

2. The Church of Ephesus

The title of this series of teachings is *Lessons From the Seven Churches* (of Asia). Prepositions “of” or “on” are not used, but **from**. Thus, this is not an analysis of the letters dictated by Christ and written by John to these churches, but rather it is to answer the questions, “What may we learn from Christ’s critique of these churches?” “How may we receive this evaluation by our Lord to our personal walk and to our church fellowships?” “Can we look at each letter as in the light of a mirror and closely examine ourselves and to ultimately ...



“Examine yourselves, whether you be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know you not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except you be reprobates?” 2 Co. 13.5

A thorough and necessary foundation was laid in Chapter 1 of this series. We will now proceed with Christ’s assessment of the Church of Ephesus, Revelation 2.1-7.

The Lampstand This Letter begins with Christ addressing the church,
“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this:” Rev. 2.1

He explains the mystery of the vision as, *“The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which you saw are the seven churches.” Rev. 1.20*

The *lampstand* was a central figure in Moses’ tabernacle and the latter temple(s). It is represented today even in many households as the menorah. Though originally consisting of some seventy parts it was formed as beaten gold into a singular piece to show oneness. Its central shaft is symbolic of Christ. The seven lamps atop each of the six branches and the central shaft are symbolic of the seven churches. The number seven means completeness or wholeness, thus not restricting the meaning to seven individual churches but the whole of all the churches comprising ‘The Church’ of Christ.



Symbolism of the lampstand now passes from a religious object of the Old Testament to that of **spiritual reality** in the New Testament. This lampstand shows well the reality of Christ’s words found in John 15.5, *“I am the vine, you are the branches: He that abides in Me, and I in him, the same brings forth much fruit: for without Me you can do nothing.”* This verse ends in the word *nothing*, which in the Greek interpretation means, *“oudeis* (“not one, none”) *categorically excludes*, declaring as a *fact* that no valid example exists.” All churches, this or that church, all the members, you or me, are of no exception. This *nothing* includes all things done, even those things done in memory of Christ, for Him, and on behalf of Him. *Each lamp was reliant upon oil which source was not from within it. And, this oil had to be ignited to produce fire and therefore light. O how we, as members of His Church and of His Body on this earth so desperately need to learn this vital principle.

*In a vision the prophet Zechariah saw the golden lampstand with its seven lamps, and two olive trees on either side of a central bowl. These trees had a fruit-bearing “branch,” which “emptied itself” (its golden oil) by a golden tube into the oil-bowl of the lampstand. Human agency is again set aside. The berries become oil without the aid of man and are the continual source of energy and light to the lamps. Zech. 1:1-3,11

When asked to explain this, the Lord said: *“This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: ‘Not by might nor by power, but by*

In John's vision of the seven churches, each church is seen as a unique many-membered church, but not independent of something much larger. All churches are "in Christ" as He alone stands in their midst. Every member of every church finds their existence in Christ. The vision is that of a corporate entity of which all the churches, and all its many members, belong and find their function and relationship as the Body of Christ. How large does that church have to be to qualify for such a presence? Jesus said, "*For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.*" Mt. 18.20

So, do you see that these letters are not just descriptive of the conditions in these seven unique churches of Asia existing nearly 2000 years ago? Rather, they are reflective of conditions throughout the Body of Christ. These things are written for all churches for all time. They are written for our instruction. Paul wrote letters to specific churches in specific cities, such as Corinth, Colossae, Thessalonica, etc. However, to this day we read them as personal letters to every church and each church member. They are timeless, space-less, and without exception.

In order to press into this reality, **faith** needs to be exercised. Faith is not physical activities as in things we do, or emotions as in what we feel. "*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*" Heb. 11.1 "*Assurance*" is as one knowingly has the deed or title to an agreement. It is a legitimate claim to an unseen promise. "*Conviction*" is being fully persuaded in the invisible, the intangible things of the spiritual realm, as those things "*not seen.*" Faith **must** be exercised to experience and enter this spiritual reality and life. When the members of a church gather together, they become as a lamp of this lampstand with Christ in their midst. Not symbolically but spiritually and experientially present. And, in which the Holy Spirit provides the "anointing," the flow of golden oil into the lamp, and in whose power the Spirit of Christ ignites the oil to bring fire and light. Did not John the Baptist say of Jesus Christ, "*He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*" Mt. 3.11 It must be realized that gathering together is as in entering that (invisible) cloud of the glory of God's presence, much as when Moses and the children of Israel finished building the tabernacle, and consecrated it by sacrifices, "*Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.*" Ex. 40:34 Dare I say, "any less of the exercise of this faith, the gathering of believers becomes religious in nature, routine and memorial, void of spiritual reality?"

The seven stars held by Christ in His right hand are the angels to the seven churches. These are ministers of the Gospel of Christ, commissioned and gifted by Him alone, and sent to bring forth His word, to serve His purposes. Our present prayer is that such a messenger yet minister this word to us this very day, as we press on to understand this upward calling of our Lord upon our lives and upon His Church. As the psalmist wrote, "*O send out your light and your truth: let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill, and to your tabernacles*" Ps.43.3



The Encouragement Christ condones the church for its "intolerance,"

"I know your works, and your labor, and your patience, and how you cannot bear (tolerate) them which are evil: and you have tried (tested) them which say they are apostles, and are not, and have found them liars:" Rev. 2.2

Today's society not only looks for, but demands, tolerant churches and condemns any "intolerance" found therein. Society wants open-minded, broad-minded, liberal churches. Christ, however, commends their intolerance. Everyone is not accepted, every act is not easily forgiven, and every motive is not condoned. They had become a **discerning** church. They were sharp, eagle-eyed, discriminating. They would not tolerate those with morally-corrupt character. A "church of Ephesus" is not a hospital for the morally sick, but rather a tabernacle of God in holiness. Decisive actions are required.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthian Church immorality is rebuked and they are encouraged to expel an immoral brother, "*I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world. But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat. For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? Do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judges. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.*" 1 Cor. 5:9-13

Such a discerning church is condemned by society as being intolerant, small-minded, without compassion or love, homophobic, prejudiced, and bigoted. But as scriptures says, "*Woe to them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!*" Is. 5:20 Christ commends this church of Ephesus for rightly judging good and evil. Isn't this the basis for Godly righteousness? It was to this same church that Paul wrote, "*In whom (Christ) you are being built together for a holy habitation of God in the Spirit.*" Eph. 2:22 Imagine that, a people built together for a holy dwelling place of God!

In Rev. 2:2 Christ also commends the church for testing those who call themselves *apostles* and are not; those who make false pretensions to a divine mission, and inspiration, and have endeavored to impose their errors on others, on the pretense of apostolic-type authority. Paul had warned the Ephesian elders of the appearance of false teachers. (Acts 20:28-31) Zeal for pure doctrine and guidance characterized this Ephesian Church. How often I have seen in today's church, because the leadership errantly embraces such a ministry, nearly the whole church embraces it as well. However, not all are without discernment. Some in the church are spiritually sensitive to these matters. Two errors occur. Firstly, the discerning one(s) fear coming to the church leadership and express their concerns and warnings. They fear it is not their place to do so, when they are really obligated, in the spirit of meekness, to do so. The second error is the deftness, sometimes down right arrogance, of church leaders to sense the members of its body, to feel their pulse, and to learn from them. After all, it is, "... *every joint supplies, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, makes increase of the body to the edifying of itself in love.*" Eph. 4:16

It is a true saying that the "tail should not wag the dog." But the church cannot be divided into head, body and tail. Christ is the Head and the believers are the body. There is no tail to wag. As to the church at Rome, Paul writes, "*And I myself also am persuaded of you, my brothers, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another.*" Rm. 15:14 Some versions use the word "instruct" here for "admonish" but it is admonish in the original Greek. This word means to warn or correct... in a Godly manner. Perhaps the primary responsibility for **correction** and guidance lies with the church leadership, those elders in the faith set in place to oversee the local church. But the responsibility to discern wickedness, sin, errant doctrine, pseudo-ministries, and other spiritual matters lies with the whole of the body, the church.

As such, this church is also commended for down-right hating. To detest someone, or some group because of their doctrinal belief or life-style is a very strong position to take. However, Christ commends, "*that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitanes.*" Rev. 2:6 There are many varying thoughts by Bible scholars about this group. Basically, it is thought a sect so called from Nicolas, one of the seven deacons mentioned in Acts 6:5. According to some ancient writers, their doctrine and their lives were equally corrupt. They allowed the practice of the most abominable lewdness and adulteries, as well as sacrificing to idols; all which they placed among things indifferent, and even pleaded for, as branches of Christian liberty. I once heard my wife in voice prayer, "Lord, may I be offended of things that offend You." This means not to be tolerant or intolerant of anything in general, but to desire with all the heart what is pleasing and acceptable to Him, and to be equally repulsed and affronted at anything to what He finds offensive. It means to love, pursue, and cherish what the Spirit reveals as good, and to hate, abhor, and separate from what is spiritually discerned as evil. This is fellowship in Christ.

The Admonition “Nevertheless I have ~~somewhat~~ against you, because you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you are fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come to you quickly, and will remove your candlestick out of its place, except you repent.” Rev. 2.4,5

This is a very stern and grave admonition. Note that the word ~~somewhat~~ has a strikethrough, as it is not in the original text. Rather, Christ’s use of the word *against* (Gk. *kata*, down) is severe, “You have fallen from a higher love relationship to something much lower.” The fervor and zeal of their love has diminished (not diminishing, but has diminished) in intensity to a faint glow. This is very serious.

The Greek word for love here is *agape*. Christ is not speaking of an emotional love (Gk. *phileo*) with which one feels towards another. One spouse may say to another, “Something has gone out of our marriage. The love (*phileo*) we had just isn’t there any longer.” In other words, they don’t feel the inner warmth towards one another. They are no longer attracted to the other. But Christ is addressing a higher love (Gk. *agape*), which is not tied to emotions but to the spirit. Elsewhere He had said,

“If you love (agapao) Me, you will keep My commandments.” Jn. 14.15 And,
“If you keep my commandments, you shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love.” Jn. 15.10

So *agape* love is one of action or of obedience, and is void of emotions. Mere profession of love is no evidence for love. Love is shown by obedience or by doing. It is the only evidence of our love to Jesus, or of Jesus to the Father. Such a love is shown when a child is willing, without hesitation or complaining, or any such thing, does those things the parents require or expects him to do.

In addition, *agape* love is a love of choice, one simply chooses, or prefers, to care for the well-being of another. One does not “fall into” or “fall out” of this kind of love. It is a love of the spirit and outside the realm of soulish emotions. As *phileo* love is innate to the soul and its emotions, *agape* love is innate to the spirit and its discernment. Discernment here means insight or special understanding to the needs or expectations of another.

The ultimate of this love for the believer, is preferring to “*live though Christ,*” 1 Jn. 4.9, embracing God’s will for us for us, choosing His choices, through the indwelling life of His Son—“*I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me.*” Gal 2.20 This is the exercise of spiritual discernment.

The idea behind this reprimand is, that, as a church, they had less of this *agape* love than formerly characterized them. They were in a severe state of decline, as in the twilight of a setting sun about to go into darkness. Though they fervently maintained in the most outward way the doctrines of the Christian religion, and strongly opposed the advocates of error and deception, they were no longer walking in the reality of His fellowship, that is, “*through Christ.*” The church was not in tune with His present-day will and purpose for them. They were living in a religion of the past and void of the present life of Christ in their midst. In short, they became “churchy,” “religious,” and “legalistic.”

This has little to do with that warm feeling, joyous emotion, at the first experience of knowing Christ. That feeling wanes over time. And actually, there is a danger in trying to rekindle that “feeling” that can lead to error and deception. Things may be done in the church setting to try to stimulate those emotions which further accentuates the decline of this true love. Over time, believers can, as with the Ephesian church, become so overwhelmingly dogmatic in their precepts, doctrine, codes of behavior, and institutional practices that they become more of a religious organization and less of a people linked to God in a living relationship through His Son Jesus Christ. This is the pitiful state of decline in which the Ephesian church found itself. “Things” of Christ, so precious and guardedly preserved, have slowly over the years replaced Christ Himself.

This situation has occurred repeatedly over the centuries regarding the church. A church or denomination loses the passion of their first love, and they become cold and dead. Then another church or denomination is formed under the reviving influence of the Holy Spirit, bringing spiritual life into the midst. There is a new zeal, not for things of Christ, but for Christ Himself. But it need hardly be said that this early zeal may also die away, and that this new church or denomination, once so full of life and love, may become as cold as those that went before, even as those from which it separated. There then arises the necessity of the Spirit for the formation of a new ~~organization~~ (strikeout intended) organism that shall be fired with passion and zeal. Sadly, such has been the history of the church to this day. Have you experienced such? I have.

Thus, what has occurred at Ephesus has occurred repeatedly throughout the history of the church. The same operation of the sovereignty of God that occurred there may be expected to follow in all similar cases. Christ has been set in place as the Head of the church and governs the church always on the same principles. So it is reasonable to think that once a church has lost its “*first love*,” and declines more and more into archaic religious ritualism, its “*lampstand is removed*”—until the church becomes wholly extinct, its spiritual vitality gone, and all that remains is religion of forms.

The Exhortation *”He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit said to the churches; To him that overcomes will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the middle of the paradise of God.”* Rev. 2.7

For the one(s) who “*have an ear to hear*” they hear His voice as the sound of a trumpet, “*Remember therefore from where you are fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come to you quickly, and will remove your candlestick out of its place, except you repent.*” Rev. 2.4,5 They would be gripped with fear at the thought of such a great loss in spiritual well-being. However, there is also an overwhelming, far greater zeal for the vision before them, “*to eat of the tree of life.*” They must press on at all cost. The first reaction may well be to stand and *fight* to preserve the present church. A close attachment has been formed with many brothers and sisters in the faith and that bond is difficult to break. So all must be done to bring about a corporate repentance; one that must begin with the elders in church leadership. This may prove to be a most difficult struggle in which to *overcome*.

When it becomes clear that one cannot *overcome* in the present setting, then *flight* is the only option. The comfort and nostalgia of the church, the close friendships, the traditions, must all be left behind. To *overcome* means either to form another church with a body of believers, all who “*have an ear to hear*,” or to be joined with another body of believers having *overcome*, with their *Lampstand* yet in tack. Once again, to *overcome* is not an option, it is an absolute necessity.

Some may say, “All that I have ever known is a ‘religion of forms.’” For much of my early life I too only knew religion, denominationalism, ritualism, routine. It was of a Christ who died for me and I should be eternally grateful, and to regularly remember to honor Him. It was part of my culture and upbringing. It was seemingly “sound and safe.” But all of this vaporized when the trumpet sounded, and His voice brought light and life. Some others may say, “I remember, things were different back then. Something just happened over time.” To remember the former brings to mind Israel rebuilding of the temple after many years in exile in a foreign country: “*But many of the priests and Levites and chief of the fathers, who were ancient men, that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice; and many shouted aloud for joy.*” Ezra 3.12 They remembered the former life and a fresh zeal entered into them.

To overcome means to remember and repent and to begin eating of “*The Tree of Life.*”

In the midst of the Garden of Eden were two trees, the *Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil* and the *Tree of Life*. Gn. 2.9 Adam and Eve fell short of God’s highest calling, that is, to eat of the *Tree of Life*, who is Christ Himself. Instead, by eating of the *Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil* they were able to develop their own

soul life, to grow in knowledge and independence and to satisfy their desires with what they deemed “good.” Having abandoned *life*, all that was left to them, and to their progeny, was a religion of forms: sacrifices and offerings, worship from afar, and obedience to an outward set of commandments.

This promise to eat of the *Tree of Life* is not made just for the “here-after.” It is a promise for the present *overcomer*. There is a partaking of His *Life*, now, which abides for eternity. (See Jn..6.51) It means to voluntarily give up ones independence and self-reliance and to begin a new walk of faith—in Him. The here-after will bring the full blessing of a resurrected body in which this life will dwell. But for now, even yet in this unredeemed body, His *life* may flow:

“I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.” Gal. 2.20

This is remembering and doing the works of the first love. May we all learn from the Church of Ephesus and preserve, nay come into fullness of the reality of the *Lampstand*, the One who stands in the midst of the churches holding the stars in His right hand.

We pray, even as the psalmist, “*O send out your light and your truth: let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill, and to your tabernacles*” Ps.43.3