

"REVELATION MADE RELEVANT"

A verse by verse exposition of the Bible's most controversial book

Notes are Fr. Ward's personal observations with the exception of the historical background information

II. The Messages to the Seven Churches (2:1-3:22)

A. The Sevenfold Pattern found in each message (review from last study)

It is important to note that **there is a sevenfold pattern** to each message or edict. The breakdown is as follows:

- 1) The recipient church is first identified with the words, *"To the angel of the church in _____ write,"*
- 2) The speaker (Jesus Christ) is mentioned with a reference to one of His identifying features revealed in His vision to John from Rev. 1:12-16.
- 3) An assessment of the church's current state is given by the One (Christ) who knows all.
- 4) A verdict is pronounced on the church's condition.
- 5) Jesus issues a command to correct and/or encourage the congregation.
- 6) There is then the same general exhortation *"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches,"* which may be at the end or the second last from the end of the message. Note that what Christ says is the same as what the Spirit says!
- 7) Finally, there is a victor's promise of reward to those who overcome. The rewards are metaphorical or symbolic of what the believer will receive at the end of the age and correlate to **Rev. 21-22**.

B. The Message to Ephesus (Rev. 2:1-7) (see last study)

C. The Message to Smyrna (Rev. 2:8-11)

1) Historical background of the city of Smyrna

- a) known as the "Supreme Metropolis of Asia" (the Roman Province not continent!) and with a population of nearly 250,000, Ephesus became the de facto capital and commercial center of the province.
- b) home to the Roman governor, it was a "free city" (i.e. self-governed) and located on the west coast, closest to Patmos, at the convergence of three great ancient highways, from north, east, and south; making it a major trade city.
- c) religiously, it was home to the Greek and Roman "bee" fertility goddess *Artemis/Diana*. The temple built in honor of this so-called deity was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Thousands of priests and priestesses were involved in her worship, the latter being involved in cult prostitution.
- d) the Temple was at the heart of the city's commerce, serving as a bank for kings and merchants, as well as an asylum for fleeing criminals!
- e) the moral depravity of the city must have been significant even by ancient standards as one of its own citizens, philosopher Heraclitus, wrote that the inhabitants of the city were *"fit only to be drowned and the reason why he could never laugh or smile was because he lived amidst such terrible (moral) uncleanness."*

2) Historical background of the church in Smyrna

- a) Founded by Aquila, Pricilla and (later) Paul (**Acts 18:18-19; 19:1-10**) visited Ephesus on his second missionary journey (**Acts 18:19-28**) and stayed two years during his third missionary journey first teaching in the synagogue and then in the hall of Tyrannus (**Acts 19:8-10**). See also the rest of Acts 19 for important background information.
- b) So many came to Christ as a result of Paul's ministry that the church became one of the most powerful influences in the city and soon one of the most famous churches in the world. It became the mother church of Asia Minor. It became a very significant and influential church receiving at least one official letter from Paul while he was imprisoned and was under the leadership of Timothy and possibly the Apostle John, himself. In fact, according to church tradition, after Paul's death Timothy continued to work from Ephesus until he was martyred under the persecution of the Emperor Domitian, during which John was sent into exile on Patmos.
- c) Ten years after the death of John, the Emperor Trajan sent Pliny to investigate whether to persecute Christians in Asia Minor. Pliny wrote back that Christians had become so numerous that the pagan temples were almost deserted!
- d) The Church in Ephesus was made up of hundreds of "house churches" where people met in homes and halls. It was before the day of "official" church buildings.
- e) **ACTION POINT:** For the church to be truly successful it must retain the characteristics of a movement, not simply a destination point to go and worship the Lord. If St. Bartholomew's is to truly be all that it can be in Christ, we must refocus so that our mission truly reflects that of a disciple making movement. We will see that in His messages to the seven churches, Jesus gives us no other option!

3) The Words of Christ to the Church in Ephesus (Rev. 2:1-7)

- a) **v.1: *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:*** Here we have the standard address to each church. It goes to the angel of the church thereby highlighting the heavenly reality that each church has before God and that angels are actually over every church! Of course, Christ is over the angels and the churches as He walks among us as evidenced in the description highlighted from John's original vision. There is both the assurance of His presence with His Church but also a note of warning as He walks among the lampstands to keep His Church accountable! The church of Ephesus may have become too proud of its status, forgetting its true mission, hence this reference to the part of Christ's vision that emphasized His authority.
- b) **vv. 2-3: *'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.'*** Christ acknowledges the faithfulness and dedication of the Ephesian Church. They have been faithful to the truth of the Gospel and God's Word. They have not tolerated false teachers. They have the gift of

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spiritual discernment. About fifteen years after this message, church leader, Ignatius wrote to the church in Ephesus and commended them for refusing to give a “home” to any heresy.

- c) **v. 4: ‘But I have this against you, that you have left your first love.’** The one criticism (and it is a big one!) that Christ has is that they have forgotten their first love. In other words, they do not have the same passion for Christ in their personal relationship with Him as when they first believed. It may also include the lack of actually “loving” others in the community by reaching out to them in tangible ways. This is a common trend in many of our churches, including St. Bartholomew’s. We maintain fidelity to God’s Word, we preach that salvation is only through faith in Jesus Christ, we worship God in spirit and truth every Sunday, we combat false teaching, but in terms of actually reaching the community with demonstrable actions of love, we fall short. It should not be overlooked that this message is the first one sent and it is for the church in Ephesus (the largest and most influential church). Why? It will be a common trend in churches that have been established for a long period of time, have a healthy mode of operations, and maintain true doctrine, to get complacent in reaching out to others!
- d) **v. 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.’** Jesus gives us the remedy to correct our complacency – recognize the problem, repent (change course) and do those things (deeds-actions) you did at the beginning which were motivated by love for Christ and others! Otherwise the indifference and half-heartedness of the Ephesian Church would lead to the lukewarmness of the Laodicean Church! The result would mean the eventual end of the church. While it appears that the Ephesian Church took this message to heart in the ensuing decades, it did eventually die. The site of Ephesus is deserted today. Sadly, there is no church there.
- e) **v. 6: ‘Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.’** Jesus still commends the church for standing for the truth and against false teachers. While much is not known about who these “Nicolaitans” are, we do know from 2:14-15 that they may be related to the sin of Balaam which involved mixing the Christian faith with idolatry and cult prostitution. Nicolaitan comes from the Greek words *nikao* (consume/conquer) and *laos* (people), so literally “to conquer the people.” That is exactly what cults do. They control all the adherents, what they think and do. This group undoubtedly wanted to mix the Christian faith with the pagan cultic practices of the city. They may have also been a Gnostic sect which taught that for one to be a true believer they had to be in “the know” and adhere to the “secret” knowledge of the group. Such accommodation with the culture that is contrary to God’s Word must be exposed and rejected by the Church of Jesus Christ. St. Bartholomew’s had this same experience when it rejected the heretical teachings of the Episcopal Church.
- f) **v. 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.’** Another way to say “Listen up!” This time from the Holy Spirit. Finally, we have the promise to all believers, not just the Church in Ephesus, of the reward we receive when we overcome in Christ. How do we overcome – **Rev. 12 – by the blood of the Lamb and the word of our testimony!** Here the reward is to eat from the tree of life which

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harkens back to the garden of Eden as one of the trees Adam and Eve could eat from BEFORE the fall (**Gen. 2:9; 3:22, 24**). Now, in Christ, we have been restored to eat from it again. This promise is reiterated in **Rev. 22:19**. Recall from the last study that the believer does not go to *Hades* but to "*Paradeisos*." This is the same word used in the Greek to translate the Hebrew "garden" of Eden. What was lost by Adam and Eve, and thereby all of mankind, in the garden, will be restored in the new "garden" or Paradise of God!