

TO THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS, I (Rev 2.1-7) CBC-20 Apr 2014

Title to distinguish among 7 “letters,” but to all churches—to us! (2.7 = 7x.)

Context: John (1.9); visions of Christ, His warfare, future triumph. Dramatic, symbolic vision of our King (1.10-20). Charged to relay messages to 7 churches in Asia Minor (1.11, same order in Rev 2-3).

7 literal local churches in first century—not as dispensationalists say:

a description or prophetic outline of the “Spiritual History” of the Church from the time when John wrote the Book in A. D. 96, down to the taking out of the Church, . . . This interpretation of the “Messages to the Seven Churches” was hidden to the early Church, because time was required for Church History to develop and be written, so a comparison could be made to reveal the correspondence. If it had been clearly revealed that the Seven Churches stood for “Seven Church Periods” that would have to elapse before Christ could come back, the incentive to watch would have been absent (Clarence Larkin, 1919, in loc.).

“This interpretation was hidden to the early Church” because it is wrong. These letters are perspicuous for all Christians in all times and places. This principle should serve as a check on fanciful interpretations, e.g.,

I have a Christian friend who was a Green Beret in Viet Nam. When he first read this chapter [of locusts in Rev 9.1-12] he said, “I know what those are. I’ve seen hundreds of them in Viet Nam. They’re Cobra helicopters! That may be conjecture, but it does give you something to think about! A Cobra helicopter does fit the sound of “many chariots.” My friend believes that the means of torment will be a kind of nerve gas sprayed from its tail (Hal Lindsey, *There’s a New World Coming*, 1973, pp. 138–139, cited online).

Yet Providence ordained that these seven letters would be perfectly relevant counsel for all the churches throughout the world and history. They are representative and remain the voice of the risen Christ to us!

The topic of “what’s wrong with the church today?” is a cottage industry today (books, blogs, conferences, etc.). Too often sweeping generalizations are made and the advice is a mishmash of good and bad. I am so thankful that we have Christ’s universal counsel to His churches here in Rev 2-3. He tailors His messages and yet together they are wonderfully comprehensive.

All follow a general pattern with minor variations (alliterated to memorize).

1. **Charge to the writer.**
2. **Christ described** (elements of vision in Rev 1).
3. **Commendation** of the church’s virtues (not Laodicea).
4. **Criticism** of the church’s vices (not Smyrna, Philadelphia).

5. **Counsel** (persevere, repent) in response to their spiritual traits.
6. **Call to hear** what the Spirit says to the churches.
7. **Closing promise** to overcomers.

In his exceptional commentary on the Greek text, scholar Greg Beale wrote:

The logical flow of thought in each letter generally conforms to the following pattern: 1) Christ presents Himself with certain attributes particularly suitable to the situation of each church, faith in which provides the basis for overcoming the specific problem that the church faces; 2) the situation and the particular problem are reviewed; 3) on the basis of the situation and the problem, Christ gives either encouragement to persevere in the face of conflict (to faithful churches) or exhortation to repent in order to avoid judgment (to unfaithful churches); 4) the situation and the problem and the corresponding encouragement or exhortation form the ground for Christ issuing a call for the churches to respond by heeding the encouragement or exhortation; 5) on the basis of a positive response, Christ promises the inheritance of eternal life with Him, which uniquely corresponds to His attributes or to the churches’ situation. Therefore, the logical flow of each letter climaxes with the promise of inheriting eternal life with Christ, which is the main point of each letter.

Let me overstate the case at Ephesus to make the point clear. They had theology without love, purity without passion, doctrine without devotion, truth for themselves but no witness for the world. They were an embattled church, as all true churches are, but they fell into a common trap set by the devil in spiritual warfare. They were a defensive fortress but no longer a base of offensive operations. They were ecclesiastically introspective with no concern for evangelizing the perishing sinners of this world, “out there.”

This is a common, if not universal, problem among true churches of Christ, but all churches need to hear of it for prevention or for cure.

CHARGE TO THE WRITER (2.1a). Comparable phrase in all seven.

“*Write* [command to John] to the angel of the church of Ephesus.” Christ communicates His mind to His church by written text, often denigrated.

It pleased the Lord at sundry times and in divers manners to reveal himself, and to declare . . . his will unto his church; and afterward for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan, and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the Holy Scriptures to be most necessary (1689 LBCF I.1).

The inspired text John received = preserved, propagated, and necessary.

Its use ☐ to establish, comfort us against spiritual corruption.

Ephesus: main city of Asia (Minor). Devoted to Artemis (Diana), Greek fertility goddess of the moon, wild animals, hunting. Paul visited on 2nd missionary journey; stayed 2 years on 3rd journey, established strong church.

CHRIST DESCRIBED (2.1b). First we need to hear of Christ, then ourselves!

Pronouncement formula: “These things saith He;” NT equivalent to “Thus saith the LORD” (OT-hundreds of times) ☐ “propositionally disclosed truth” (BDB, “Bible, Authority of the”). LJC is Jehovah relating to His churches. Not so much “letters” to the churches as “prophetic messages” (Beale).

Seven times in Rev 2-3 drawing from Rev 1 vision. Here He holds stars (angels), walks among lampstands (churches; cf. 1.13, 16, 20). Conveys His 1) support, protection, control and 2) absolute knowledge and fellowship (cf. John 15.5; “I know thy works” 7x in Rev 2-3). He knows *us*, and *all about us*.

Christ’s resurrection is a historic event; His living ministry is perpetual. He constantly upholds His Church, and we are the object of His unceasing interest, love, and pastoral concern. Knowing Pastor Christ is fundamental. Being a Christian involves the intimacy of knowing and being known, even to Christ’s under-shepherds and to one another (1 Thess 5.11-12; Heb 13.17).

COMMENDATION (2.2-3, 6)

He starts with praise. Christ’s 1) gratitude for God’s redeeming work [we are prone to ingratitude, cynicism], 2) hope for its completion [we tend to despair], 3) preparation of us for reproof [loving condescension, acknowledges our frailty], 4) encouragement to persevere [persuasion]. He is “Wonderful Counsellor” (Isa 9.6), the Example for us in ministry to others. See the descriptions of Him as most tender in Isa 40.11; 42.3.

1) For their perseverance. “Patience” (vv. 2, 3) ☐ “patient endurance, “the characteristic of a man who is not swerved from his deliberate purpose and his loyalty to faith and piety by even the greatest trials and sufferings” (ESL #5281). This involves persistent engagement in “works” (that which is *done*, with possible focus on energy or effort involved), “labor” (toil, burdensome activity). This is “borne” (v. 3), lit., a carried burden; fig., bearing anything burdensome, put up with something, etc. And they had “labored [verb form of noun in v. 2] and not fainted [or, wearied].”

One of the greatest tests of character. Numbers dwindle: work ☐ hard work ☐ persistent hard work. Ephesians among the precious few.

Some unbelievers persist in all kinds of troublesome tasks and service, but Christ commends the Ephesians for their motives in this: “For my name’s sake” (v. 3); i.e., for Me, for My pleasure, for My glory, etc. This makes all the difference to the Lord here and hereafter; a defining trait of real Christians (1 Cor 10.31; Col 3.17; 23).

Teach me, my God and King, / In all things thee to see, / And what I do in anything, / To do it as for thee: // A servant with this clause / Makes drudgery divine: / Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws, / Makes that and th’ action fine. // This is the famous stone / That turneth all to gold: / For that which God doth touch and own / Cannot for less be told” (George Herbert, The Temple, “The Elixer”).

2) For their intolerance! Yes, this is virtuous, when it is intolerance of **evil** [Gk. morally reprehensible]: people and their evil words (v. 2), deeds (v. 6), and doctrines (v. 15). Everyone hates things *they* consider evil. We are supremely blessed when we agree *with God* about good and evil.

☐ “You cannot bear [tolerate, LEB] them which are evil.” Idiomatic expression for rejection as trusted teachers or even church members. Only qualified men should be ordained and kept as church leaders (1 Tim 3; Tit 1; 1 Tim 5.22; Gal 2.9; Rom 16.17), and only credible believers should be received and kept as church members (1 Cor 5.1-2, 13; Eph 5.11).

☐ “You have tried [tested] those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars.” Probably “secondary apostles,” their associates sometimes so-called (e.g., Acts 14.14). Christ calls His people to test religious teachers and reject those as evil who are liars (1 Jn 4.1).

☐ “You hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.” Strong verb (Gk. μισέω) applied to them and to Christ: hate, detest, have a strong aversion to, hostility (lexicons).

The [hate] God [has] belongs to the context of His office as Lord and Judge. Rev. 2.6 refers to the hate of Jesus and His church at Ephesus; they both hate the works of the Nicolaitans. Hate here denotes differentiation and disavowal, punishment and judgment (TDNT).

The church’s hatred of evil people, words, deeds, and doctrines is like the body’s immunity system that fights infections and keeps it alive. Without discernment, judgment, and even detestation in the doctrinal and moral realm, people have “spiritual AIDS” (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) with the inevitable consequences of spiritual sickness and death.

This reveals something of the nature of the hard work carried on by the church at Ephesus—studying the apostles’ teaching for real-life application. 1 Tim 5.17 uses the same Greek word for “laboring” in the word and doctrine. 2 Tim 2.15, “Study” = “be diligent” (NKJV), “do your best” (ESV), “make every effort” (LEB).

It requires long hours of prayerful study to know Bible content, understand sound principles of interpretation, appreciate the heritage of sound teaching throughout church history, make valid practical application, etc. It’s also very hard to persist in unpopular stands for His sake. All these things are required for good discernment and sound judgment like those at Ephesus did.

And Jesus *praises* them for all this! This much was *right* about them! But all was not well at Ephesus: He says to them, “thou hast left thy first love” (v. 4). God willing, we will come back to consider this next time.

TO THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS, II (Rev 2.1-7) CBC-27 Apr 2014

#1/7 prophetic messages from Jesus to historic Ephesus, all churches. Each has 7 parts: **charge** to writer, **Christ** described, **commendation**, **criticism**, **counsel**, **call** to hear, **closing** promise. His diagnosis & prescription today.

CHARGE TO THE WRITER (2.1a). Divinely-dictated, preserved words. “Propositionally disclosed truth.” The voice of the living Christ to us now.

CHRIST DESCRIBED (2.1b). Stars in hand, walking among lampstands—His support, protection, control, absolute knowledge, and fellowship.

COMMENDATION (2.2-3). For perseverance in truth and intolerance of evil. A steadfast and pure church, doctrinally sound with real qualifications for teachers, members. Here Jesus *commends* what the world and many misguided Christians *condemn*. “Judge not” (Matt 7.1) was never meant to suspend all examination, evaluation, and proclamation, but only a spirit of self-righteousness and censoriousness. Cf. John 7.24; here Jesus commends a church that took that charge seriously.

CRITICISM (2.4). “The loveless church” (NKJV notes), pointed, overstated.

So far, so good, but all was not well in the church at Ephesus. “Nevertheless” signals a problem, lit., “but I have against thee” (and it is named). No criticism of Smyrna (2.8 ff.) or Philadelphia (3.7 ff.), but all others (cf. 2.14, 20). At Ephesus it was only one thing Christ had against them, but *what* a thing!

1. It Is Personal with Jesus. “I have somewhat against thee.”

He does not say, “*I* am against you,” because He wasn’t (cf. 3.19). He has a special love (He does not *chasten* the world for reformation) for all His true churches, whatever our sins and problems. But He *does* say, “*I* have somewhat against *thee*.” It is intensely personal. He has to do with us like no one else, as a husband with his wife (Eph 5.32). He is our Head by covenant; we have special obligation to submit to Him (5.22). By grace alone He loved us, chose us, came for us, lived for us, died for us, rose for us, ascended for us. By grace alone He called us out of our filth, forgave our sins, renewed our souls, comforts our hearts. and guides our lives. By grace alone He constantly protects us, prays for us, provides for us, prepares for us, and He shall come for us! O praise His name!

THIS IS WHO SAYS, “I have somewhat against you.” Can you ignore Him?

We should not reject the notion of “rule-based sanctification,” for God’s moral law is a rule of life for believers. He gives us commands and prohibitions and calls us to conform in heart and conduct to what is written. But more, sanctification is fellowship with Christ—enjoying/walking with/serving/

pleasing/representing Him to others/suffering with Him. Christians *are* holy (state); now we are called to *be and live holy* (experience). The holier you are, the more blessed your fellowship with the holy Christ.

2. It Is a Spiritual Regression. “Thou hast left thy first love.”

Your “first love” commonly your first boyfriend or girlfriend—not here, not a reference to Jesus.

Lit., “that-love your-first you have left” (LSGNT). Love is personified and a very sad verb is used to describe the history of your relationship with him/her. It can mean (lit.) to dismiss someone from one’s presence, and can be used in a legal sense for divorce; but here it means (fig.) to give up, abandon (BDAG); hence, “you have abandoned the love you had at first” (ESV). Implied: movement from a former and better condition characterized by love.

Salvation plus time does not equal spiritual maturity! It is entirely possible for a real Christian and a true local church to regress spiritually! If you’re not paddling you always drift downstream due to the downward pull of your three enemies (world, flesh, devil).

This backsliding or apostasy (cf. 5a). For God’s elect it is only temporary and partial, but still very serious. It can be doctrinal or moral but here it is affectional and practical. JE was right when he said, “True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections,” love being among the most important (TCRA). Therefore growth in true religion necessarily involves an increase of holy affections, and a decrease signals a falling off from it.

We understand backsliding to be the very opposite of growth: the decrease of both habitual and actual graces. It is possible that the life in the soul becomes less viable and loses its vigor and this must necessarily result in a decline in the quality of the actions—be it regarding the spirituality or regarding the manifestation of these actions. In some, the habitual manifestation of grace will continue as before. Since, however, intimate fellowship with God—the strength of their light and life—becomes less, the spirituality of its manifestation is also reduced. Sometimes this can occur suddenly—when one suddenly, from being in a good frame, reverts into darkness, a sinful condition, and a state of spiritual desertion. Sometimes believers backslide gradually and imperceptibly, similar to Samson’s case who, without his knowledge, was deprived of his strength. When he intended to use it, he perceived that the Lord had departed from him. Such is also the experience of some of the godly. They proceed as they normally do in maintaining their relationship with God, and in offering ejaculatory prayers, not perceiving that they are losing ground. They neglect their devotional exercises or they perform them quickly. There are no express transactions with God through Christ, and if they then earnestly seek to begin as of old, only then will they

experience what they have lost. They are then astonished that they are not able to draw near (à Brakel, TCRS IV.90).

3. It Is Too Little Love. Loosely, “you don’t have as much love as you had at the first” (NIRV).

As important as truth (Eph 4.15; 1 Pet 1.22), which Ephesian-like churches especially need to recognize and appreciate. LJC cares deeply about both.

Spiritual love in a Christian is (first) a deep feeling (i.e., it is emotional) that (second) compels voluntary (volitional) acts of worship (toward God) and benevolence (toward men). It is tragic that some have denied the emotional aspect to avoid the excesses of emotionalism or to accentuate the practical (examples abound). Dabney got it right: “Christian love is a feeling eminently practical” (Discussions, Vol. 1, “Principles of Christian Economy”). Also Spurgeon, “Love is a feeling vastly more to be valued than mere mercy” (MTP #1096). Also, “Love is a feeling which needs to be constantly renewed. The love of one generation will not avail for the next. It must be rekindled and find fresh expression” (*Pulpit Commentary* on Josh 1.5-9).

The object of love is not here specified, whether God, Christ, fellow Christians, or the lost sinners of the world, but these are all interrelated.

Beale makes a good case that Ephesus’ relatively lovelessness had its manifestation in their diminished witness to unbelievers (i.e., evangelism, missions). It’s complicated but he says,

The idea is that they no longer expressed their former zealous love for Jesus *by witnessing to him in the world*. This is why Christ chooses to introduce himself as he does in v 1. His statement that he “walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands” is intended to remind the introverted readers that their primary role in relation to their Lord should be that of a light of witness to the outside world (in loc.).

This was Matthew Henry’s interpretation, too (in loc.):

Because thou hast left thy first love; of late thou hast not been so warm **in the propagation of my gospel**, and maintaining my truth. The love of many in this church, both toward God and their brethren, probably was cooled, though not wholly extinguished (**emphasis mine**).

They had some loving witness to others, but much less than in earlier days. Let us do some serious soul-searching whether it is also the case with us.

The case is serious but there is a remedy (like surgery for appendicitis).

COUNSEL (2.5). In love, Christ convicts and counsels toward full recovery.

1. Direction: Remember, Repent, Reform. “Therefore:”

- “Remember from where you have fallen.” Fondly, humbly, to stir regret, and also hope. The greater love, the more bold witness.

Should the humiliating truth force itself upon you, my dear reader, that “I am not as I once was; my soul has lost ground; my spirituality of mind has decayed; I have lost the fervor of my first love and slackened in the heavenly race; Jesus is not as He once was, the joy of my day, the song of my night; and my walk with God is no longer so tender, loving, and filial, as it was”—then honestly and humbly confess it before God. To be humble as we should be, we must know ourselves. There must be no disguising of our true condition from ourselves or from God; there must be no framing of excuses for our declensions. The wound must be probed, the disease must be known, and its most aggravating symptoms brought to view (Winslow, Evening Thoughts, July 16).

Our espousal love burned with a holy flame of [devotedness](#) to Jesus—is it the same now? Might not Jesus well say to us, “I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love”? Alas! it is but little we have done for our Master’s glory. Our winter has lasted all too long. We are as cold as ice when we should feel a summer’s glow and bloom with sacred flowers. We give to God pence when he deserveth pounds, nay, deserveth our heart’s blood to be coined in the service of his church and of his truth (Spurgeon, M&E, Feb 11 PM).

- “Repent,” (Gk. *metanoeo*, “to change one’s mind for better, heartily to amend with abhorrence of one’s past sins,” ESL #3340). Remembering is not for nostalgia but for an about-face. “The most common word for conversion in the NT” (Berkhof); like another conversion for Christians (e.g., Peter; Luke 22.32). Heartfelt contrition and resolution: “God helping me, I am really going to change starting right now.”
- “Do the first works.” Take practical steps to be and do as you did before when you had a greater love and a bolder witness. Applies not only to an individual Christian but to a local congregation. Was our worship ever more fervent? Was our zeal and ministry ever more evangelistic, and our giving more missionary-oriented? Yes, I think it was. Christ is saying we should “do the first works.”

2. Discipline: Removal of Their Witness. Note the “or else.” Do this, or else. There is no third option. We cannot continue in this condition and expect no bad consequence for us, specifically, “I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent” (ESV). The

consequence fits the cause. If you will not aggressively witness, you shall be a witness no longer (i.e., the church will die). A group with no witness is no church; true believers witness (Rom 10.9-10; 2 Cor 4.13). A ruptured appendix is fatal if not removed right away; so is this sin.

CALL TO HEAR (2.7a). Alludes to important passages in Isa 6.9-10 and the synoptic Gospels in connection with Jesus telling parables (Mark 4.9). "The exhortation assumes a mixed audience, of which only a part will respond positively" (Beale, in loc.).

CLOSING PROMISE (2.7b). Highly symbolic promise of eternal life, which implies that all who are truly saved will also prove to be overcomers at last (Rev 21.7-8; cf. 1 John 5.4-5).

Historically, there is good news: the church at Ephesus repented and was restored, at least for a time (implied by Ignatius of Antioch, 35-107 AD).

It is possible that John is addressing a second generation in the Ephesian church that had failed to maintain the witnessing fervor of the first generation. If they do not repent, Christ will come and judge them. They will cease to exist as a church when the very function that defines the essence of their existence is no longer performed. However, the Ephesian church apparently responded positively to this exhortation (Beale, in loc., cites Ignatius).

Brethren, if our whole purpose as a church was merely to worship God and love one another, there would be no point of His leaving us in the world. We will spend eternity doing that long after the last elect sinner is saved. We remain in the world as witnesses to the risen, reigning Savior, Jesus Christ. Surely you will agree that worship and discipleship *toward evangelism and missions* is *the main calling of the church militant* until Christ returns. If we are not going to be faithful in that, we have no right to exist as a church!

I close with an extended illustration.

"A Parable: Saving Lives" by Charles Swindoll

On a dangerous seacoast notorious for shipwrecks, there was a crude little lifesaving station. Actually, the station was merely a hut with only one boat . . . but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the turbulent sea. With little thought for themselves, they would go out day and night tirelessly searching for those in danger as well as the lost. Many, many lives were saved by this brave band of men who faithfully worked as a team in and out of the lifesaving station.

By and by, it became a famous place. Some of those who had been saved as well as others along the seacoast wanted to become associated with this little station. They were willing to give their time and energy and money in support of its objectives. New boats were

purchased. New crews were trained. The station that was once obscure and crude and virtually insignificant began to grow.

Some of its members were unhappy that the hut was so unattractive and poorly equipped. They felt a more comfortable place should be provided. Emergency cots were replaced with lovely furniture. Rough, hand-made equipment was discarded and sophisticated, classy systems were installed. The hut, of course, had to be torn down to make room for all the additional equipment, furniture, systems, and appointments. By its completion, the life-saving station had become a popular gathering place, and its objectives had begun to shift. It was now used as sort of a clubhouse, an attractive building for public gatherings. Saving lives, feeding the hungry, strengthening the fearful, and calming the disturbed rarely occurred by now. Fewer members were now interested in braving the sea on lifesaving missions, so they hired professional lifeboat crews to do this work.

The original goal of the station wasn't altogether forgotten, however. The lifesaving motifs still prevailed in the club's decorations. In fact, there was a liturgical lifeboat preserved in the Room of Sweet Memories with soft, indirect lighting, which helped hide the layer of dust upon the once-used vessel.

About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast and the boat crews brought in loads of cold, wet, half-drowned people. They were dirty, some terribly sick and lonely. Others were black and "different" from the majority of the club members. The beautiful new club suddenly became messy and cluttered. A special committee saw to it that a shower house was immediately built outside and away from the club so victims of shipwreck could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next meeting there were strong words and angry feelings, which resulted in a division among the members. Most of the people wanted to stop the club's lifesaving activities and all involvements with shipwreck victims . . . ("it's too unpleasant, it's a hindrance to our social life, it's opening the door to folks who are not our kind"). As you'd expect, some still insisted upon saving lives, that this was their primary objective--that their only reason for existence was ministering to anyone needing help regardless of their club's beauty or size or decorations. They were voted down and told if they wanted to save the lives of various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own lifesaving station down the coast!

They did. As years passed, the new station experienced the same old changes. It evolved into another club . . . and yet another lifesaving station was begun. History continued to repeat itself . . . and if you visit that coast today you'll find a large number of

exclusive, impressive clubs along the shoreline owned and operated by slick professionals who have lost all involvement with the saving of lives. Shipwrecks still occur in those waters, but now most of the victims are not saved. Every day they drown at sea, and so few seem to care . . . so very few. Do you?