

Study 10: The Church in Revelation

Introduction

We finally see the Ephesian church some 20 years later (around AD 95) through the letters to seven churches of Asia Minor. We want to notice in this study how similar (or different) the Ephesian church is to what we have learned from our previous studies.

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Notes for study 10: The Church in Revelation

We finally see the Ephesian church some 20 years later (around AD 95) through the letters to seven churches of Asia Minor.

Whilst we don't know for sure when the book of Revelation was written, some say it was before AD 70 and the destruction of Jerusalem, and was written to prepare the Christians for the persecution that they would face. Others say it was written much later (AD 95). The external evidence for a later date is strong – see my studies “Introduction to John's Letters” and “Introduction to Revelation” for a discussion on the dates. We know that John died in AD100, so it must have been before then. The reference to the Ephesus church is often used to set the date.

In support of the latter date, some argue that Paul commends the church time and again in the Ephesian letter. It was a strong church and they were dedicated to the Lord. The Ephesian letter was written around AD 62, and (some say) an early date does not “fit” with an early date for Revelation of AD 66. The destruction of Jerusalem began in AD 68 and took 3 years. This would mean that they would have had to “have left their first love” very quickly. This provides some internal evidence for a late date for Revelation (AD 95).

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Introduction

John writes “...*To the angel of the church in Ephesus...*” (2:1). The word angel comes from the Greek word “*angelos*” and means “messenger”. Sometimes the messenger is a “special” messenger from God (heavenly angels) and sometimes it is just a man carrying a message. We can tell from the context which one it is, and if we can't tell from the context then it is not important for us to know. In this case, he is writing to the “*messenger of the church...*” We should not conclude that there is a “heavenly angel” (“guardian angel”) watching over us individually or watching over the church. God has a message. The message was given to a man (John, an Apostle) to give to the church(es). He sent the message from his exile on Patmos to the messenger of the church. In these days, we write to “The Secretary” of an organisation.

Revelation teaches through *visions* rather than through direct teaching, and we are led to see the things that those who saw the visions in the first century saw. In the first chapter, we see the first vision, and John spells out what the vision means. The Son of Man is walking amongst seven lampstands, and holding seven stars in His right hand (Rev 1:12-20). The lampstand (candlestick) is reminiscent of the Temple. The tabernacle was lit by a single stand of seven candles. In Solomon's Temple, the number increased to 10, with five on each side. John's vision has *seven* lampstands, which suggests a complete number. The seven are later revealed to represent the seven churches (1:20). The significance of the lampstand as a symbol of the church will be revealed later – when it fails to provide the light to the world, it will be removed from its place.

Christ stands in the middle of the churches “...*and in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band...*” (1:13 NKJV). The candlesticks represent the seven churches, and Christ is walking in the middle of them. The clothing describes someone having a high office, but is not consistent with the High Priest of the Old Covenant, which is described in Exodus 28:39.

Jesus holds the 7 stars and the 7 lampstands. He is the one “...*who lives, and was dead...and is alive evermore...*” (1:18). Note the “*Sharp two-edged sword*” that came out of His mouth. (Heb 4:12 – *the word of God is alive and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword*). The word is proceeding out of His mouth. The seven stars are the messengers of the seven churches.

The “right hand” is the position of **power**. Jesus after His ascension “...*sat down at the right hand of God...*” (Heb 10:12). The seven churches in Jesus right hand show the exalted position Christ has for the church. The seven churches are representative of **all churches** for **all time**. It is not

exclusive that only these seven churches and no others were (are) the ones that have the exalted position!!! We can see in the seven churches described here some characteristics that we can find in any church anywhere. But these were *not fictitious* churches. They were *real people in real places*, and had *real characteristics*.

Instructions to Ephesus

Jesus has a message specifically to the church at Ephesus “...*These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands...*” (2:1 NIV). He knows the specific situation in each of the seven churches. [For a further discussion on these, refer to my Revelation studies]. He is walking amongst the churches, and sees what is happening amongst them all.

Commendation

The situation in Ephesus is mixed. On one hand He has praise for them “... *I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false.* ³ *You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary...*” (2:2-3 NIV). They were **working** for the Lord. They were not inactive, but were “out there” spreading the gospel. They were **patient**. James tells us: “... *Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds,* ³ *because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance (patience NKJV).* ⁴ *Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything...*” (Js 1:2-4 NIV)

Peter says: “...*For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge;* ⁶ *and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance (patience KJV); and to perseverance, godliness;* ⁷ *and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.* ⁸ *For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ...*” (2 Pet 1:5-8 NIV)

The Ephesian church had grown and developed. They had some **roots** in the faith. Their faith had been tested, and they had withstood the temptation and **grown** through it.

They **could not stand evil people**, and they have **tested** those who were **falsely claiming to be apostles**.

We see here a **discerning** church. They tested the claims that some people made about their authority (as being apostles). They also found some people who on the surface were claiming to be Christians, but underneath they were evil. The Ephesians were able to discern the true from the false and the truly good from the facade of good.

This raises an interesting question: Some claimed to be apostles, but were not. If there were only 13 apostles (the original 12, take out Jude, add Matthias and Paul), then why was there a need for “testing”? It would be obvious as to who they were! Were there then other apostles who were “chosen” in the same manner as Paul? The bible tells us nothing of these people (if they existed). Given the **authority** that the apostles had, it would be (in my opinion) most unlikely that God would leave us with people having such authority but not telling us who they were.

A more plausible explanation is that there **were** only the 13 (in fact 12, because Paul began his work as an apostle after the death of James), but some people had come along and were **claiming** that they had been called like Paul had, and that they therefore had authority. The Ephesians **tested them**, and found them to be false and to be liars.

They had **not become weary**. They were **fired up for the Lord**, and were **enthusiastic** about the work for the kingdom. They had stick-to-it-ness. They were not going to give up.

Condemnation

Whilst he has commended them for their discernment, he has criticism for them on the other hand “...*Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love...*” (2:4 NIV). They had **left their first love**. They had become caught up in the “mechanics” of what they were doing, and to some extent had forgotten **why** they were doing it. Does this sound like some churches you know? They have a real zeal for God, and are enthusiastic for the work. But most of the teaching is on the “mechanics” and not on Jesus. They **love to do things right**, but have **lost their love for Jesus** who made us right!!! They have a strong focus on the **internal** of the congregation, but have forgotten about the lost who are **outside** of Christ. Jesus said “**GO into the world and make disciples**”. Evangelism (outreach) is just something that they don’t have time to do. Sometimes we just “**lose the plot**”!!! Paul’s instruction to the church at Ephesus was to “...**Remember the words of the Lord Jesus...**” (Acts 20:35), but according to John they had “...**Forgotten their first love...**” (2:5).

Jesus (through John) tells the church that they need to repent “...*Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place...*” (2:5 NIV). They need to **remember**, and **repent**, and **do** the first works. They need to get things back into perspective again. Firstly, by **remembering** where they had come from, and the first place and pre-eminent position that Jesus has in their lives and in their teaching. Secondly, they need to **put things right** by repenting of what they had done. They need to recognise that it was not right. They need to turn around and don’t go that way anymore. They need to determine never to go that way again. Thirdly, they need to **do** the things that having Jesus as the forefront of their focus requires.

In the Ephesian letter, Paul sent out *a call to faithfulness*. They heard the message loud and clear, and had **understood the mechanics**, but **lost sight of the reason** why they were doing these things. They were **faithful to the church**, but were **not faithful to the Lord** as they had lost their first love (for Him).

Further Commendation

Jesus adds a further commendation to them – they hate the abominable practice of sin “...*But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate...*” (2:6 NIV). Tradition identifies these people with Nicolas, the proselyte of Antioch who was one of the seven deacons, however the evidence is purely circumstantial and based on the name “Nicolas”. The implication is that they had worked out a compromise between the pagan practices and Christianity. Jesus said that **he hates their practices**.

Christ adds a further commendation concerning the Ephesians' hatred of the practices of the Nicolaitans (cf. 2:15)--a hatred directed at the practices of these people, not the people themselves (cf. Ps 139:21). It is difficult to determine exactly who the Nicolaitans were and what they taught. Etymologically the name means "to conquer the people." Did they call themselves by this name, or is it a derogatory title Christ applied to them? The close association of the name with the Balaamites in vv. 14-15 ... may suggest either identity with this group or similarity to their teachings.

Information about the Nicolaitans is limited, ambiguous, and based on John's references here in Revelation. Irenaeus claims that John wrote his Gospel to thwart the teaching of the Gnostic Cerinthus whose error was similar to the earlier offshoot of the same kind of teaching known as Nicolaitanism. Eusebius mentions that the Nicolaitans lasted only a short time. Seeing the sect as a heresy would agree with the references in vv. 14, 20, which warn against mixing Christian faith with idolatry and cult prostitution. The Nicolaitans claimed to have insight into the divine or, more probably, into the demonic. They lived immoral lives, which allowed them to become part of the syncretism of pagan society and to participate in the Roman civil religion. Others understand the Nicolaitans

as Christians who still showed devotion to the emperor by burning incense to his image.
(NIVBC)

With the temple of Diana in Ephesus, and the culture, trades, and commerce based around it, no wonder that a riot erupted forcing Paul to have to leave the city. It was inevitable that some “compromise” would be worked out to allow co-existence between the Christians and the worshippers of Diana. This co-existence resulted in the Christians embracing the culture of temple worship. They had forgotten the examples of the Jews when they came into the Promised Land. God said that they were to remain separate from the other people in the land, and they were not to intermarry. But many of them did, and this resulted in the people of God being drawn into idolatry.

God does not condemn the co-existence, but warns against the interaction and compromise.

A Call to Action

Christianity is a practical religion – it is not just about what we believe, it is about what we do and practice, and how we live our lives. God calls us to put our belief into practice “...*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God...*” (2:7 NIV). They need to **Heed** the warnings. If they **overcome** (the temptations, practices and false doctrines) then they will receive their reward of being faithful to God. If not, God will count them unfaithful, unworthy, and remove their place as one of His churches (2:5).

The term *overcome* is John’s favorite word for martyrdom. Many in Asia Minor would face persecution and death. If they stand faithful to Jesus – even in the face of death – they will receive their eternal reward in paradise with God.

Applications for Us

We live in what is called a “pluralist society” where it is accepted that opposing views on hosts of issues can exist together. Many views held by society are opposed to God’s will and teachings. Paul tells us that we cannot avoid interaction with worldliness if we remain in the world, but we are not to tolerate it in the church (1 Cor 5:9-11).

We embrace the *Nicolaitian teachings* when we (for example) accept homosexuality as a legitimate lifestyle and accept it in the church, or when we follow (society’s) natural conclusion that women are oppressed and therefore they should not be excluded from leadership positions within the church. There are hosts of other examples.

God wants purity. The church is the bride of Christ, and is to be presented in glorious white array (symbolising purity). We must **not** compromise God’s pure teachings, and embrace compromise in the church, even though society might be (and always is!!!) acting contrary to God’s will.

Conclusions

The Ephesian church had heeded the warnings from Timothy, and had responded with faithfulness, but they had become so tied up in trying to do the right thing, that they had left behind their love for the Lord. We must continue to practice what is right, but we must also continue to have our focus on the love of the Lord.