

Newsletter May 2017

In last month's newsletter of April 2017, we began a series of studies of the book of the "Revelation of Jesus Christ," with an exposition of the text contained within Chapter 1. In that first chapter, we found a vision of the glorified Christ as He stood in the midst of seven candlesticks representing the totality of his Church on earth. Jesus is both the creator and the source of light and life for all church assemblies residing upon the earth. In Jesus' right hand, He held seven messengers (angels/stars) to those seven churches represented by the candlesticks. Jesus is the true head of his Church created through his blood, and He alone must be the final judge over his own creation.

Jesus speaks of these seven churches in the present tense: "...the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches" (Re.1:20). Those churches specifically refer to seven churches located in seven cities of Asia Minor (present-day nation of Turkey), and each are identified by the city in which they assembled (Re.1:13,20). Those cities are, Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos (or Pergamum), Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. (see map insert below). As we begin our study of each of these seven churches beginning in Revelation Chapter 2, we shall utilize edited excerpts taken from *Comprehensively Reformed Christianity*, Book III, Chapter 17.4.



These seven churches were all early-institutionalized temporal churches, representing seven factions of the larger institutionalized church making up the whole of Christianity in that day. Each contained unbelievers as well as believers. Inasmuch as each of the churches was uniquely different in character from the others, we know that there was already a lack of unity in the faith as far as doctrine and practice was concerned. We find that fact clearly revealed in Jesus' own words which are found in seven messages to the seven churches, which are recorded in Chapters 2 and 3. Although two churches received no condemnations from Him, two others received no commendations. The other three churches received mixed reviews.

Inasmuch as each of those messages are part of the larger circular document that would ultimately be read by all of the churches, we find that each of Jesus' individualized messages were also directed, in general, to all the churches on earth for their edification. Commendations issued in these messages were intended to be encouragements to those churches who seriously strived for perfection in the true faith, the warnings were to those that had fallen away that they should repent, and mixed reviews were intended for those churches who although yet reasonably sound in the faith were nonetheless in danger of sliding into the open abyss of apostasy if they did not hold fast to the Truth.

We cannot merely assume that these brief messages were written only for the purpose of encouraging and warning the churches of the first century, inasmuch as they have been carefully preserved in Scripture so that we may also read them and readily compare them with our own assemblies today. Therefore, we can reasonably assume that the individual churches mentioned in those messages represent a descriptive cross-section of the church existing at the end of the first century and extending into every age including all our present-day churches.

We observe that Jesus consistently addressed individuals in those churches as "he who overcomes," and "he who can hear." Those were most surely the elect making up the Visible Church that were within those seven temporal churches, yet were set apart spiritually from the larger organization itself. The warnings given are to the institutions while the encouragements are given to elect individuals who faithfully lived for Christ within the confines of those churches. Each of these messages was specifically directed to an "angel" of each church. The word "angel" can be more generally translated as "messenger." In context, therefore, those "angels" would most probably have been human couriers who would carry forth and read aloud the messages contained in the document to the congregations of each of the churches. If so, those messengers were specifically chosen elect believers whom John had previously appointed as overseers (i.e. Elders) of each church, which Jesus held in his right hand as we saw earlier in the vision of the glorified Christ (Re.1:20). Each was sent forth with a complete copy of the Revelation document for the purpose of edifying each church not only through Jesus' individual

messages specifically intended for each of them, but as a means of informing them of the condition of the church at large and to make them aware of things that must come to pass in the future (cf. Re. 1:1).

Revelation Chapter 2 begins with Jesus' message to the church of Ephesus. The city of Ephesus was initially built around 1000 BC as the Arzawan capital by Ionian Greek colonists. It had been built near a wooden shrine of an Anatolian fertility goddess, Cybele (or *Kybele*), that was afterwards adopted by the Greeks for the worship of their goddess Artemis in about 550 BC. In the year 356 BC the wooden temple was burned down by a supposed arsonist, thus necessitating that the temple be rebuilt by the city's Greek inhabitants. The temple was subsequently rebuilt and greatly enhanced to be much larger and far more grandiose than the original inasmuch as its construction was authorized by Alexander the Great. This reconstructed temple was four times the size of the Parthenon at Athens and its roof was supported by more than 100 external columns each around 55 feet high of which many were hand carved. The walls of the temple were constructed of Parian marble.

Within the Temple was a large art gallery as well as a bank depository holding large amounts of the city's wealth. The city also contained the *Library of Celsus*, which was one of the most impressive buildings of the Roman Empire. This library was exceeded in size only by the first-largest found in Alexandria and the second-largest found in Pergamum. It was designed to contain 12,000 scrolls, and it also contained a mausoleum for the Roman Senator *Tiberius Julius Celsus Polemaeanus* after whom the library was named. There was a large indoor theater in the city that seated twenty thousand people and an amphitheater that seated over one hundred thousand. The harbor city of Ephesus soon grew into a great commercial center as well as a great religious center.

Artemis was later known as Diana by the Romans. A large meteoric stone found near the city was said to be the image of Diana that had fallen from heaven. The crude shape of this stone was sculptured into an ugly multi-breasted image of the goddess Diana that held a club in one hand and a trident in the other. This lewd image was kept behind a purple curtain within the temple of Artemis (or temple of Diana), which soon became one of the wonders of the ancient world. The sensuous worship of Artemis in her temple was quite similar to that of the worship of Aphrodite in Corinth – both having a host of attending priestess prostitutes. In the areas about the temple, acts of the basest forms of immorality were performed in riotous drunken orgies. Diana of the Ephesians, still recognized farther inland as the Anatolian goddess Cybele was arguably the most worshiped of the many female idols of the ancient world. A large silversmith trade had developed around the manufacture of various shrines and images of the goddess Diana to be sold in gift shops to the many tourists who visited Ephesus on religious pilgrimages. At times there were as many as two million people gathered together in Ephesus.

Paul while en-route from Corinth to Jerusalem by ship, spoke only briefly in a synagogue at Ephesus as he left Priscilla and Aquila there and continued on his journey. Following his brief visit, a devout disciple of John the Baptist named Apollos arrived in Ephesus. After being instructed by Aquila and Priscilla concerning Jesus, he began to preach the Gospel such that many Jews were receiving Christ as their Messiah. The Apostle Paul later arrived in Ephesus on his third missionary journey. The Gospel came in full force to the Gentiles through the teaching of Paul in the Greek school of Tyrannus over a period of two years. It is apparent that the apostle Paul organized a missionary effort while there to reach others in and around Ephesus from a statement in which he said he was reluctant to leave Ephesus: "For a great door and effectual is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries" (1Co. 16:9). One of his most determined adversaries was Demetrius, a silversmith whose trade had been all but decimated as the populace turned from worshipping pagan idols to the living God (cf. Ac. 19:24-41). The churches of Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea were most likely established through this great missionary effort.

The Apostle John arrived much later in Ephesus shortly after the death of the Apostle Paul, most probably around AD 68, whereupon he took over the pastorate of the church there and from which he oversaw the other six churches addressed in the Revelation document. Inasmuch as Jesus left his mother, Mary, in John's care as He was being crucified, it is often speculated that Mary arrived in Ephesus with John where she later died and was buried within that city. However, simple mathematics would indicate that Mary would have been approaching 90 years of age when John left Jerusalem for Ephesus making the trip vary arduous if she was still living. For that reason, it is most probable that she had died and her body was interred in Jerusalem long before the Roman siege had destroyed the holy city in AD 70.

The city of Ephesus was destroyed by the Goths in AD 253. Although it was rebuilt, it never again became the great commercial center that it once was. The great harbor soon became silted over by the *Kaystros River* that flows into it thus rendering it unusable. What remained of the rebuilt city was for the most part destroyed by an earthquake in AD 614. Today it is in ruins and has become one of the largest archaeological sites in the eastern Mediterranean.

Turning now to the text of Revelation Chapter 2, we find that Jesus begins each individual message to the seven churches by first identifying himself to each of the messengers with certain specific attributes of his person taken from the vision of his glorified state revealed in Revelation Chapter 1; thus, He begins his message to the church at Ephesus:

“Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks;” (Re. 2:1)

Jesus identifies himself to the messenger of the church at Ephesus as the one who holds seven stars in his right hand and walks in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks (Re.1:20). Jesus felt the need to remind them that He alone is the head of the Church that holds their leaders in his hand and walks about in their midst to guide it. Although this is in one sense a note of assurance, it is also a warning that they must concede to his absolute authority.

“I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil: and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars: And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted.” (Re.2:2,3)

Jesus knew of their diligent work and how they had patiently struggled to maintain the purity of the true faith. They had obviously heeded the warning given to them by the Apostle Paul at Miletus to carefully test those who claimed to be apostles: “For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears” (Ac.20:29–31). In all of this they had persevered and had not given in to false doctrines coming from outside their flock or from false doctrines devised from those within their own ranks.

“Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.” (Re.2:4,5)

It is the love that Christ has for us that constrains us in all that we do (cf. 2Co.5:14); “We love Him because He first loved us” (1Jn.4:19). Therefore, love is born in divine Truth, such that Truth without love is not Truth, nor is love without Truth genuine love. The Apostle Paul said, “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not [love], I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal” (1Co.13:1). Biblical truth is all important to the believer; nevertheless, a strong desire to hold to strict orthodoxy can overtime make one cold and indifferent to the needs of others and for that matter move us farther away from our personal love relationship with Christ. Just as human marriage can be founded in wondrous abounding love, that initial love can fade once the day-to-day effort of living the married life in the practical sense continues over many years if one is not diligent to maintain that first relationship. Likewise, the diligent efforts of the Ephesian church to be obedient to the Truth had overtime smothered out their first love for Christ. Obedience to the Truth must be wrought in love. As Jesus said, “if ye love me keep my commandments” (Jn.14:13). During his ministry on earth, Jesus was asked by a scribe what He considered to be the greatest commandment of all, “And Jesus answered him, the first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. and the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these” (Mk.12: 30,31; cf. De. 6:5).

“But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.” (Re. 2:6)

Nicolaitans are mentioned only in this letter to the church at Ephesus and again in the letter to Pergamum. It is possible that this faction was founded by an apostate deacon named Nicolas, but that is far from being certain (cf. Ac.6:5). The Nicolaitans were apparently a corrupted self-indulgent priesthood that sought to elevate themselves above the laity of the Church (perhaps through the exercise of exclusive sacramentalism). They sought after their

own gainful reward as did the prophet Balaam of old and taught the people by example to commit adultery with the world through unrestrained gratification of the flesh in the manner of the epicureans. Even so, believers in the Ephesian church hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans as did Jesus, and this was to their credit.

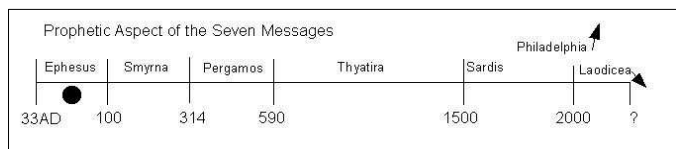
“He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.” (Re.2:7)

This is Jesus’ message to his elect within the church of Ephesus as those that have an ear to hear. The individual believer within the church at Ephesus who overcomes all these difficulties and obstacles to their faith shall “eat of the tree of life” and shall dwell in “the paradise of God.”

The church in Ephesus can be compared to many of our strict fundamentalist conservative churches today. They are certainly active and are very careful to emphasize correct doctrine, but because of their rigid wariness of error, they have in the process lost their spiritual fervor that was born in heart-felt love of Christ, and they have instead adopted a form of institutionalized legalism to guide them. These churches patiently provide good works, but they lack genuine concern for the lost, or for those who do not ascribe to their strict understanding of the Word. Rather than lovingly guiding immature believers into the acceptance of genuine biblical Truth, they summarily dismiss them and condemn them outright. Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved Him. After each of Peter’s answers in the affirmative, Jesus told him to “feed my lambs – or feed my sheep” (cf. Jn. 21:15-17). If we surely love Jesus, we cannot withhold the Truth from any of his “lambs or sheep” who hungrily seek it.

Many churches today, as did the one at Ephesus, firmly hold to strict moral discipline and fiercely hate evil, but in doing so, their love for Jesus has waned over the years. None of us can boast that our love for Jesus is as strong as it could be and should be in view of all that He has done for us – as the Gospel fully attests (cf. Jn.3:16; Ro.5:8; 1Co.15:1-4). To truly love someone, we must get to know them intimately. Our personal salvation is based upon a love relationship that we have with Christ (1Jn.4:19), which has come about through a spiritual rebirth from above (cf. 1Pe.1:23). That love, which we have for Jesus, is strengthened as we commune with Him through personal prayer and through the private study of his Word. We “sit at Jesus’ feet” as the Holy Spirit takes the things of Christ that are found in Scripture and make them real to us. As He does so our love for Jesus will continually grow. Sadly, many of today’s churches neglect the importance of this necessary personal relationship. They hold to rigid traditions in corporate church services that appear quite proper in all matter of doctrine, but, if Jesus should appear in their midst, they would most likely continue on in their formal liturgy as if nothing had happened. They have so soon forgotten their personal love for Jesus as individuals, as well as their love for one another as corresponding members within the body of Christ, which is the Visible Church.

Christendom in every age has had many conflicting factions within it that were similar to those present in the seven first-century churches as we have pointed out. However, in each individual age we can also recognize the dominance of one particular kind of church as we move through various periods of church history beginning with the early first century church and leading up and into the present day. John’s Revelation document gives us a preliminary overview of church history that has extended well past the biblical accounts that abruptly end with the book of Acts. A general time-line presenting this prophetic aspect of the seven churches is presented in the figure below, which begins at AD 33 and continues on beyond our present age. As we continue in our study of the seven churches, we shall examine their dominance within each of these periods in turn.



The Ephesus church, as to type, was dominant in the early first century that had the direct spoken teaching of the apostles, which they had at first received with such fervor in an overwhelming love for Christ. Yet, by the end of the first century AD, the apostles had left the

scene through death. The church’s battle against the evil forces of their day had greatly thinned their ranks through physical persecution. Moreover, diligently seeking out error had so occupied their minds that they had concentrated their efforts toward opposing the rampant evil about them rather than continually doing that which was good and honorable to Christ. They had become so preoccupied with eradicating error in each other that their love for fellow believers was largely lost and with it their love for Christ as well (cf. Mt.7:3–5). We must be careful not to repeat that error in our churches today. © Arthur J. Smith May 2017