

“Ephesus: First Love”

Revelation 2:1-7

Introduction

Recently we began a new series on the last book of the Bible, the book of **Revelation**. What I’m going to show you in a moment is a two minute video clip from an excellent resource put out by the people at “The Bible Project” who have been working at putting together pictorial overviews of each of the books of the Bible. For those of you who have been here the past two weeks this 2 minute clip will be a good review of what we’ve covered. For those of you who weren’t here, this is a quick way for you to catch up. **Bible Project Clip**

Biblical Contact

The recipients of the revelation are seven churches in Asia. **SLIDE3** The seven churches are actual churches. Some interpreters (e.g. Scofield, Walvoord), argue that each church stands for a different period in history. Such speculations are unlikely, because all the indications we are given in the text itself (names, locations, historical details), these indicate that the messages are directed to the first-century churches in the province of Asia. There were other churches in Asia at this time **SLIDE4** (Hierapolis^{Col.4:13}; Colossae^{Col.1:2}; Troas^{Acts20:5-12; 2Cor.2:12; 2Tim4:13}) so although these 7 are specific churches they are probably also representative of the whole church.¹ After all, all 7 letters are in one document and are sent to all the churches (“you” & “your” = plural in Greek and everyone ends with “let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches”) so that “all the believers...end up reading everyone else’s mail.”² That is what Christ and John intended. That is what we have done and should do with all the letters we have in the NT (*cf.* **Col. 4¹⁶**).

The main content of the revelation is clearly Christ himself as John witnessed him “unveiled” in all his glory in chapter one. Darrell Johnson makes the simple but important point that the title itself will keep us on track in our

¹ Robert Mounce, *Revelation* (NICNT), p.67.

² Gordon Fee, *Revelation*, p. 22.

reading, after all, “The title of the book is The Revelation of Jesus Christ³ by Jesus Christ about Jesus Christ. The book is all about Jesus Christ.”⁴ He is its grand theme. **Read Revelation 2:1-7**

Structural Contact

In each of the seven letters or messages to the churches that we’ll be looking at in Revelation 2-3, there is a common pattern. In every case the opening is the same, “To the *angel* of the church in _____ write.” The unexpected element, for many of us, is the instruction to write to “the *angel*” of each church. What are we to make of this?

A good place to start is to look at the original word (*angelos* = “messenger” in Greek)⁵. An *angelos* is usually a *heavenly* messenger but on occasion is also used to refer to *human* messengers (Lk. 7²⁴; 9⁵²). So from the word’s range of meaning there are two options. So we need to look at the context. Having the message written and sent to a *human* leader makes the most logical sense for us, **but** when we look at how the word is used everywhere else in Revelation, *angelos* always = a heavenly messengers, angels. Probably...angels.

What is crystal clear, as Darrell Johnson notes, is this:

What Jesus speaks to the angel of each church is meant for the ears of the church. ...The message to the angel is actually a message through the angel to the church.⁶

In the **introduction** to each letter the author (Christ) identifies himself with a descriptive phrase or image drawn, for the most part, from aspects already unveiled for us in chapter one. This indicates that these letters are an integral part of the whole book, and should not be separated or detached. Indeed, the specific description Christ gives of himself to each church is an aspect of Christ each particular church most needed to see and hear.

³ Does the entire phrase mean “the revelation about Jesus Christ” (a Greek construction called an “objective genitive”) or “the revelation from Jesus Christ” (a “subjective genitive”), or both? If it means the former, Jesus will be the subject of the book of Revelation from start to finish; if the latter, then other issues may be central in the book. See Keener, p. 53.

⁴ Darrell Johnson, Discipleship On The Edge, p. 14.

⁵ But in the Greek OT it was used to refer to *heavenly* messengers (translated as “angels” in English). Fee, 19.

⁶ Darrell Johnson, Discipleship On The Edge, p. 53.

The main content of each letter or prophetic message includes Christ's commendations and critiques of each church. **SLIDE6** Of course *everyone* has an opinion of the church and what the church should do more of or less of. But don't you sometimes wonder what *Christ* thinks of the church? Stay tuned to find out for one of the things that we will notice time and again is Christ saying not "I think..." but "I know". "Ephesus, I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance."^{2:2} "Smyrna, I know your afflictions and your poverty."^{2:9} "Pergamum, I know where you live—where Satan has his throne."^{2:13} "Eagle Ridge Bible Fellowship, I know you too inside and out," Christ says, because he not only stands in the middle of the churches (recall 1¹²⁻¹³) but, as we see in 2¹, Christ "*walks* among" his churches. That is why he can say with absolute certainty to every church, "I know." His authority & certainty are unquestionable.

To every church Christ also gives a command of what to do based on his commendations and critiques. "Consider how far you have fallen."^{Ephesus} "Do not be afraid...Be faithful."^{Smyrna} "Repent!"^{Pergamum} "Hold on to what you have until I come."^{Thyatira} And to each church Christ spells out the consequences of obeying, or not obeying, his commands before finally concluding with the famous call, "Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

The basic form Jesus uses was familiar to his Jewish and Gentile audiences (prophetic oracles & royal edicts) and also makes a statement (in his opening and closing commands) that he is the ultimate authority.⁷ His evaluation is the one that carries ultimate weight and importance.

Ephesus – So we come now to Christ's message to Ephesus. **SLIDE8** Ephesus is the "first" church to which Jesus speaks, partly because it was the first church the delivery person would reach after sailing across the water from the island of Patmos to the mainland of Asia. But the port city of Ephesus was also "first" in

⁷ The seven "messages" bear a remarkable semblance to the so-called "royal edicts" that Roman Governors sent out to local municipalities, edicts which praised citizens for the good they were doing, and criticized them for the bad. The people were warned of severe consequences if they did not correct the problems, and were promised great rewards if they did. See Darrell Johnson, Discipleship On The Edge, p. 50 and his sources.

terms of being the biggest and most influential city in the Roman province of Asia.⁸ At this time in the first century it had a ¼ million people and was the fourth largest city in the entire Roman Empire. It was a multi-cultural urban centre:⁹ economically, financial centre athletically, Pan-Ionian Games, gyms & aquatic centre, religiously, Temple of Artemis, Temples to Emperor & culturally. Amphitheatre It was truly a world-class city as you'll see from this **VIDEO** clip.

It is not surprising that the church in Ephesus comes “first” among the seven churches. Even though its failure is one of the best known of all (“you have forsaken your first love”), it is also the church that is given some of the most lavish commendation.^{Fee,23} The church at Ephesus exhibited three virtues that Christ commends (= a “triple threat”...Explain briefly).

1st Busy in Service – “*I know your deeds*” Christ says, and immediately adds by way of explanation, “*your hard work*” (*kopos* is related to the word translated “grown weary” in verse 3, *kopaio*, “to labour to the point of exhaustion”^{1Cor.15:10; Gal.4:11}). Several times in the NT it describes missionary activity.^{1Cor.15:58; 1Thess.2:9} The Ephesian church was an active busy hardworking church fully engaged in the range of ministry described elsewhere in the NT: reaching out to the lost, caring for the sick, teaching the young, visiting the isolated and the elderly. Simply put, they’ve been busy yet they haven’t burned out in their service for Christ.

2nd Patient in Suffering – This is a dominant theme in the letters (1⁹; 2^{2,3,19}; 3¹⁰). The Christians in Ephesus had evidently been exposed to some fierce local opposition (like Paul had when he was there—Acts 19). After all, the city was filled with major temples of many religions (Artemis, emperor worship, magical arts, false apostles and “wicked people”). Many people earned a livelihood from these pagan religions and from social evils (like they do in our day). From the riot in Acts

⁸ A contemporary visitor to the site of the ruins of Ephesus can only be amazed to learn that in John’s day the city was located on the coastline itself, since its harbor has long been silted by years of flow from the Cayster River.

⁹ At this time Ephesus was truly a multi-cultural world-class city, the 4th largest city in the Roman Empire (1st = Rome, 2nd = Alexandria, 3rd = Antioch). It was a major financial centre with a major seaport. When it came to sports, it was home to the Pan-Ionian Games (surpassed only by the Olympic Games in Athens) and was a major religious centre with temples for emperor worship and the temple of Artemis, one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient World (the size of two football fields). It also had an amphitheater that could seat 24,000 people. Darrell Johnson, Discipleship On The Edge, pp. 53-54.

19 we know that people who became Christians dramatically changed their viewing & spending habits. Imagine if all of those who call themselves Christian in our culture expressed it in what we buy and watch, or stopped buy and stopped watching. What impact would it have in our city if we did?

We know what impact it had in Ephesus when Paul was there and though Paul had left Ephesus and died decades ago, the backlash against Christians still lingered (verbal slurs, social ostracism, economic boycotts, & political pressure). Yet despite all the backlash, the Ephesian Christians had not denied Christ. They remained firm and unwavering in their allegiance to him.

3rd Orthodox in their Beliefs – They are praised because a particularly important work they did was they *“tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false.”* There were, and are, people who claim to be telling us the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth about God and the world and what is worth living for. The name some of some of these imposters in Ephesus were “the Nicolaitans” (v.6; cf. 2¹⁵; in our day = _____). We don’t know exactly who the Nicolaitans were or what they taught, but it is enough here to know that what they were teaching and the practices they were condoning were hateful to Christ. We know from Acts 20²⁹⁻³⁰ that Paul had warned the elders of the Ephesian church that such an invasion by heretical teachers would take place. *“²⁹I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. ³⁰Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. ³¹So be on your guard!”*

The “wolves” came as Paul predicted. How did the Ephesian church respond? They did not “tolerate wicked people” a phrase which could be as easily misunderstood as some of the Corinthians did when Paul had written to them “not to associate with sexually immoral people” (1 Cor. 5⁹). Paul later clarified that we all need to rub shoulders with people like this in the world, but we should not be buddy buddy with people who say they follow Christ but still live by the world’s values. (cf. Elaine & Esam’s discussion this week...)

The “wicked people” Christ has in mind here in Ephesus are identified as “*those who claim to be apostles but are not*”. These imposters and counterfeits presented themselves as genuine apostles. So the Ephesians “tested” them, (cf. 1Jn.4¹) rather than immediately embrace or reject them.^{Jos9} Paul’s counsel to the Thessalonian church is a great guide: “*Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good, reject whatever is harmful.*”^{1Thess.5:21-22} No doubt the Ephesian church did the difficult but important work of listening and discussing and praying and comparing what they were hearing with the truth of God’s word. Then, after an honest hearing and a careful testing, they absolutely rejected what the Nicolaitans taught and practiced (beliefs & behaviours). It resulted in a church that was outstanding in their doctrinal integrity (= root & fruit).

“*Yet I hold this against you.*” Ugh. When I hear that critique too often it erases all the commendations that preceded it. But it shouldn’t. The commendations are real and their work of ministry and maintaining biblical integrity are things that needed to be done and were. Yet there is still additional “first” class work to do because you’ve abandoned your first love. For God? one another? Others? All but primarily the first. (Some suggestions if time permits)¹⁰

What they were doing was good stuff, important stuff, great stuff, but it was no longer a labour of love. What is a labour of love like? I was reminded of the story in Genesis 29 where Jacob was in love with Rachel and said to her father, “I’ll work for you seven years in return for your daughter Rachel.”^{v.18} “So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, *but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her.*”^{v.20} That, friends is a labour of love. “Without this love,” said John Stott, “the church’s work is lifeless.”¹¹ That is why love is the first, the foremost, the uppermost mark of a true and living church (& marriage).

¹⁰ (1) “*She has fallen from the spontaneity of the relationship with the God, from the attempt to please the Lord in everything...and from the glow of passion.*”^{Ellul} (2) “*They had fallen from the early heights of their devotion and had descended to the plains of mediocrity.*”^{Stott} (i.e. from romance to routine), (3) “*The zeal of the Ephesian church for witness in the world has been lost.*”^{Beale} (4) “*It has lost the offensive of love and adopted the defensive of orthodoxy.*”^{Mulholland} (5) “*They lack the solidarity that holds the community together.*”^{Richard}

¹¹ John Stott, What Christ Thinks of The Church, p.

- Why do we serve: is it out of duty or devotion?
- How do we serve: as if we have to or as if we get to?
- Who do we serve: primarily ourselves (self-serving) or others?

So what can I do, what can we do if we've lost that lovin' feeling? (church or marriage)

1st Remember your former highs ("Consider" = **mnēmoneúō**). Remember, recall to mind with care or concern¹² and then hold that thought until it sinks in how far (or the heights from which) you have fallen!" Because you are not, we are not, a living church unless we are a loving church. A top drawer church is a church high in love for God and one another because that is what the greatest commands always were and are.

2nd Repent – which means to change direction, to make a dramatic shift rather than a slight alteration. Turn *from* sin and turn *to* the beloved Christ. Jesus does not ask us to conjure up an emotional experience (i.e. to feel bad about our sins), but to take action. "Repent and **do**". Make a change, take a step.

3rd Resume – "do the things you did at first" (re-do). Remember how your relationship with your beloved started? I remember the story of a pastor who met with a young couple for premarital counselling. During their meeting he asked the young man, "When are you thinking of getting married." He replied, "All the time." You can't re-live that...But you can go back to your favourite spot (e.g. Bill Hybels going back to the camp where he came to faith). Go back to the date nights you used to have when you & your spouse were dating. Go back to doing the things that mattered most.

Christ's Call – "*Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says...*"

¹² R. Leivestad, "mnemoneuo" in Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament, 2:435.