



Overview

Author: John

Date: c 95 AD

Purpose: John writes these letters to continue the pastoral care to the congregations established by St. Paul. He writes to bring the words of His vision of the exalted Jesus Christ to the churches.

Outline:

A. Vision of the Exalted Christ (Revelation 1:9-20)

B. Letters to the Seven Churches

Letter to Ephesus (2:1-7)

Letter to Smyrna (2:8-11)

Letter to Pergamum (2:12-17)

Letter to Thyatira (2:18-28)

Letter to Sardis (3:1-6)

Letter to Philadelphia (3:7-13)

Letter to Laodicea (3:14-22)

Key Terms: the exalted Christ, epistle, one literal sense, 'One like a Son of Man', first love, Nicolaitan heresy, libertine, legalist, antinomian, syncretism

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Around the Word Bible Study Trinity, 2015

The 7 Churches of the Revelation Revelation 2:1-7

Opening: Psalm 119:1-8

Letter One: To the Church in Ephesus "Rekindling the First Love"

Read Revelation 2:1-7

2:1a: "To the angel of the church in Ephesus"

+ The Greek word for "angel" (God's created, spiritual protectors) can also mean "messenger." The messenger of the Church is the one who preaches the message. It is likely that the "angel" refers to the pastor of the congregation. Each of the seven letters is addressed to "the angel," or 'messenger' of the church' (Revelation 2:1; 2:8; 2:12; 2:18; 3:1; 3:7; 3:14).

+ John is a brother and partner in tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance in Jesus. He is on an island called Patmos. Church tradition locates John on Patmos because of the first century AD Roman persecution of the Church under Domitian, who ruled Rome from AD 81-96.

+ John was "in the Spirit on the Lord's day..." John had an experience of the Holy Spirit speaking through God's Word. It was on the Lord's Day, which was a Sunday, the day of the Lord's resurrection. His prophetic imagination was filled with images of the Lord's imminent coming.

+ Who had a voice "like a trumpet," and tells John to write down His vision? John is made a Spirit-inspired writer of Jesus' words. Can the Church trust the testimony of this New Testament book of prophecy?

+ Who is the "One like a Son of Man"? See Daniel 7:13-14. What does this One like the Son of Man look like? How is He dressed? What is John's posture before him? What does the One like the Son of Man say about Himself?

Christ Among the Gods of Ephesus

+ Ephesus was the most cosmopolitan city of all the seven churches written to in Revelation. The Greek city had a great history, dating back to 1400 BC. An ancient temple of Artemis (so-called archaic Artemision) stood outside the city walls, built by Croesus of Lydia. Ephesus became most influential in the Greek and Roman periods. Later, a new temple to Artemis ('younger' Artemision) was built in surrounding the arrival of Alexander the Great in 334 BC (see photo on back). This version of the temple was included in the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was "225 by

425 feet...-the largest building in the Greek world and four times larger than the Parthenon" (Winger, *Ephesians*, 101). The structure was marble. It had 127 columns, 6 feet in diameter and 60 meters high (Winger, 102).

+ Under the *pax Romana*, Ephesus was privileged and thriving. A conservative estimate of the population by St. Paul's time was between 100,000 and, may have been up to 250,000 (cf. Winger, *Ephesians*, 100). The city's devotion in worship was directed to many gods. There were Jews in Ephesus. The gods of the pagan temples included Hestia, Serapis, Zeus, and the Phrygian mother goddess. Winger suggests that there was worship of up to fifty gods in the city. On top of it, Alexander the Great and Androclus (legendary founder of Ephesus) had cults. These were small games in town "in comparison with the cult of Artemis Ephesia, the Lady of Ephesus." (Winger, *Ephesians*, 101). Ephesian Artemis was likely a mix of the Artemis of Greek myths and the local mother-goddess Cybele. She was thought to have "power over death," and served as an "aid in childbirth. She was the perpetually virgin huntress, depicted normally in a short dress carrying a bow and arrow, equipped for both the hunt and to fend off suitors" (Winger, *Ephesians*, 104). She was an example of chastity, at least in daily life. In her rituals, she was the goddess of fertility, and the rituals probably included prostitution with temple priestesses (Winger, *Ephesians*, 106). This was a great challenge and contrast in the worship of the young Ephesian Church.

2:1b: "The words of him who..."

+ The words of the seven letters are the words of the exalted Christ Himself. Christ is pictured as walking among "the seven golden lampstands" as the almighty Angel of the LORD. The "seven stars" are the messengers of the Churches. He holds them in His right hand. The "seven golden lampstands" are the seven churches. Becker insightfully says this "...is a figurative way of expressing his promise, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Mt 18:20) (Becker, 46).

+ The exalted Jesus Christ holds your pastor in His hand. Jesus is the ultimate authority, but He upholds His called and sent preachers. How might we see the pastors of the church in light of this symbol?

+ Have you ever considered this image that Jesus "walks among" His congregations? What a profound image of Jesus' nearness to His flock! This should inspire fear of our Lord in our worship of Him and in

using His Word and Sacraments, as well as love and trust in Him as we receive His gifts. He comes near, not only to be with us, but to be with us in specific ways. His baptismal waters cover you. He is preached "for you" in the sermon. He is given to you in His body and blood. He dwells within the Christian. He has gone ahead to heaven as high priest to the right hand of the Father, interceding for the saints.

2:2: "I know your works"

+ Christ "knows the works" of the Ephesian congregation. He is omniscient. He knows all our works as well. He knows the toil and patient endurance that go into pastoral care and congregation life. This translates into a care and reverence for the Church He has won by His blood shed on the cross for us.

+ Jesus tells His church to "beware of false prophets," and to "recognize them by their fruits" (Mt 7:15, 20). A corresponding gift of the Spirit in Christ's Church is "the ability to distinguish between spirits" (1 Corinthians 12:10). This gift of the Spirit has shown itself in the Church at Ephesus. They have "tested" some apostles for their fruits, and "found them to be false." Jesus praises the Ephesians for "testing" the false apostles. Do our congregations still "test" their preachers in any ways?

+ The Ephesian Church had identified and rejected the "false apostles" (2 Corinthians 11:4-5, 12-15; Gal 1:6-9). What are some examples of the fruit of "false apostles" in Christianity today? How can we "test" them?

2:4: Abandoned Love

+ Jesus admonishes the church: "You have abandoned your 'first love.'" Love is the fruit of faith. Where love has grown cold, faith is probably all but dead. John's other writings exhort us to love one another as Christ has loved us (John 13:34-35; 1 John 4:7-12; 2 John 4-6). Our Lord Himself warned that brotherly love would grow cold before His return (Matthew 24:12).

2:5: "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent"

+ He exhorts them to "remember from where you have *fallen*." This tells us that individuals and even an entire congregation can fall into sin and do great damage to the Christian faith. Christians are not 'once saved, always saved,' as the saying goes. They can become too hung up in controversy that they lose Christ. They can pursue other interests, not commanded by God, so that they fall from the Christian faith.

+ "Repent" literally means "to change one's mind." It is a call to turn from sin to righteousness. What God does in us is deeper than just "changing our mind." The Holy Spirit works such repentance in believers by the Word of God. God's Law attacks the stubborn old Adam in us. The Spirit's convicting voice in the Law creates terrors of the conscience. The call is to turn from a cold, dead love to the love of God they had at first. Repentance is a daily call to turn from our sins, to remember baptism's strength in Christ. Christ forgives our sin. He helps us to focus our eyes to do the deeds Christ commands us in our vocations.

2:6: The Nicolaitans

+ The church father Irenaeus identified the Nicolaitans with Nicolaus, one of the seven deacons (Acts 6:5). If true, it would represent a startling fall, similar to the present state of the Ephesians. However, Irenaeus' connection of Nicolaus with the Nicolaitans is not based on any other

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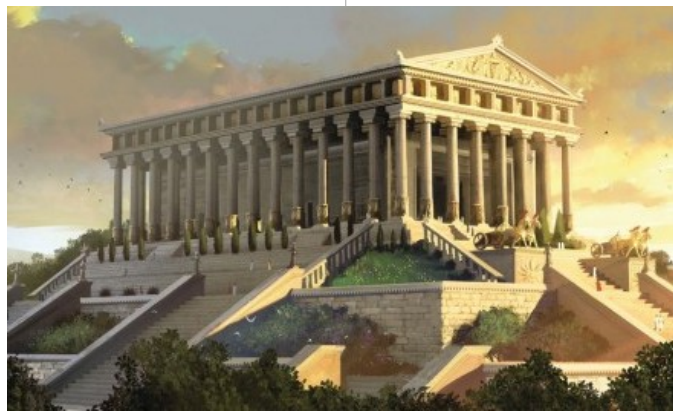
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evidence in Revelation, except the common-looking name. Even if we are uncertain of their leader, the nature of their error can be known. Brighton helpfully asserts that "the antinomian heresy of the Nicolaitans...encouraged Christians to misuse their Christian liberty for the purpose of licentious living" (Brighton, *Revelation*, 78).

+ Later in the Letter to the Church at Pergamum (Revelation 2:15), the Nicolaitan heresy is mentioned again. A temptation of living in a city like Ephesus is that the religious diversity was always there. There were over a hundred thousand people. The Ephesian Christians likely had family, friends, and colleagues who worshiped at the Temple of Ephesian Artemis or in the pagan temples of the other gods. That religious diversity led to pressure to water-down their Christian confession. The Nicolaitan heresy might have led some people in the congregation to think it was consistent with the faith to participate in worship with other religions, including sacrificing food to idols and even to engage in the sexual immorality that went along with the local religious festivities. The Nicolaitan heresy could lead others into the sin of *syncretism*: worship with

other religions or creeds that were against Christianity. We will see this again in the letter to Pergamum (Rev. 2:15).

+ Can you identify any antinomian heresies (misusing Christian liberty for licentious living) in contemporary Christianity? In Lutheran Churches? How dangerous is it, exactly? How can the Church fight against the antinomian threat?



2:7: "He who has an ear, let him

hear what the Spirit says"

+ Jesus gives ears to hear by His Holy Spirit working through the Word. The ones who hear His voice will hearken to His Word. Those who reject His Word will continue in their coldness and sins.

2:7b: 'To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life'

+ Jesus proclaims a sweet promise to the "one who conquers." He reminds them of the final, heavenly goal. There the paradise of Eden will be restored. The tree of life will abound with the delightful food of immortality.

+ The God who is love rekindles our cold hearts. Look to Jesus, love in the flesh. He loved us to the bitter dregs of shedding His blood for us. He rekindles the love in against over against the old self in us who refuses to love. The old Adam is killed by remembering God's first application of His love and grace to us in baptism. The new man in Christ rises to live in righteousness and purity before God. Eternity and all its Edenic richness awaits the Christian. The believer who finds himself rejected by idolatrous religious elites in this life will have eternal communion with the Triune God.

Closing: God's Own Child, I Gladly Say It (LSB, 594)

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