

The Lord urges them to remember what they were taught, to obey it and to turn from their sins. It is time for them to wake up!

- In what ways should the Church seek to be authentic, relevant, attractive... to the people of the age in which we live?
- What is the true evidence of life before God? In what ways does our congregation need to “come alive”?

Read: Revelation 3.14-22

The Ephesian church had lost their first love. The church at Sardis had a reputation of vitality but a dead heart. The Laodicean church is “lukewarm, neither hot nor cold.”

Leon Morris comments, “Christ wishes the church were the one or the other. To prefer a rejection of the faith to the way the Laodiceans professed it is startling to say the least (cf. 2 Pet. 2.21). But to profess Christianity while remaining untouched by its fire is a disaster. There is more hope for the openly antagonistic than for the coolly indifferent.”

The problem is that they were self-sufficient and self-satisfied. They had no knowledge of their wrong-doing or of their need for forgiveness through Christ. They were undoubtedly a Jesus-admiration group, regarding his life and teachings as a very valuable contribution to humanity, but lacking the passionate commitment of those who know they are sinners saved by grace.

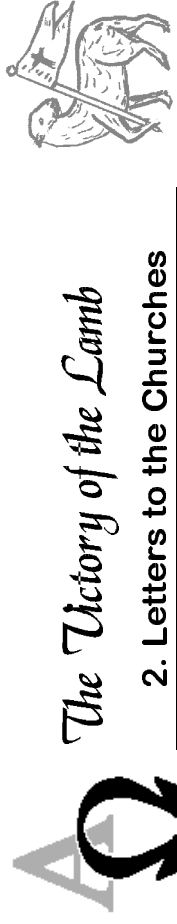
They were unaware of their poverty, blindness and nakedness. They need to come to him for true riches (2 Cor. 8.9), for true clothing that alone will cover their guilt before God, for the true eye ointment that can restore their spiritual sight (note Jn 9.39).

In fact, they need to invite the Lord himself to come in and share their lives. They may respect him, but they have left him outside knocking! They are fit for such condemnation, but graciously he knocks and waits.

- Are we, as a congregation and as individuals, too self-sufficient and self-satisfied? How can we be sensitised to our need and our Lord's gracious provision?
- How do we respond to his gracious knocking?

Study 3: Seven Seals and Seven Trumpets – Revelation 4-11

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The Victory of the Lamb

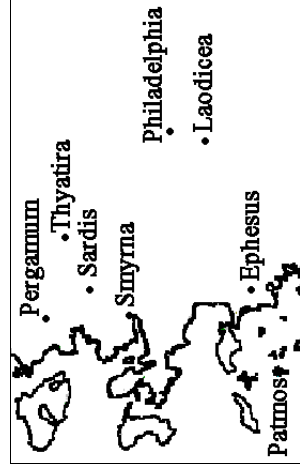
2. Letters to the Churches

Mark Twain once said that the church is a place where a nice respectable person stands in front of other nice, respectable people and urges them to be nicer and more respectable.

What is the Church all about? Is there more to it than Mark Twain has humorously suggested? What does the Lord of the Church have to say about his churches?

C.S. Lewis, in *The Screwtape Letters*, has the devil brief his nephew, Wormwood, on the subtleties and techniques of tempting people. The goal, he counsels, is not wickedness but indifference. Satan cautions his nephew to keep the prospect, the patient, comfortable at all costs. If he should become concerned about anything of importance, encourage him to think about his luncheon plans; not to worry, it could induce indigestion. And then this definitive job description: “I, the devil, will always see to it that there are bad people. Your job, my dear Wormwood, is to provide me with the people who do not care.”

The Seven Churches



John, in exile on the island of Patmos, writes specifically to each of the seven churches of Asia to whom the whole book is addressed. His messages related to needs and problems within those churches, but, as one writer has put it, they also “hold up a mirror to the Christian church of all times and places.” In many ways the spiritual state of each church seemed to be related to its geographic and cultural setting.

⇒ **Ephesus** was a large city and the centre of Roman administration in the province of Asia. It was famous for its temple to Artemis (Diana). Paul founded the church there (Acts 19).

⇒ **Smyrna** was a prosperous city and port, famed for its beauty and the fertility of the surrounding area. It is modern İzmir, a large city. The church was probably founded about the same time as that in Ephesus.

⇒ **Pergamum** was full of pagan temples, hence ‘where Satan has his throne’ (2.13). It was also the centre of emperor worship. The town of Bergama stands near the site today.

⇒ **Thyatira** was the smallest of the seven cities mentioned. It was an industrial centre with trade guilds operating a ‘closed shop’ employment policy. Lydia, the purple-dye merchant converted under Paul in Philippi (Acts 16.14-15) came from this city.

⇒ **Sardis** was well known for its textile industry and for the shameful behaviour of its people. Christians appear to have been sucked back into their bad ways. Both city and church had become apathetic.

⇒ **Philadelphia** had a small population (in an area afflicted by earthquakes) but was on the threshold of a prosperous and fertile area. Alasehir now stands on this site.

⇒ **Laodicea** was a large commercial and administrative centre, wealthy, with clothing factories and a medical school. Water was piped to it from hot springs (near the present-day Denizli) and probably arrived lukewarm.

- “In many ways the spiritual state of each church seemed to be related to its geographic and cultural setting.” Reflect on our own congregation. To what extent do we influence or are we influenced by the setting in which we are placed?

Looking at the Text

The seven letters follow this general pattern: 1. A greeting (“To the angel of the church in...”); 2. a title of the risen Christ (usually taken from the description in chapter 1); 3. praise for what is good, introduced by “I know” (except for Laodicea); 4. a criticism of the church (except for Smyrna and Philadelphia); 5. a warning; 6/7. an exhortation, “If you have ears, then listen...”, and a promise “to those who win the victory”.

There is a further pattern – churches 1 and 7 are in grave danger, churches 2 and 6 are in excellent shape, churches 3, 4 and 5 are middling, neither very good nor very bad.

Read: Revelation 2.1-7

The exalted Christ knows what is going on among his people. He commends the Ephesians for their hard work and their patience (their steadfast perseverance). He knows their zeal for the truth, leading to intolerance of evil men (in the life of the church) and exposure of false

apostles (note Paul’s prediction in Acts 20.29). They have persisted in spite of difficulty and opposition.

“But this is what I have against you: you do not love me now as you did at first.” This is so serious that it overshadows all their hard work, patience and exposure of falsehood. The Lord graciously calls them to repentance, but warns that they are under threat of having their lamp-stand removed – they will cease to be a church.

We cannot with certainty identify the Nicolaitans. They may be similar to the Balaamites (v.14) and followers of Jezebel (v.20). William Barclay saw them as an enemy from within, claiming “not that they were destroying Christianity, but that they were presenting an improved and modernised version of it.” The loving Lord has hatred for such false teaching.

There is a beautiful promise to all who “win the victory” – “I will give [them] the right to eat the fruit of the tree of life that grows in the Garden of God.” Because of Adam’s sin the way to the tree of life was cut off and guarded by cherubim (Gen. 3.24). Now it is freely given by Christ to his victorious follower.

- “Remember then from what you have fallen...” (v. 5a, RSV). Think back to your early days of commitment to Christ. What were the marks of your “first love”?
- How do we regard new converts to the faith? Do we expect them to “grow out of” their enthusiasm? If that happens, is that really a maturing or is it a dying?
- What is the way back? How can we return to our first love?

Read: Revelation 3.1-6

“I know that you have a reputation of being alive, even though you are dead.” ... what you have done is not yet perfect in the sight of my God.” “But a few of you there in Sardis have kept your clothes clean.”

Sardis enjoyed a reputation as a vital active church. But the Lord of the Church sees that there are only a few in Sardis who “have kept your clothes clean.” He looks, not at their superficial vitality, but at the heart. He is looking for holiness of life.

Hendricksen has noted, “Sardis was in the world. It should have been a light-bearer. It failed in its duty. Neither the Jews nor the Gentiles seem greatly to have troubled the people of Sardis. Sardis was a very ‘peaceful’ church. It enjoyed peace, but it was the peace of the cemetery!”