

NECMA Feb. 14th 2004

The Seven Churches of the Revelation - 1

I'm in a bit of a bind over this series on the seven churches, and seek your thoughts on how to proceed.

My original intention was to breeze through the first three today, and the other four next Sunday, knowing that some of us are not as keen as others are on what could be thought of as teaching rather than preaching.

In actual fact, to do any justice at all to this series on the seven churches of the Revelation, I am finding that it just isn't possible to do this - because once you start following through - which is necessary in order NOT to take stuff out of context - you open up what could be described as an enormous can of worms.

If that isn't dealt with at the time, it just gets ignored later, and is as true for the 7 Churches at the start of the Revelation as the rest of the book.

I believe this is the problem with looking at any of the apocalyptic scriptures - that is to say most of Daniel, all of Revelation, and bits of several other books.

And we really do need to look at it, because of what Paul told Timothy about "all scripture", not just some of the books being essential for teaching, for edification, and so on.

So we shall spend today looking at the first of the seven, and I bow to your thoughts on what to do next week - a brief summary of the remaining six, or to do the next one, and see if we can slot the others in later in the year into the rest of the preaching programme the elders plan ahead with.

I would like to hear your thoughts right now, because today's message CAN be taken in isolation, and I need to plan for next Sunday when I get home today.

Let's start anyway...

He that hath an ear to hear, let him hear, what the spirit is saying to the churches. Listen to the trumpet sound. Hearken to the trumpet.

The message to the seven churches in the Revelation - which includes us at this end of the age - is very clear. Are we listening? Are you and I listening? He is talking to us. He is talking to you and me. He says it seven times, the way of scripture to reinforce the message.

In the introduction a few weeks ago, I left you with this set of thoughts, straight from the Book of Revelation, to which we had also listened, expressed in music:

To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life. To him that overcometh the same shall be clothed in raiment of white.

To him that overcometh and keepeth My works unto the end, to him will I give the power to rule with an iron rod over the nations.

To him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of God.

And he will go out no more for I will write upon him the Name, the new name, which no man knows, but he who has received it, the Name of the Lord, and the name of the city of God, the New Jerusalem.

He that hath an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit's saying to the churches.

Intriguingly that phrase also echoes through the series of books written by Jenkins and LaHaye... a phrase used by Jesus Himself - both in His preaching in the gospels, and in His teaching in the Revelation. Preaching and teaching are very closely allied.

The Seven Churches, one in each of the Seven Cities In Asia, named by Jesus Christ, are Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea.

They are depicted as the seven candlesticks or light bearing bodies, the church, with the Lord in their midst. Rev. 1:13

Amazingly, in spite of the Lord being in their midst, each church is completely different from the other six, and in spite of Him being there, each is also failed or flawed.

As discussed last time, put them all together into one body and we see the overall church today, all of its good points and all of its bad ones being quite obvious.

The diversity of problems and commendable points Jesus describes to John, and which John wrote down, cannot be found just in one church anywhere in the world today. The nature, the character, the attitude and the atmosphere of these seven churches is scattered throughout the modern church world.

But let us emphasise most strongly that the Lord Jesus Christ is shown in her midst. He is still with the church at this point in time, because the Holy Spirit shall not be withdrawn until during the Tribulation.

Put it another way, it was Jesus' instruction about leaving the good and the bad together in which we understand that it is not until the time of the harvest itself - a harvest that HE will organise, using his own machinery (in farming terms) - that the wheat and the tares, the grain and the weeds, the converted and the unconverted, the saved and the unsaved, shall be separated.

While we are most definitely called to point out to our brother with love and long suffering where he is actually in error according to what scripture says, we are NOT to run around pointing fingers in general terms at those whose views differ slightly from our own, nor be vocally critical of their not being as Christian as we are.

The point really is that while our brother doesn't have the full picture, we also - shock horror - don't have the full picture either!

To borrow a metaphor from Paul's epistles, we see through a glass darkly. The apostle referred to the reflection off a mirror of the type they used in those days, a metal plate.

In the 1950s, the military still used World War II logistical support materials. I remember a lovely flat shaving mirror with which I was issued - not that I would use it much now!

It was not made of glass, but of stainless steel. Its size was designed to fit exactly inside the top pocket of a battle dress blouse.

In time, with use, and abuse, and misuse, it got dented, scratched, and lost some of its shine, and was no longer the perfect mirror churned out by munitions factories in hundreds of thousands.

We discovered that by flexing it slightly, and making it bowed, it would magnify, and you could see the stubble better, so you could avoid being disciplined by your superior officer for having a poor shave.

What we saw - amplified we could say - was at the expense of what we could no longer see - because that was now out of sight.

Paul talked about a burnished brass mirror rather than one made of stainless steel, because that had not yet been discovered as a process - certainly it was not one made of that silicone compound nowadays called glass.

So, we look to find - and see - and recognise - smatterings of the spirit of the seven churches in each and every present day church. This also includes smatterings of the spirit of rebellion Jesus describes. Out of this man-made muddle the Lord will develop the church of His desires in His timing. She will be that glorious church, perfect in all her ways. What better place to start looking than the principle city in Asia Minor.

THE CHURCH AT EPHEBUS

The first of the seven churches Jesus mentions was at Ephesus. The city was called “The light of Asia”, Asia being the province of the Roman Empire occupying the western end of what we now know as Turkey. A thriving commercial city, situated at the junction of several roads, and a nearby sea port.

A vibrant lively church, they were not short of the presence of the Lord. But Jesus both commended and rebuked them with a command to repent. Reading for Revelation 2:1 progressively...

“To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, ‘These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands:”

“I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name’s sake and have not become weary.”

HIS COMMENDATION - He was pleased with their “WORKS”, their willingness to help. Good deeds, acts of kindness and charity. So often you and I make this a substitute for waiting on Him, and doing what He wants us to do.

He understood their “LABOUR”, their difficulties, weariness and troubles. Anyone who has ever been involved in spreading the Gospel will understand the fatigue of body, soul and spirit that goes with that labour of love.

Their “PATIENCE”, what a beautiful virtue. Someone possessing patience is one who is greatly blessed of the Lord. I frequently cry “God give me patience please... and give it to me NOW!” We often have to face unrighteous humanity to try to win them for the Lord. It is then that patience has its reward. Rev. 2:2

A CHURCH POSSESSING DISCERNMENT.

A most essential gift of the Spirit for any assembly. They did not put up with those who were unrighteous and wicked, even though they were surrounded

by them. Those who would gather together with them, but their hearts were not right before the Lord, and possessing ungodly and ulterior motives.

Jude calls them spots and blemishes in their feasts of charity. Jude 1:12 (11-13)

Woe to them! For they have gone in the way of Cain, have run greedily in the error of Balaam for profit, and perished in the rebellion of Korah. These are spots in your love feasts, while they feast with you without fear, serving only themselves.

They had discerned particular APOSTLES in their midst and found them to be false; liars, men without integrity. They tested and examined these false Apostles until they were satisfied that they were not of the Lord.

All churches should do that, because the church is given the right to judge any and all of the works or utterances of the “fivefold ministries”. Ephesians 4:11-15 edited

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, Why? For the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God... That we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine...

Speaking the truth in love... literally, in the Greek, “Truthing in love”, being open-faced, one to another.

We must measure all things, accordingly. This seems necessary for the church of today more so than any past generation. May God Himself grant wisdom and understanding that not every voice that says; “Lord, Lord” is necessarily of the Lord. Rev. 2:2

Matt 7:21,22

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’

Luke 6:46

“Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and don’t do what I say?”

A CHURCH MUCH TESTED, according to Jesus. An integrated group of people, able to endure and conquer every situation and problem they faced, with the patience of the Lord.

A people who had labored extensively to exalt and magnify His name. Their efforts were centered on the Lord Jesus Christ and the glorification of His name. They did not grow weary in well doing. Rev. 2:3

Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love.

NEVERTHELESS.

A forbidding statement, alerting and warning them about their love for the Him. Love is the very essence of life and worship to Him. Their relationship is flawed, causing the Lord to have to deal with the problem.

They had *“left their first love”*. No, not *“lost their first love”*. This was a serious and damaging situation that had developed in their midst. They deliberately deserted that great love which they had in the beginning of their walk with the Lord.

It was not a case of just growing cold, but rather one of neglect, which was very serious in His eyes. It bordered on the same level as desertion towards other things that occupied their love instead. Does that sound familiar? This is one of the signs that Jesus gave as a warning about to the end of the age, the age we are now in. The cause of lost love is, of course, abounding iniquity all around us, challenging us for its attention.

We are living in the fulfillment of many of the prophecies of the Bible. Mt. 24:10-13

“And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved.”

Remember therefore from where you have fallen.

Repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place; unless you repent.

REMEMBER, THOU ART FALLEN.

Wake up to righteousness and stop sinning. Direct, and to the point, words that show the standard of the Lord and not those of a worldly church. Let each of us look back to the beginning of our own experiences with Him. Revive and refresh that same love and fervor for Him. Without a shadow of a doubt the issue is extremely serious and must be rectified. Rev. 2:5

REPENT

A command, yet words of mercy. The only way to restore the high standard from which they had fallen. Repeat your first works. Return to the Lord with a Godly sorrow. With a broken heart and tears of repentance. The condition of the church is seriously flawed. They are warned of an impending judgment.

I will remove your lampstand - loss of light

A lax and weak fellowship is about to be completely severed by a removal of the light or the lampstand. If that light is removed the darkness will prevail. How great is that darkness. Mt. 6:21-24

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness! No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.”

The only avenue for them to maintain the light of life is to come to the Lord in deep and heartfelt repentance, and then stay in that relationship, that of first love, and not to wander away seeking other pleasures.

Twice in that sentence Jesus uses the word repent about the Ephesian church. A call often made in scripture. A call for repentance for those within the church, not outside.

They were complacent and self satisfied. They had worked out for themselves a way and manner of Christianity that was comfortable to them.

Now, suddenly they are confronted with a letter that would once again completely change their smug and complacent ways. Repent, was the message that the Lord sent to them. Does He say that to us, today?

But this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

Next a **COMMENDATION**. He commends their detesting of the doctrine and practice of the Nicolaitans, a dislike he too shared.

Those embracing this heretical doctrine were not hated, just their teaching and their actions. Both were in opposition to bible-based sound doctrine.

A good example of their teaching is “In order to master sensuality, one must know the whole range of its experience. We must abandon self - without any

reservation - to the lusts of the body. Thus involving only the body and not the spirit”.

Such a practice is in direct conflict with Christ’s teaching - He hates anything contrary to righteous living and we must follow His pattern of life in our likes and dislikes. Rev. 2:6

‘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.’

HEARING WHAT MAY BE SOUNDLESS, TO MANY.

Most of us have these things on the side of the head. Interesting, we also have an inner ear, where the actual hearing organ is. There is an “inner ear” of the spirit to hear the voice of the Spirit. What “more sure” way is there of hearing the voice of the Spirit than to have the Spirit illuminate the WORD of the Lord to us.

Those who overcome, the world, the flesh and the devil are granted a great privilege, they may eat, abundantly of the “TREE OF LIFE” - lost to man because of sin - restored, to the new creature, in Christ Jesus. Rev. 2:7

Our heavenly Father not only possesses life but is the essential quality of life. So, that same essence has been imparted to the Son, who is life. If we are in Christ Jesus, we then live and possess eternal life or very life, itself. John 5:26, 27

“For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself, and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man”.

Through a sincere and exhaustive search of the scriptures we come to a complete knowledge that we are the possessors of eternal life. The Word witnesses to us of that life that is in Christ Jesus. John 5:39, 40

“You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life.

He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To him who overcometh I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.”

What the spirit is saying. Not what it has said in the past, long forgotten. What the Spirit is saying, NOW.

Now that is the bare bones of what I have researched about Ephesus... we could have gone on and explored a lot more.

Next week we shall look at Smyrna, and here is some advance information... John writes Jesus' words and we can read them in Revelation 2:8

“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, ‘these things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life:

I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death.’”

2 - THE CHURCH LOCATED IN SMYRNA.

Its name means Myrrh, or incense. It is here that we find the church of suffering and persecution. There are nations where the church is greatly persecuted today. This is difficult to reconcile with frequently heard teachings of ease and prosperity.

Surely, if there are prophetic utterances to the church promising wealth and well being for these last days it should pertain to all of the body, not just a select group. The reality is, that the church is more apt to suffer for righteousness than it is to gain popularity and political power. One of the signs of the end of the age is the fact that the church will be afflicted and hated. Mt. 24:9

Those who maintain their salvation unto the end, shall be saved. Mark 13:13

Smyrna, is representative of the church that is subject to opposition and is living in poverty. Their riches are not of this world. How well we all know that wealth does not bring contentment and satisfaction. Only Christ can possibly meet and satisfy the innermost desires of the human heart. Is persecution a thing of the past? If so why are there Christians being persecuted today? When will our turn come?