in at that time in Asia Minor. John is familiar with each one of them. He may have taught in each one of them at time or another.

I am sure he was not fully aware of all the things that Jesus provides him insight into as Jesus begins to address each of the seven churches. These are letters that Jesus is dictating to John for each church.

We call the contents of these chapters Epistles; but they are not so much messages from an absent Lord as sentences of a present Judge, engaged in the solemn act of inspection and decision. (Seiss 1901, 149)

As we dig into this next section of Revelation, each church that is referenced has four possible interpretations available.

First of all, each letter is addressed to a specific church and the angel of that specific church. There is a historical, point in time application to each letter with a direct message for the church being written to in John's time. They have issues and Jesus is addressing those or He is encouraging the church to keep going on.

At the end of each separate letter there is the admonition "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Each church, "each one is a composite picture of the church. There is something that is applicable to all churches in all ages in each message to each individual church. In other words, when you read the message to the church in Pergamum, there is a message for your church and a message for you personally." (McGee 1997, 898)

Based on the ending of each letter we see the second interpretation. Each letter applies to all churches everywhere throughout history including the church today. A type of each church has always been around. But each letter also applies to you and me as they also exist today.

A third way of looking at these letters is to take each letter to be representative of a period of actual church history. This means that when written, they were prophetic in nature as well, now we see them as historical. If you were to take these churches and arrange them in any other order, they would not fit this picture. Doctor Walvoord tells us that "Many expositors believe that in addition to the obvious implication of these messages the seven churches represent the chronological development of church history viewed spiritually." (Walvoord 2008, 52)

A fourth way to look at this comes Doctor Seiss. "But as the seven Churches were representative and inclusive of the entire Church, these Epistles also give Christ's judgment of the entire Church, and are necessarily anticipative of its entire history. In other words, they give us, from the beginning, the exact

picture of the whole history of the Church, as that history, when finished, shall present itself to the mind of Christ as he contemplates it from the judgment seat, which is really the point from which everything presented in the Apocalypse is viewed. We may therefore read in them what was in the beginning, and what the career of the Church has been since, and will be to the end.” (Seiss 1901, 151-152)

Looking again at the possibility that these seven churches are aligned prophetically. Some interpret these churches as prophetic descriptions of Western history from Pentecost to the Second Coming

- Ephesus = the Apostolic Period, A.D. 33–100 (Pentecost to John)
- Smyrna = the Period of Persecution, A.D. 100–313 (John to Constantine)
- Pergamum = the Period of Constantine, A.D. 313–590 (Constantine to Gregory)
- Thyatira = Papal Rome, A.D. 590–1517 (Gregory to Luther)
- Sardis = Reformation, A.D. 1517–1792 (Luther - Carey)
- Philadelphia = Modern Missionary Movement, A.D. 1792–1914 (Carey to rapture)
- Laodicea = Period of Apostasy, A.D. 1914 - Parousia (WWI - Parousia) (Utley 2001, 30)

The bottom line, every picture we will look at, each church we examine, exists within each period of church history, it may be characteristic of a specific period of church history, it is applicable to a church John knew, but it is also applicable to us today.

There are some remarkable similarities in comparing these letters to the seven churches to the movement of church history since the beginning of the apostolic church. For instance, Ephesus seems to characterize the apostolic church as a whole, and Smyrna seems to depict the church in its early persecutions. However, the Scriptures do not expressly authorize this interpretation, and it should be applied only where it fits naturally. After all, these churches all existed simultaneously in the first century. (Walvoord, Revelation 1985, 932-933)

As we study these churches, I'll point out some similarities between the church being referred to and church history. I will also be referring to the church today at times as well.

As it pertains to all 7 churches, looking at them as a unit there are some things which begin to jump out at you. We will see the church in Ephesus (1) and Laodicea (7) are both in grave danger of losing their lampstands. Two of the churches have nothing good said about them at all, Sardis (5) and Laodicea (7). The last four churches Jesus addresses are connected with the rapture of the church. There is a reference that takes place within the body of the text to them that touches on the topic. We see the following historical picture also of the last four churches.

Thyatira - Orthodox Church
Sardis – Protestant Reformation Church
Philadelphia – End time true church, missionary church
Laodicea – End time false church

Philadelphia – accepted and promised deliverance
Laodicea – Rejected and left behind

Nothing bad is said about two churches, Smyrna (2) and Philadelphia (6). We will see warnings against apostasy, compromise, false doctrine (antinomianism), tolerance of false teachers, hypocrisy, legalism, formalism, apathy and indifference. In other words, everything we see in the church today.

We all share the same problem with John, we all look on the outside, we look at appearances and do not see the problems within especially if there are not visible symptoms. But Jesus looks at the inside and shows us the motivation as well as the condition of the heart providing a true picture of the condition of each church.

As we enter this section of Revelation, we need to remember what it is that the Lord said to Samuel in 1 Samuel 16:7. “But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”” (NASB95)

The first church is the Ephesian church which was proud of its position not only as “the metropolis of Asia” (as Ephesus was called) but also of its heritage as the mother church of the region. Therefore, it is natural that this be the first church addressed, not only for its status but also because the mail route for these letters would naturally begin there. (Osborne 2002, 111)

Let’s take a look at this first city, Ephesus.

During the period of the Roman Empire, Ephesus was the capital of the Roman province of Asia and an important seaport for travel and trade through Asia Minor along the Cayster (Kaystros) River Valley. Ephesus moved around as the Cayster River silted the harbor. As the city decayed, the harbor was neglected. Today Ephesus stands seven miles inland in the modern town of Selçuk, near Kusadasi

Pliny the Elder discussed the sea “receding”

The same thing also happened in the harbour of Ambracia, for a space of 10,000 paces, and was also said to have taken place for 5000 at the Piræus of Athens, and likewise at Ephesus, where formerly the sea washed the walls of the temple of Diana. (Pliny the Elder 1855, 1117)

You can see the current harbor outside of Ephesus today at the Kusadasi harbor.



(Bolen 2012, Used with Permission)

Looking from the site of Ephesus towards the current town of Selçuk, you can see how the old harbor filled in.



(Bolen, Ephesus area of bay and ancient city from Selçuk 2012, Used with Permission)

Even though there is a new name for the city, as you can see, Ephesus (Selçuk) continues on today, just not as a major port.

The population at the time of John, about 250,000 people. This is not a small city.

During the period of time that John was there, a booming large city existed that had a major temple to Artemis.

In the first century, however, the great temple of Artemis was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world and a major destination for pilgrims and tourists from across the Mediterranean. It was 130 × 70 meters [142 × 77 yards] in terms of its footprint—almost four times the footprint of the Parthenon. Its high roof was supported by more than 120 towering columns. (deSilva 2018, Ephesus)

There is not much of that temple left as it was not uncommon for the stones to be reused elsewhere. This is a view of it today.



(Bolen, Ephesus Temple of Artemis ruins 2012, Used with Permission)

Most of the stone used for that temple though wound up being used to build the fortress as well as the Basilica that is at the site.



(Bolen, Ephesus Selçuk fortress aerial 2012, Used with Permission)

Religiously, Ephesus was best known for its temple to the fertility goddess Artemis (Roman Diana). The “Artemision” was outside the city (northeast of it) and had literally thousands of priests and priestesses, many of them sacred prostitutes. Biguzzi (1998a: 279) states that it was the largest building in the ancient world and the first major temple made completely out of marble. The temple was four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens, 425 feet long and 220 feet wide, with 127 pillars 60 feet high. There were enough

gifts, donations, and bank deposits to make it the pillar of Ephesian wealth and the leader of the province of Asia. (Osborne 2002, 109)

Acts 19:23–28

About that time there occurred no small disturbance concerning the Way. For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, was bringing no little business to the craftsmen; these he gathered together with the workmen of similar trades, and said, “Men, you know that our prosperity depends upon this business. “You see and hear that not only in Ephesus, but in almost all of Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away a considerable number of people, saying that gods made with hands are no gods at all. “Not only is there danger that this trade of ours fall into disrepute, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis be regarded as worthless and that she whom all of Asia and the world worship will even be dethroned from her magnificence.” When they heard this and were filled with rage, they began crying out, saying, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” (NASB95)



(Bolen, Ephesus theater aerial 2012, Used with Permission)

So much for the Temple and for Artemis. I find it fitting that the stones were taken and used for the Basilica built during the Byzantine era as well as for the fortress.

The church in Ephesus was actually founded by Priscilla and Aquila. Paul stopped in now and then and used it as a center of operations for a time.

Acts 18:18–19

“Paul, having remained many days longer, took leave of the brethren and put out to sea for Syria, and with him were Priscilla and Aquila. In Cenchrea he had his hair cut, for he was keeping a vow. They came to Ephesus, and he left them there. Now he himself entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews.” (NASB95)

Acts 19:1

“It happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus, and found some disciples.” (NASB95)

Acts 19:10

“This took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.” (NASB95)

Paul wrote a letter to the church in Ephesus and alluded to problems with false teaching there.

Ephesians 4:14

“As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming;” (NASB95)

His letters to the Pastor there, Timothy, also deals with the same topic of false teachers.

John possibly also tried to address the same issue in his letter, 1 John.

Here you can see Saint John's basilica and the Fortress, both built with the stone from the temple to Artemis.



(Bolen, Ephesus St Johns Basilica with Selçuk fortress 2012, Used with Permission)



(Bolen, Ephesus St. John's basilica grave of St. John 2012, Used with Permission)

The cult of Caesar also thrived in Ephesus.

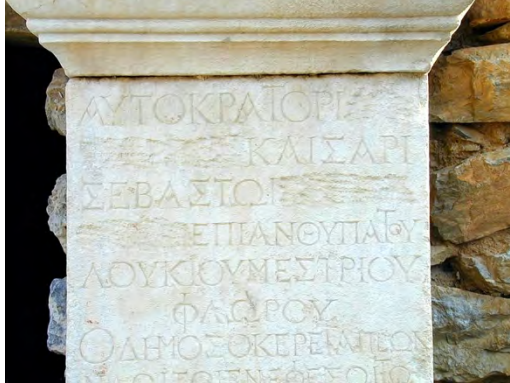
It was above all Domitian—the oppressive emperor under whom John was exiled to Patmos—who made his presence known at Ephesus. At the upper end of Curetes Street on a large terrace, 50 × 100 m. (164' × 328'), a great altar and temple were erected to Domitian. (Yamauchi 1979, 73)



(Bolen, Ephesus Temple of Domitian remains 2012, Used with Permission)

Recall that John is on Patmos because of Domitian, the Emperor, who also had a temple to himself built in Ephesus.

He was so well liked, that shortly after his assassination, the city tried to erase him.



(Bolen, Ephesus inscription with Domitian's name rubbed out 2012, Used with Permission)

When Domitian was assassinated in 96, the Ephesians probably destroyed the emperor's colossal marble statue, the head and forearm of which have been recovered. The statue was four times lifesize with the forearm extending to a man's height. (Yamauchi 1979, 73)

Ephesus was a modern city. The homes had running water and sewers as did the baths.

This was a modern city which had a library as well as various stadiums for entertainment. Recall that Paul was dragged into one of the stadiums.

The one thing you don't see today in Ephesus, or in the surrounding modern towns and villages, is an active church. To begin with this may not seem odd. But Ephesus had been one of the major centres of early Christianity. By the early second century, Christian writers were holding up Ephesus as a great example of Christian faith, life and witness. For several centuries it held a position of pre-eminence, and one of the great fifth-century church councils was held there (AD 431). Archaeologists have found a church building in the city, which may be where that council took place. But there are, to repeat, no active churches there today. If there are any Christians there, they are in hiding. (Wright 2011, 11)

Revelation 2:1–7

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this: ‘I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name’s sake, and have not grown weary. ‘But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. ‘Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent. ‘Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ‘He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.’” (NASB95)

About Ephesus

We see in Acts 19:1–20:1 that the church in Ephesus was so alive in Christ, so profoundly in love with Jesus, that it was making a powerful impact upon the world around it. All the residents of the province of Asia heard the gospel (Acts 19:10), the name of Jesus was extolled (Acts 19:17), and a burning of magic books revealed a radical paradigm shift in the lives of believers in the midst of the culture of Ephesus (Acts 19:19). In addition, the economy of the city was affected so much that the metalsmiths stirred up the

entire citizenship body to hold an unscheduled meeting (Acts 19:23–41). Obviously, the church in Ephesus was impacting its world with the gospel. (Mulholland Jr. 2011, 435)

The first letter is to the church that John happens to be one of the pastors of. It is the church that Paul spent more time at than any other church. We see in Acts 20:31 how long Paul was there. “Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.” (NASB95)

Jesus, in each of His letters to the seven churches, utilizes a methodology that we see in the Old Testament. For example, Zechariah 1:3.

Consequently, the use of the formula here and to introduce the sayings of Christ in the letters emphasizes that Christ assumes the role of Yahweh. Such a role for Christ has already been shown in other respects in 1:12–18. Indeed, this formula demands that chs. 2–3 be seen as a group of prophetic messages rather than as mere letters. (Beale 1999, 229)

In fact, in Zechariah alone, the prophetic terminology is used 19 times. Ezekiel, 126 times. By using this term, Jesus, in His “John take a letter” section here in chapter 2 and 3, is letting us know that these are prophetic messages.

There is an aspect that is “the things which are,” but there is also the aspect of prophecy as well

By way of the introduction that Jesus uses, He is letting the church at Ephesus know that He is in the middle of what they do. He knows everything. He is God.

He is aware of everything and by being in the role of priest tending to the lampstands, He is also working to ensure that the lights stay lit and bright with plenty of oil, the oil being the Holy Spirit.

The church at Ephesus is a type of the early New Testament church. Everything is new, as in a new church plant today, but as with many churches, even today, doctrinal issues creep in as well as false teachers.

The body at Ephesus works hard, Jesus says so and they have encountered some issues along the way. Jesus notes three things they have done:

1. Work hard
2. Hang in there
3. They do not tolerate sin in the camp

Jesus commends them for their struggle to remain doctrinally faithful and to keep evil out. In fact, Jesus makes note of the traveling “apostles” but who really were not. No one knew what they looked like. These false apostles became a problem for the early church.

Here is a short list from Romans, there are other references in Acts as well as some of the other epistles. It was important to know who you were talking to when someone showed up and said “I am ...”

Romans 16:7–12

“Greet Andronicus and Junia, my compatriots and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles, and they were in Christ before me. Greet Ampliatus, my dear friend in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my good friend Stachys. Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus. Greet Herodion, my compatriot. Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord. Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, laborers in the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord.” (NET)

The importance of Ephesus in the ancient world and its crucial location on the trade route between Rome and the East made it susceptible to itinerant frauds. The problem was especially acute in predominantly

Gentile areas, where recent converts were less apt to be schooled in OT backgrounds and could easily misunderstand Christian terminology. (Mounce 1997, 68)

Matthew 7:15–20

“Watch out for false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are voracious wolves. You will recognize them by their fruit. Grapes are not gathered from thorns or figs from thistles, are they? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree is not able to bear bad fruit, nor a bad tree to bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will recognize them by their fruit.” (NET)

The church in Ephesus took the words of Jesus and Paul (Acts 20:28-31) and tested these” wicked men.” So far, a good report card, or so they would think.

As the church in the 21st century, we have to look at this as well and wonder, do we truly contend for the faith? Do we know doctrine and are we able to identify when someone comes with a teaching that isn’t quite right? It is more important now, than ever before, to test.

Acts 17:11

“These Jews were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they eagerly received the message, examining the scriptures carefully every day to see if these things were so.” (NET)

One of the gifts of the Spirit is discernment. If that is your gift, there is a need for the exercising of it in the body. They (false teachers) have arrived.

2 Peter 2:1–3

“But false prophets arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. These false teachers will infiltrate your midst with destructive heresies, even to the point of denying the Master who bought them. As a result, they will bring swift destruction on themselves. And many will follow their debauched lifestyles. Because of these false teachers, the way of truth will be slandered. And in their greed they will exploit you with deceptive words. Their condemnation pronounced long ago is not sitting idly by; their destruction is not asleep.” (NET)

So how do they infiltrate? What is the process that is being taken today?

- Christian radio
- Podcasts
- Christian television
- Books

For example, when small groups are put together here at Calvary, many times there is also a book that is proposed to be used along with the group. I spend a lot of time answering questions regarding some of those books and have flat out recommended “no” more than once. The other pastors here at Calvary are doing the same, but with all of us watching, it still is not enough. We desperately need those who have been gifted by the Holy Spirit to exercise their gifts.

1 Corinthians 12:7

“But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” (NASB95)

Jesus continues on in verse 3 commending the church in Ephesus for the focus it had on ensuring doctrinal purity, the church was all about orthodoxy which is one of the things a healthy church should be paying attention to, but it cannot be all you pay attention to.

Good report card so far, but then the shoe drops

Revelation 2:4

“But I have this against you, that you have left your first love.” (NASB95)

Something had happened in Ephesus; the love was gone.
Remember what it was like when you first gave your life to Christ?
Remember what it was like when the church first started meeting?

The church in Ephesus was unbalanced, not hard to have happen. It is easy to forget that the mission is to catch fish, not clean the pond; once alligators and snakes start bothering you. You start paying more attention to those things that damage our love for Jesus and our brothers and sisters.

Remember what is in Ephesus, the 7th wonder of the ancient world, the temple to Artemis.
The church in Ephesus had so infiltrated Ephesian society that the trades involved with the temple were beginning to suffer.

For example, when revival hit Wales in 1905, “All across Wales theaters closed, jails emptied, churches filled, and soccer matches were canceled to avoid conflicting with the revival. Welsh miners were so converted that their pit ponies had to be retrained to work without the prodding of curse words. (Morgan 1997)

The Ephesian church had that kind of impact, do we?

Have we left our first love?

But then the church seemed to have fallen back into the defensive posture of orthodoxy rather than continue the offensive of evangelism. This may have been due to the pressures that the society of Ephesus was putting upon the church, thus the double reference to endurance (2:2–3). The church maintained their allegiance to Jesus and had not become tired of being faithful citizens of New Jerusalem. They were not, however, reaching out to their world with the liberating, healing, cleansing, transforming reality of God’s grace in Jesus. While they were profoundly orthodox, they were no longer evangelistic. (Mulholland Jr. 2011, 435)

Every church in every age faces this danger. There are churches all around us that have majored on orthodoxy to the point they have injured those who were relying on them for help.

The Ephesian church had ceased being a rescue mission, a hospital, and turned into a court; “this failure of Ephesus’ angel (and Christians associated with him) is probably especially manifested in lack of love towards other Christians.” (Boxall 2006, 50)

Jesus warns us of what our time will be characterized by.

Matthew 24:12

“Because lawlessness is increased, most people’s love will grow cold.” (NASB95)

1 John 2:11

“But the one who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes.” (NASB95)

Mark 12:29–31

Jesus answered, “The foremost is, ‘HEAR, O ISRAEL! THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD; AND YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH.’ “The second is this, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (NASB95)

Love is important to Jesus, and the church in Ephesus had missed that.

Jesus has identified the problem; he is right to the point. He does that. When you take seriously your walk with Him and ask Him to show you things in your life that may be a hindrance to your walk with Him, He will be just as direct and to the point.

We can then deal with what He has shown us or ignore it and realize we are no longer obedient. We asked Him to show us what we need to clear up, in shows us, and for the Ephesians, He then tells them what they need to do, repent. Most likely the same action for us.

Revelation 2:5

“Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent.” (NASB95)

Repent. We need to change our mind, which is what the Greek word *metanoeo* means.

The word is in the imperative here meaning this is a command.

If we focus on the action words here, we see the following:

- Remember – we have to (imperative) remember, right now, today, where we were in Christ
- Repent – as we remember, we find ourselves in need of repenting, of changing our minds and this is to be a point in time decision that must take place
- Do – as a result of repenting, we then must do what we did at first. This is not optional

The natural progression, remembering leads to repentance leads to picking up and doing what was done before.

Now we see some of the reasons behinds what John wrote later in 1 John

1 John 1:8–10

“If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.” (NASB95)

So, if I am stubborn, and I am, and I refuse to repent, what happens.

Jesus loves the Ephesian church; He wants them to repent as He knows that is the best for them and that is how to enhance the flame and light on the lampstand. That is how to ensure the flow of oil is free.

But He gives the alternative, no repentance, no more church.

To make this point more emphatically, John then states it negatively. If they refuse to repent and return to the loving community they used to be, they will face Jesus as Judge, the God with the blazing eyes and sharp double-edged sword. The warning is stated two ways to stress its seriousness—“if you do not,” and “unless you repent.” The penalty is incredibly severe: Christ will remove their lampstand. He will come to them in judgment, not just at his second coming but in the near future. (Osborne, Revelation: Verse by Verse, Osborne New Testament Commentaries 2016, 50)

Did they repent?

Ignatius of Antioch wrote a letter to Ephesus in the second century AD

Ignatius of Antioch

Ignatius, who is also called Theophorus, to the church at Ephesus in Asia, blessed with greatness through the fullness of God the Father, predestined before the ages for lasting and unchangeable glory

forever, united and elect through genuine suffering by the will of the Father and of Jesus Christ our God, a church most worthy of blessing: heartiest greetings in Jesus Christ and in blameless joy.

1. I welcome in God your well-beloved name which you possess by reason of your righteous nature, which is characterized by faith in and love of Christ Jesus our Savior. Being as you are imitators of God, once you took on new life through the blood of God you completed perfectly the task so natural to you. (Ignatius of Antioch 1999, 137)

But I have learned that certain people from there have passed your way with evil doctrine, but you did not allow them to sow it among you. You covered up your ears in order to avoid receiving the things being sown by them, because you are stones of a temple, prepared beforehand for the building of God the Father, hoisted up to the heights by the crane of Jesus Christ, which is the cross, using as a rope the Holy Spirit; your faith is what lifts you up, and love is the way that leads up to God. (Ignatius of Antioch 1999, 143)

This is only one of two churches that Jesus says is in danger of losing their lampstand, the other is the church in Laodicea. That church is also a picture of the last days church of today. More to come when we get there.

Jesus, after providing the angel the warning, makes sure they know about one other thing they get right, they hate the Nicolaitans.

We do not know much about them, but we do know what they taught, and it sounds a lot like the culture today.

The Nicolaitans' practices apparently centered on idolatry, including participation in temple rites and trade guild banquets ("food sacrificed to idols" in 2:14, 20), and sexual immorality. Broadly speaking, there were two problems. The first was syncretism: having an accommodating attitude toward paganism and allowing Christians to participate in emperor worship. The second was libertinism: showing freedom from sin by doing what you want on the premise that it doesn't affect your salvation. (Osborne, Revelation: Verse by Verse, Osborne New Testament Commentaries 2016, 51-52)

In the church today, we see the same, it goes under the name of cheap grace. Basically, "I have my fire insurance and now I can do anything I want."

Paul warned about this way of living.

Romans 6:11–18

"So you too consider yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its desires, and do not present your members to sin as instruments to be used for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who are alive from the dead and your members to God as instruments to be used for righteousness. For sin will have no mastery over you, because you are not under law but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Absolutely not! Do you not know that if you present yourselves as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or obedience resulting in righteousness? But thanks be to God that though you were slaves to sin, you obeyed from the heart that pattern of teaching you were entrusted to, and having been freed from sin, you became enslaved to righteousness." (NET)

Not only are the Nicolaitans an Ephesian problem, it is a problem today.

Paul's warning that the world will enter a time when people will "no longer listen to sound and wholesome teaching" (2 Tim. 4: 3) but instead will "follow their own desires and will look for teachers who will tell them whatever their itching ears want to hear" (v. 4) and "reject the truth and chase after myths" (v. 4) is an apt description of America at the start of the twenty-first century. (Barna 2016, Kindle Locations 356-359)

Few population segments generate as much heat or garner as much attention as evangelicals. Although they comprise only 7 percent of the adult public, they have disproportionate influence in our culture. Their influence is driven by their strong conviction that the purpose of their life is to love God by serving and obeying Him, and that their Christian faith is meant to be lived wholeheartedly, not merely believed intellectually.[1] Evangelicals are an example of a niche that is small but mighty. Even within church circles they are dwarfed by non-evangelical born-again Christians (who are about 30 percent of the population) and notional Christians (people who consider themselves to be Christian but have not confessed their sins and asked Christ to save them, a segment that constitutes about 40 percent of the population). In other words, among all of the adults who consider themselves to be Christian, evangelicals are outnumbered ten to one by those who do not embrace biblical positions on sin, salvation, and Scripture. (Barna 2016, Kindle Locations 737-745)

Revelation 2:7

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.” (NASB95)

The ear is a reference to the blood tipped ear of the priest.

Exodus 29:20

“You shall slaughter the ram, and take some of its blood and put it on the lobe of Aaron’s right ear and on the lobes of his sons’ right ears and on the thumbs of their right hands and on the big toes of their right feet, and sprinkle the rest of the blood around on the altar.” (NASB95)

This means the priest is ready to listen to the Lord, to hear what He has to say, “Now He speaks to those with spiritual perception.” (McGee 1997, 903)

The overcomer, not the overtaken.

Many today are overtaken by the world and do not fall into the realm of the overcomer.

Jesus is talking to those who are planted in good soil, those who truly believe, overcomers.

Those who have a lifestyle of following, we all are overtaken at times, even the Ephesians, but true believers will take serious what Jesus is saying, repent and return to first things, to loving Him and those who love Him as well as those who need Him.

The overcomers in Revelation are not those who have conquered an earthly foe by force, but those who have remained faithful to Christ to the very end. The victory they achieve is analogous to the victory of Christ on the cross. (Mounce 1997, 72)

The overcomer will no longer be blocked by the divine guard of the tree of life from access, they have access. Jesus promises us life

John 10:10

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (NASB95)

The overcomer has access to Eden, the Eden which God always intended and will establish here on the earth.

Revelation 22:2

“in the middle of its street. On either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.” (NASB95)

Overcomer, or overtaken. Our choice.

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