

A Word about the 7 Churches of Revelation 2-3

These two chapters address the seven churches. They are each unique in their circumstances, makeup and situation. John, however, addresses them in a common manner. Further, these are some specific characteristics about the seven churches we can highlight:

- 1) All 7 Churches follow a distinct and similar *pattern*:
 - a) Characteristic of Christ drawn from Revelation 1 (and other texts).
 - b) A word of *commendation* and *praise* if appropriate.
 - c) *Criticism* for their sins.
 - d) A word of *correction* and *warning*.
 - e) A challenge and promise drawn from Revelation 19-22 (and other texts).
- 2) These were 7 *historical churches* located in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) at the end of the 1st century.
- 3) These churches were in and around the major city of the Province of Asia at that time, the city of *Ephesus*.
- 4) These churches were located on a major postal/travel route and are addressed in a counter clockwise order in term of their location.
- 5) Each of their messages have a word of wisdom and application for all churches throughout history until Jesus comes again. These seven churches do not represent seven ages or dispensations of the church (usually seen as the church in the west).
- 6) The following chart helps us see the parallels and patterns in the 7 letters.

The 7 Churches of Revelation: A Comparison

The Church	Christ	Commendation	Criticism	Correction	Challenge
Ephesus (2:1-7)	Holds the 7 stars in His right hand, walks among the 7 golden lampstands (1:20)	Works, toil, endurance, cannot bear with those who are evil, judges false teachers in word and actions	You left your first love	Remember, repent and return to your first works or be extinguished	You will eat from the tree of life in paradise (22:2)
Smyrna (2:8-11)	The First and The Last, who died and came to life (1:17-18)	I know your tribulation, poverty and the slander you endure			Do not fear, be faithful, you will receive the Crown of Life and not experience the 2 nd death (20:6, 14; 21:8)
Pergamos (2:12-17)	He has the sharp two-edged sword (1:16)	Faithfulness, honor the Name of Jesus, have not denied their faith in Christ.	You hold the teachings of Balaam (Spiritual compromise) leading to idolatry and sexual immorality. You also hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans	Repent or face my sword	Receive my hidden manna, a white stone and a new name (19:12)
Thyatira (2:18-29)	He has eyes like a flame of fire, and his feet are like burnished bronze (1:14, 15)	Works, love, faith service and patient endurance	Tolerate Jezebel, a false prophetess who led them into idolatry and sexual immorality	Repent and hold fast what you have until I come	You will receive authority over the nations and the morning star (20:1-6; 22:16).
Sardis (3:1-6)	He has the 7 spirits of God and the 7 stars (1:4, 20).	Works, not soiled your garments	Spiritually dead	Wake up, strengthen what remains, remember, repent	Clothed in white garments, No one blotted out of the Book of Life. I will confess your name (19:8, 14; 20:12, 15).
Philadelphia (3:7-13)	Holy and true one who has the Key of David, and he opens and shuts (1:8)	Works, kept Jesus' Word and have not denied His name		Just keep holding fast what you have	Kept from the hour of temptation, made a pillar in God's temple, and receives the name of God, New Jerusalem and Jesus' new name (19:12; 21:2; 22:4)
Laodicea (3:14-22)	The Amen, the faithful land true witness, the beginning of God's creation (1:5)		Lukewarm, wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked	Buy refined gold from Jesus and white garments, eye salve. Be zealous and repent.	Communion with Christ, sit on His throne (20:4-6)

When a Church Loses Its Love for Jesus

Revelation 2:1-7

Introduction 1) Few things are more hurtful and painful than when a spouse says to their mate, “I don’t love you anymore.” Sometimes there is shock. Often there are tears. To hear the one you have covenanted with for life say I have lost my passion for you, I no longer desire you, my feelings for you have grown cold rips at the heart and wounds the soul. We may sing a song that says, “you’ve lost that lovin’ feeling,” but we all know this is nothing to sing about.

2) Now, looking in from the outside, we may not actually know what is going on in a marriage. I often say, “no one knows what goes on behind closed doors.” And, sometimes, in fact most times, love for another is lost not in a moment, but over time. It takes place slowly not quickly. We may not even realize it is happening.

3) This was true of the 1st century church in Ephesus. By all outward appearances things were good. However, in this instance looks were deceiving and the Lord who walked in their midst (2:1) knew it. Like many churches, this church was doing many good things. But, they had somehow neglected and lost the most important thing: Christ and the gospel. Their condition was critical but not hopeless. The Christ who love them and had freed them from their sins (1:5) was there to cure them if they would listen.

I. Christ is characterized by His protection 2:1

- The glorified Christ has been revealed to us in all of His glory in 1:13-16.

Both His work of atonement (1:5) and His vindicating resurrection (1:5, 18) have been highlighted. This Christ is sufficient for every need His churches might have. John, on behalf of Christ, writes to the angel who watches over the church at Ephesus.

- Ephesus was a major city of significance in the 1st century politically, commercially and religiously though its significance was waning.

Politically it was the capital of Asia and known as the “Supreme Metropolis of Asia.” Commercially the great highways converged there, and a major seaport was still in place, but silt deposited by the Cayster River was building in the mouth of the harbor and would eventually be the death of the city’s importance. Some have referred to Ephesus as “the Vanity Fair of the Ancient World.” (Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, Vol. 1, 71). Religiously the city was the center for the worship of the fertility goddess “Diana” (Roman) or “Artemis” (Greek). The temple dedicated to Diana was one of the “7 wonders of the ancient world” and a source of intense civic pride. Thousands of priests and priestesses served in the temple, many as religious prostitutes. One of Ephesus’ own philosophers, Heraclitus, was known as the weeping philosopher, and he lamented over the immorality and wickedness of the city saying that its citizens were “fit only to be drowned,

and that the reason he could never laugh or smile was because he lived amidst such terrible uncleanness” (Johnson, *BSC*, 41; see also Criswell, 76-77).

- Paul, Aquila and Priscilla evangelized and founded the church at Ephesus (Acts 18:18-19; 19:1-10). Paul believed the city to be so significant as a gospel outpost that he labored there for at least 2 years (Acts 19:10). His ministry was not uneventful and included a riot related to the temple of Diana. Later Paul would meet with their elders at Miletus (Acts 20:17-38) and he wrote one of his prison letters to them in the early 60’s. Paul, Timothy and now John had ministered to this church. What a heritage! What a danger!!! Here is a 2nd generation church that apparently was living off the prestige and momentum of the past. The past was great, but their present condition was spiritually in trouble.

1) Christ cares

Jesus is described in two ways in v. 1. First, He “holds (present tense) the seven stars in His right hand.” He is in possession of His “church angels” with divine authority. He is responsible for them and they, like us, are accountable to Him. Ladd says, “The Greek verb used here...[indicates] that Christ holds his churches firmly in his hand, that they should not be snatched away (see John 10:28)” (38). Every Church Jesus purchased with His own blood is dear to Him.

2) Christ is there

John says, secondly, Christ “walks (present tense) among the seven gold lampstands.” Our Lord walks about among His people, His church. He is no absentee landlord or disinterested deity. He is there, up close and personal, intimately present.

Application: Christ is our sustainer and protector. He is our vigilant watchmen. He sees what we do, hears what we say, knows how we think and what is in our heart. This brings great assurance. It also brings to light great accountability.

II. The church is commended for its purity 2:2-3, 6

The church was very active and busy in doing many good things. Our Lord accurately and fairly assesses and takes note of these. In fact, every church should seek to emulate the church at Ephesus at this point. Three things, in particular, are recognized and commended by our Lord.

1) Jesus is pleased with our good deeds. 2:2

The church is commended for its a) works, b) labor and c) endurance.

This community was busy for the Lord. Mounce says, “The Ephesians had toiled to the point of exhaustion and borne patiently the hostility of a society at odds with their goals and efforts” (Mounce 68). Further, “they could not tolerate (ESV, “bear;”) evil.” Holiness and purity mattered to them. Scripture, not the culture, guided their moral behavior. Purity of

life was a hallmark of this community of faith. I like how *The Message* phrases it: “I see what you’ve done, your hard, hard work, your refusal to quit. I know you can’t stomach evil...”

2) Jesus is pleased with our dedication 2:3

Jesus says of the Ephesians, “You also possess endurance (v.2) and have tolerated many things (NIV, “endured hardship”) because of My name and have not grown weary.” Life was not easy for these followers of the crucified Galilean. Swindoll notes, “The Ephesian Christians faced special challenges. Because they refused to bow the knee to the goddess Diana or the images of the emperor, they found themselves maligned, slandered, boycotted, and abused. Not unlike Jewish merchants in Berlin in the 1930’s Christians in Ephesus would have been the objects of physical violence, social ostracism, and economic repression. Yet they endured. They bore up under the load. Clearly, Ephesus had been taught well by its predecessors, Paul, Timothy, and John” (38).

3) Jesus is pleased with our sound doctrine 2:2, 6

- This church was theologically orthodox and evangelical to the core. They took confessional identity and doctrinal fidelity very seriously. One of the evidences that they would not “tolerate evil” is that “they tested those who call themselves apostles and are not,

and have found them to be liars.” I suspect the test or theological exams they gave related to things like:

- What do you believe about Jesus? His person and work?
- What is the gospel and how are people born again?
- Do you believe a holy life should complement our confession of Christ?
- Do you teach thing contrary to or in addition to the Word of God and the witness of the 12 apostles?

I think this to be the case because these are the type of issues that arise in virtually every generation. Further, in verse six they are commended because, “You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.” Wow! There is something Jesus hates!

- Exactly who the Nicolaitans were we cannot be sure. It would seem idolatry and immorality were at its roots. What follows in a lengthy excursus.

THE NICOLAITANS

In the New Testament, only two passages refer to the Nicolaitans – Revelation 2:6 and 2:15. Likewise, the church fathers – Irenaeus, Clement, and Tertullian mention the Nicolaitans only briefly. The New Testament shows that the Nicolaitans were a sect whose

teachings were repudiated in Ephesus (2:6), yet they had several adherents in Pergamum (2:15).

[Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 1. 26. 3) identified the Nicolaitans as the heretical followers of Nicolaus, the proselyte of Antioch (Acts 6:5).]

“The Nicolaitans are the followers of that Nicolaus who was one of the seven first ordained to the diaconate by the apostles. They lead lives of unrestrained indulgence. The character of these men is very plainly pointed out in the Apocalypse of John when they are represented as teaching that it is a matter of indifference to practice adultery, and to eat things sacrificed to idols.”

Hippolytus added that one of the seven appointed apostles lapsed from the true doctrine (*The Refutation of All Heresies* 7. 24). Clement of Alexandria identified the followers of Nicolaus as a Gnostic sect who “abandoning themselves to pleasure like goats, as if insulting the body, lead a life of self-indulgence” (*The Stromata* 2. 20). Tertullian asserted that the Nicolaitans aimed at destroying the happiness of sanctity by their lust and luxury (*Against Marcion* 1. 29).

The consensus of early Christian writings is that the Nicolaitans were the followers of Nicolaus (Acts 6:5) and thus, the founders of libertine gnosticism.

Other scholars use etymological study to posit that the word “Nicolaus” is simply the Greek equivalent of Balaam. This view also proposes that the two words, Balaam and Nicolaitan, have common meanings. Balaam, derived from two Hebrew words *bala’ am*, means the “destroyer of the people.” Nicolaitans, composed of two Greek words, *nikan laos*, means “conqueror of the people.”

The theology of the Nicolaitans can be seen in the description of the evil works of the church at Pergamum (Rev. 2:15). What did the Nicolaitans teach? Immorality and idolatry appear to be the heresies which they tried to teach in the churches at Ephesus and Pergamum. Ephesus refused but Pergamum tolerated a group who believed the Nicolaitans. These pagan practices, contrary to the thought and conduct required in the Christian churches, paralleled the teaching of Balaam in the Old Testament. Balaam taught Balak to cast a stumbling block before the Israelites causing them to “eat food sacrificed to idols and practice immorality” (2:14, RSV).

The Nicolaitans perhaps had misunderstood Paul’s doctrine of freedom from the law. They encouraged eating meat sacrificed to idols and participating in immoral sexual practices. The Nicolaitans also could have been responsible for the teaching that “one could worship Caesar in the flesh and Christ in the Spirit.” In order to avoid

embarrassment at civic and religious activities, this group may have chosen to assimilate pagan practices into the life of the church. This attempt to accommodate non-Christian practices is condemned by Christ. It was also rejected by the Ephesians. For this they are commended by Christ. (Summarized from R. E. Glaze, Jr., “Nicolaus and the Nicolaitans,” *Biblical Illustrator*, Lifeway, 49-53; Criswell also has a complete sermon on “The Doctrine of the Nicolaitans, 130-39).

III. The Church is criticized for its passion 2:4

By all outward appearances this church looked healthy. Its doctrine was “spot on” and the lifestyles of its members matched their confession. However, and this is an ever present danger, they were in danger of becoming “a Pharisee church.” They were endangered of a legalism that in time would be their death. They were still doing all the right things, but sometime in the past, they had forsaken the right motivation. They had not a head problem, but a heart problem. Obedience out of duty had replaced obedience out of love for Christ. The difference between the two is massive. It is the difference between “I obey and Jesus accepts me” and “Jesus accepts me and I gladly obey.”

1) Jesus is honest with His people

“But, I have this against you.” What painful and sobering words to hear from our Master. Heartbreaking. There is an area of your life where I’m in opposition. There is an area that disappoints and offends me. We are His children, but like our own earthly daughters and sons, we can disappoint our heavenly parent. The Son of God with “eyes like a fiery flame” (1:14) sees something He does not like, and He honestly and straightforwardly tells them so.

2) Jesus is jealous for His people

- “You have abandoned (NIV, “forsaken”) the love you had at first.”

The Message: “But you walked away from your first love – why?

What’s going with you, anyway?” The Ephesians did not lose their first love. They left it. Could their love for doctrinal and moral purity create a community where love had disappeared?

- What is the love they had abandoned? Various views have been proffered: 1) Original love for one another; 2) Love for God; 3) Love for the gospel; 4) Love for Christ. There is a sense in which we need not choose because all four are so interrelated as to prevent separation. The two great commandments would seem to support this (Matt. 22:37-40). And yet I think Jesus may have intended, at least as His major focus, their love for Him and the gospel they had experienced at salvation Osborne says, “They had

lost the first flush of enthusiasm and excitement in their Christian life and had settled into a cold orthodoxy with more surface strength than depth” (115). The fervent and passionate love they had for Jesus and His gospel when they first received Him had dissipated and waned. They were now going through the motions. They could no longer sing, “Every day with Jesus is sweeter than the day before.” Jesus makes clear that He has not lost His passion, His “holy jealousy” for His people (James 4:5). One thing stands out to me in this verse: it matters to Jesus why we do what we do.

IV. The church is corrected with a plan. 2:5

All was not well, but all was not lost. It never is with Jesus and His church. Our great physician has diagnosed the illness. Now he offers a threefold remedy, each in the form of a command or imperative.

1. Remember from where you have fallen.

“Remember” (pre. imp.). Keep on remembering is the implication.

Never forget what you have lost. Go back and note when and where the flame of love grew faint. Take an inventory and evaluate where you are now compared to where you were then. Go back to the time when your love for Jesus was a burning passion and all that mattered. What was it like? What is missing now?

2. Repent of your sin.

“Repent” (aor. imp.). Change your mind resulting in a change of attitude and action. Think differently about your sin; sins of indifference, religious formalism, legalistic routine. Change your mind, thinking that your good deeds are meritorious and earn God’s favor.

- Labor is no substitute for love.
- Purity is no substitute for passion.
- Deeds are no substitute for devotion.

Do not pat yourself on the back for doing good things for the wrong reason. God looks on the heart (1 Sam. 16:7; Mark 7:6). Where is your heart in all of this?!

3. Return to where you first fell in love.

“Do (aor. imp.) the works you did at first.” The first works are the key to restoring your first love. When the days with Jesus were so sweet and precious you could think of no one else, what were you doing? What were you thinking? You could not believe He loved someone like you! Forgave someone like you! Wanted someone like you! You walked, talked, sang and thought of Him all day long. You were continually aware of His presence, continually in conversation with Him.

The place where you first fell in love is the place where you first understood He loved you, not because you deserved it or could even earn it, but because He just did. The place where you first fell in love was probably somewhere near the cross. “How matchless the grace, when I looked in the face, of this Jesus, my crucified Lord; My redemption complete, I then [fell] at His feet and Calvary covers it all.” (“Calvary Covers It All”) “At the cross, I stood one day, love and mercy found me.... Near the cross O Lamb of God, bring its scenes before me.” (“Near the Cross”)

Returning and doing the first works will keep a church from losing its witness and eventually its existence. Today Ephesus is a rubble ruin. Did the Ephesians never get their first love back?

V. The Church is challenged with a promise 2:7

Each of the 7 letters in Revelation 2-3 end with a promise drawn from the end of the book. Each, in some way, is related to the wonderful theme of eternal life and eternal security (Mark Dever, sermon on Rev. 2-3). And, though each letter is written to a specific church, each letter is for every other church as well. “Anyone (that is us) who has an ear should listen to what the Spirit says to the churches” (note the plural). So, what does the exalted Christ promise to each believer and every church?

1) We can conquer by perseverance

“I will give the victor” is a reference to those who “conquer” (*ESV*) or “overcome” (*NIV*). It is the Greek word *nikao* from which we derive the word “*nike*.” Osborne tells us,

“It is an athletic and military metaphor that connotes superiority and victory over a vanquished foe. In the NT the military overtones are primary....of the twenty-six NT uses, twenty-one are in the Johannine corpus, fifteen in Revelation alone. Here it speaks of the eschatological war between the beast and the people of God....ultimate victory is with God and God alone. It is the Lamb—The King of Kings and Lord of Lords—who finally conquers (17:14). Yet this final victory is anchored in the past—as Jesus says in John 16:33, “I have conquered the world”—which is reflected in the final “overcomer” saying in Rev. 3:21, “To the one who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on this throne.” As made clear in 5:5-6, the true victory was won on the cross, and the final battle in 19:17-21 is only the last act of defiance by an already defeated foe.

Our victory is a participation in his victory. It is critical to realize that in the seven letters the victory is a promise held out to all of them,

even the weak churches of Sardis (3:5) and Laodicea (3:21). Yet it must be achieved through perseverance....

To be an “overcomer” in the eschatological war demands a day-by-day walk with God and dependence on his strength...the overcoming theme in Revelation combines promise (God’s blessings on those who persevere) and warning (God’s judgment on those who fail to persevere). In short, overcoming in Revelation is analogous to [believe] in Paul, referring to an active trust in God that leads to faithfulness in the difficult situations of life lived for Christ” (122-23).

2) We will celebrate in paradise

- We will have the right, through Christ, “to eat from the tree of life, which is in God’s paradise.” The “tree of life” takes us back to Genesis 2:9; 3:22-24 and forward to 22:3. What Adam and Eve forfeited through sin we regain in Christ. Heaven is paradise regained and more. The tree of life is a beautiful “symbolic source of eternal life” (Mounce, 72).

“Paradise” (cf. Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 12:4) is a Persian word that meant a beautiful garden or park. It is the place where the righteous go to be with God. It is the place where sin is not present and God dwells. It is the place where Jesus is! He is what makes paradise, paradise!

There we will live forever. There we will be with Him forever. What a wonderful promise. Will you be there?

Conclusion: Tell me what you think about and I will tell you what you love. Tell me what you talk about and I will tell you what you love. Tell me what excites you and I will tell you what you love. When you consider these important questions, my prayer for you, as well as myself, is that the answer will be same for all these! May the answer always be Jesus.