

## **Chapter 5**

### **The Church at Ephesus**

*“To the angel of the church of Ephesus write ...”  
(Revelation 2:1)*

Jesus told John to address his letter to seven specific congregations. I have often wondered why Jesus picked these specific groups of people. Had not Paul, the great Apostle to the Gentiles, established congregations not only in these areas but also throughout Greece and other parts of the then known world? According to Church historians some of the Apostles had traveled as far as India establishing congregations. Would our Lord purposely leave them out? The Roman Empire was still in control of things at this time and a congregation had been established in Rome as well. Would it not have made sense to write such an important letter to this group too? What about the main counsel of the Church leadership? Were they not still based out of Jerusalem? So if what we would consider to be the headquarters by today's standard was in Jerusalem wouldn't it make sense to address the letter to the governing body?

I believe Jesus picked these seven for a specific purpose. I want to go on record as saying that I recognize the value of the instruction found in each letter to individual believers. These things are also very good examples to congregations of people. They let us know that we can grow cold as a group and as individuals unless we keep ourselves on guard. There is great value in them for the Church and Christians of every age.

But it goes deeper than that. Nowhere in the Bible will we find that these letters specifically represent the history of the entire Christian Church. I'm not going to justify this by any means. I refuse to spiritualize scripture where God has not told us it is representative. These letters were written to these seven specific congregations to warn them about their condition and tell them what was going to happen if they didn't get themselves straightened up. Of that there is no doubt.

Still, we can question why Jesus chose to put these letters in the middle of such a great and important message that He was about to reveal to John. To think that they have no prophetic value just doesn't really make sense at this point, at least, not to me.

While I will not spiritualize I will also acknowledge that even though God can see into the future like it is happening today, John had no idea of what was going to happen in the Church other than the promises given to them of the second coming of the Lord. Other than what God allowed him to see in the Spirit, he had no way of knowing where the Church would fail, succeed or grow. So he didn't know to write what these seven congregations would represent.

It is ironic how that each of these short letters with very blunt commendations, rebukes, and instruction on how to overcome, so closely resemble seven different and distinct times in church history. Each one aligns itself characteristically and historically with a certain period of time. It is also significant, in a prophetic book telling of what is to come during the end times that our Lord would inject these as a sort of parentheses between the description of Himself and the prophecies of things to come.

In a way, the Church as a whole is a parenthetical incident in the history of man's relationship with God. Nowhere in the Old Testament is it referred to. The Old Testament gives the account of God's dealing primarily with the Jewish people – His chosen people. We have the early days and instruction recorded in the New Testament. The Gospels tell us of the promised Messiah and how that He was rejected by the Jewish nation mainly because they were looking for an immediate deliverer. Jesus Christ was that deliverer but God had planned so much more for the deliverance provided by the Messiah than just freedom from the rule of man. God was providing deliverance and freedom from the curse of sin placed on mankind and the earth when Adam and Eve sinned in Eden.

Consequently, the Church was heavily persecuted by the Jews in its early days, and because it freed men from the slavery of sin and pronounced that all religion was wrong except the worship of God, Christians found themselves hated by God's chosen race and by their friends and neighbors simply because they had discovered the One and True God – a God of infinite love, mercy and grace, who wanted to bring peace into their lives and restore His creation back to Himself. Sinful man could not understand this. And so instead of wide reception of their teaching they were met by governmental persecution as enemies of the state.

This sets the stage for the first period in Church history represented in the letter to Ephesus. Notice in the beginning of the letter Jesus describes Himself again as He who holds the seven stars and walks amongst the seven lampstands. Toward the end of Revelation 1 our Lord very plainly identifies the seven stars as the angels (messengers or pastors) of the seven churches and the seven lampstands as being representative of the seven churches. Once again I question, why these seven when so many other, more significant and larger congregations existed in the world? I believe that it is because these seven churches resemble and are representative of those seven historical periods of the Church.

Our omniscient (all-knowing) and omnipresent (present everywhere at the same time) Lord told the Ephesian church that He knew of their works, their labor, their patience, and how that they could not bear those who were evil. He knew how that they had tested those who claimed to be prophets from God, spewing forth false words and outright lies, and had proven them to be false. He knew how that they had persevered, performed their work of winning souls with patience, and had labored for the name of Christ tirelessly. In these things our Lord commended this congregation.

But He had something against them in that they had abandoned their first love. Of course when we come to Christ our first love is God and our Lord. We have realized what He has done for us in dying for our sin on Calvary and extending His mercy and grace towards us allowing us as unworthy sinners to be born again into His glorious kingdom. When we come to Christ in this

manner understanding what He has accomplished to provide this for us how can we help but fall in love with Him? We begin to work and labor to win others into the Kingdom. We begin to breathe, eat and sleep Christ.

The one thing we must guard against is becoming so zealous and dedicated to our mission and goal that we somehow forget all about the beginning, our personal relationship with our Lord, and our tolerance for those who need to come to Him. In the Gospels Jesus was called a glutton and an alcoholic because He associated Himself with tax collectors, drunkards, thieves, adulterers, and those the higher Jewish community thought of as “low-life.” Why did Jesus risk these accusations that would disgust us today? He did it because these people needed salvation. Many of them did the things they did because they were tired and weary of the many laws that had been forced upon them by the Jewish leaders. They were sick and tired of religion and so they turned to other things in attempt to satisfy themselves.

But nothing could bring satisfaction. They were open to things that could change their lives. Then along came Jesus preaching a much different message than that of the Pharisees. He talked about love, honesty and integrity that was simple yet went way beyond what they had heard and seen out of the Jewish leaders. They witnessed great miracles of healing from Jesus that served as proof of the truth of His message. And so they flocked to Him.

It is no different today. Those who need Him the most, often come to Christ in droves once they see the true simplicity of the Gospel. What they rebel against is the organization, the rules and regulations, and the authority subjected upon them by religion. That’s what happened to the church at Ephesus, and it is what has happened to the church structure of today. Men have a tendency to organize and rule after a time. This organization and rule often takes the place of freedom, grace, and mercy. We begin to look more to the rule book and the decisions of our leaders rather than seek God in prayer and listen to the Holy Spirit speaking in our hearts witnessing of the word of God. When this happens we have left our first love.

This is where the Church was toward the end of the apostolic period, the time when the apostles lived. The Church had become more organized and was leaning more on their organization than upon God. Jesus told them in no uncertain terms to remember from where they had fallen, to repent and to return to their first works or their lampstand would be removed from its place; in other words, taken from the presence of the Almighty.

Our Lord did commend their hatred for the deeds of the Nicolaitans stating that these deeds He also hated. In a nutshell, these were followers of Nicholas (which is the Greek form of Balaam). Remember that while the Israeli people were in route to the Promised Land, they had an encounter with Balaam. He was described as a prophet of God. Balak, the king of the Amorites, asked Balaam to place a curse on these people passing through their land. God wouldn’t allow Balaam to do that, but later on, in Numbers 31, we see that Balaam instigated a plan to have the men of Israel to take women of the Amorites as their wives, which had been strictly prohibited by God during the time of the Law. This caused them to allow foreign and false gods and caused the people to compromise their beliefs and the Law.

This is exactly what this group during the early days of the Church did. They claimed to be Christians but actually taught that loose morals concerning other gods and immorality were okay. It was an attempt to corrupt the Church. We still have Nicolaitans around today (maybe not in name but certainly in practice).

Jesus concluded this letter, as He did all of them, by saying, “He who has an ear, let him listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.” In other words, he who understands, take heed, listen and be obedient to the warnings and instruction of the Spirit.

He finished the letter with a promise. Those who successfully overcame would be privileged to eat from the Tree of Life found in the middle of God’s paradise. The last we saw the Tree of Life it was located in the Garden of Eden. When Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden, God must have transported this tree whose fruit would grant eternal life, into Heaven. So those who overcame during this period would be allowed to eat from this tree from which no man had ever eaten before.

In summary, the letter to the church at Ephesus represents the first period of Church history, from the beginning of the Church to the end of the age of the apostles. It was a wonderful period during which the Church grew with leaps and bounds as people, both Jewish and Gentile, flocked into its folds. It was not marked by big buildings but with congregations of people in each city. It was the first age of the Church.