

Christ's message to the church at Ephesus reveals a church driven by their Christian duty rather than love for Christ. While their faithfulness to the gospel was commendable, if it was not motivated by a love for Jesus Christ then they could easily fall into legalism or cold ritualism.

Chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation cover the messages that John is instructed to write to the seven churches in Asia. Each message follows the general pattern of having a salutation, a commendation, a condemnation, a warning, and a promise. Only two churches are exceptions to this pattern: the Lord had no condemnation or warning for the church at Smyrna and He had no commendation for the church at Laodicea.

There are two main viewpoints concerning these churches. While both tend to support the fact that these were real churches with real problems that are addressed by Christ's messages to them, these viewpoints differ on the prophetic meaning of the churches. The first viewpoint sees these churches as representing time periods during the church age from John's time until the return of Christ. See "*The Book of Revelation*" by Clarence Larkin for a deeper explanation of this viewpoint. The second viewpoint sees these churches as representing churches throughout the church age from John's time until Christ's return. The churches of Asia had the same problems that churches throughout the centuries have had and Christ wants to correct them. Which viewpoint is true? Perhaps there is some truth in both.

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<sup>1</sup> 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;

**"Unto the angel [messenger] of the church of Ephesus write"** - This first message is written to the church of Ephesus, specifically to the "angel" of the church which was the church's pastor or leader. The apostle Paul ministered to this church for at least 3 years (Acts 20:31) and John was ministering there when he was arrested by Roman authorities and exiled to Patmos.

**"These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand"** - In Rev. 1:20 Christ tells us that the seven stars are the angels (pastors) of the seven churches. The image of Christ holding them in His right hand speaks of His ownership, protection and sovereignty over them. Identifying the originator of the message in this way is a reminder that they belong to Him.

**"who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks"** - In the previous chapter John saw Christ "in the midst of the seven candlesticks" (Rev. 1:13) but now Christ describes Himself as walking in the midst of the candlesticks. The walking speaks of Christ's tireless vigilance and supervision of the churches for He is intimately interested in their welfare.

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<sup>2</sup> 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: <sup>3</sup> And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted.

In verses 2-3 Christ commends the Ephesian church for the good things being done in their church.

**"I know thy works, and thy labour [toil], and thy patience [steadfastness; endurance]"** - The Ephesian church was a busy church, working to stay faithful to Christ and enduring the temptations of Satan and the world to stray from the truths of the gospel even in the face of persecutions.

**"and how thou canst not bear [carry; support; uphold] them which are evil"** - The word used here for "bear" has the literal meaning of giving support to someone, which implies that the Ephesians would withdraw support for someone they were supporting that they discover is "evil." If the word is being used in a figurative sense it could carry the idea that the Ephesians did not tolerate evil people. It's possible that they did this in response to Paul's warning the last time they saw him in **Acts 20:28-31**: "<sup>28</sup> Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. <sup>29</sup> For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. <sup>30</sup> Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. <sup>31</sup> Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears."

**"and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars"** - Paul's warning may also have influenced their policy to test anyone coming to their church claiming to be an apostle. In that day there were men who wanted to gain followers and financial support by going from church to church claiming to be an apostle of Christ. The Ephesians did not take the claims of such men at face value but examined their doctrine and lifestyle and exposed them when they failed the test.

**"And hast borne [carry; support; uphold], and hast patience [steadfastness; endurance], and for my name's sake hast laboured [toiled], and hast not fainted [become weary]"** - This verse seems to recap what was good about the Ephesian church: they were upholding the truth, enduring the temptations and persecutions of the world, were laboring for the sake of Jesus Christ and had not given up and quit. The Lord approved of these things.

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<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.

**"Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee"** - On the surface, the church at Ephesus appeared to be a good, faithful and admirable church, but Christ was able to see into their hearts and expose their critical problem.

**"because thou hast left thy first love [agápē – selfless love]"** - Commentators disagree on whether love for Christ or love for other Christians is intended, but because it is the "first" love that is specified, love for Christ is probably the meaning. Also, once love for Christ has grown cold then love for each other will soon fade as well.

Recalling our relationship with God when we were first saved we can remember how much we enjoyed our love for Jesus Christ. However, as time passes there is a tendency for our love for Christ to cool off. Our motivation for serving Christ can change from love for God to only fulfilling our duty as a Christian. We labor for Christ out of a sense of obligation rather than because we love and want to please Him. At that time our Christianity can become a dead religious ritual rather than the exercise of a living faith in Christ and if we are not careful we will be on the threshold of legalism. In fact, some segments of Christianity have become quite legalistic in their zeal to be "more holy" than other Christians, promoting ideas of holiness not found in the Bible and criticizing anyone who doesn't meet their criteria for being godly.

**Isa. 29:13** "Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men:"

<sup>5</sup> 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.

**“Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen”** - Christ calls them to remember the sweetness of the time when their love for Him was the most important thing in their life compared to where they were now. He expresses the significance of the change from where they were to where they are now when He says “thou art fallen.”

**“and repent [to change one’s mind], and do the first works”** - We see the seriousness of the problem when Christ calls on them to repent. He wants them to change direction and return to Him. The “first works” refer to the things they had previously done out of love for Christ. Those works were superior to the things they were doing now because they were done as an expression of love rather than duty, obligation or pride.

Do we do the things we do because we love God or do we do them because “that’s what Christian’s are supposed to do?” We should want to read and study the Bible because we want to know more about the God we love and not so we can check off another box on our checklist of Christian duties we’ve done. We ought to pray, read the Bible, witness, etc. because we love God and not so we can boast about how “spiritual” we are because do these things every day.

**“or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent”** - A church that has left their first love will dry up and die. It will cease to exist because they will no longer see souls saved and the membership will dwindle due to church-splits and people leaving to find spiritual nourishment elsewhere. Christ’s warning that He will “remove thy candlestick [*the church*] out of his place” will come to pass because the church will not be able to continue without His presence or blessings.

<sup>6</sup> But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

**“But this thou hast”** - Christ hands out one last compliment to the church.

**“that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate”** - There are two main views on who the “Nicolaitans” were.

- One view takes the meaning of the name and derives an interpretation from it. The name “Nicolaitans” is a compound of “niko” (to conquer) and “laos” (the people or laity) and means “to conquer the people.” This view says that the Nicolaitans wanted to establish a priestly order that had dominance over “the laity.” This view condemns the practice of churches such as the Roman Catholic Church that have offices such as priests, bishops, cardinals and popes that have divine authority over their laity.
- The other view looks to the writings of the early church fathers such as Irenaeus who wrote that the Nicolaitans were a sect following Nicolas, one of the first deacons chosen by the people in Acts 6:5. It is written that Nicolas was a false believer who later became an apostate but because he was a deacon he was able to lead people astray. Like Balaam, he led the people into immorality and wickedness, teaching that their freedom in Christ meant they were free to indulge their flesh.

Christ hated the teaching and deeds of the Nicolaitans and the fact that the Ephesian church could not “bear them which are evil” caused this church to hate their deeds as well.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

**“He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches”** - In a natural sense, “he that hath an ear, let him hear” declares that anyone with the physical ability to hear should pay attention to what is being said. However, since the message is “what the Spirit saith” then “he that hath an ear” must refer only to those who have the ability to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying – individuals who have been born of the Spirit of God or lost individuals who are undergoing the conviction of the Holy Spirit for salvation. Christ is saying that all such individuals need to listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying to these churches because these messages are too important to ignore.

**“To him that overcometh [to conquer; to get a victory] will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God”** - **1 John 5:4-5** tells that to be someone who overcomes we must be born again through faith in Jesus Christ: *“<sup>4</sup> For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. <sup>5</sup> Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?”*

We first saw the tree of life in the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve had access to it until they disobeyed God. After that the LORD had to sever their access to the tree: **Gen 3:22-24** *“<sup>22</sup> And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: <sup>23</sup> Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. <sup>24</sup> So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.”*

The tree of life is again referenced in **Rev. 22:2** where an angel is showing John the river of life emanating from the throne of God: *“In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.”*

One commentator pointed out that a number of Jewish texts used the eating of the fruit of the tree of life as a metaphor for salvation and that Christian writers continued to use the metaphor in the same way. In this context Christ giving the fruit of the tree of life to eat represents access to eternal life and the presence of God in heaven.