

The Revelation of Jesus Christ
A Redemptive-Historical-Pop-Up-Picture Book of
Jesus Christ
“Dear Ephesus”
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“Dear Ephesus”: A Church can be doctrinally orthodox and yet unloving about it. Being loving does not mean to compromise the truth in any way.

It is important to remind ourselves that these seven congregations were real historical churches at the time that John the Apostle wrote his *Revelation of Jesus Christ*. However, we want to understand that they are also symbolic of the entire church age between Jesus’ first and second coming.

This means that what Jesus says to the churches, we need to consider soberly for ourselves. Jesus is *still speaking*. Chapters 2-3 form the second part of the outline of the *Book of Revelation*. Chapters 2-3 should be read against the Revelation of Jesus Christ as the Risen-Ascended God Man revealed in chapter 1, particularly verses 12-20.

Outline or overview of *The Book of Revelation*:

- I. Chapter 1: Jesus the Risen-Ascended Prophet, Priest and King
- II. Chapters 2-3: The Church Militant
- III. Chapters 4-5: The Church Triumphant
- IV. Chapters 6-19: Recapitulation of Final Salvation and Judgment
- V. Chapters 20-22: New Creation/Restoration

Christ is the Son of Man, human and divine revealed in the Prophet Daniel. Christ is the Prophet, Priest and King who will speak with authority through His Word by His Spirit to His Churches.

It is important to realize that all of the exhortations are reinforced by an opening allusion to some element of the Revelation of Jesus Christ found in chapter 1:12-20; except for Laodicea (see previous sermons; also Poythress, pg. 83).

As prophet, Jesus speaks; as priest he is Mediator before God, assuring the churches of his continuous presence and his availability for them to come and seek forgiveness when they repent; as king, Jesus rules and reigns over his people, providing them instruction, protection, blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience.

We should understand that through the reading and preaching of the Word in public worship, we at KCPC are also recipients of this important letter. Jesus is addressing us, too! *Dear Ketocin Covenant Presbyterian Church...*

These are the words of the Risen-Ascended Glorified Speaking King to the first of the seven historical churches. Ephesus may have been addressed first because of the fact that she was one of the first churches to be established strongly as a Gentile-Jewish congregation. Ephesus was a great and prosperous city in the ancient world.

It is encouraging to know that the LORD Jesus knows each congregation intimately; this can be a great blessing to realize. Jesus Christ the risen-ascended king speaks with that knowledge to the spiritual needs of each congregation with encouragement, rebuke, exhortation and promise (“I know your works...”- 2:2, 19; 3:1, 8).

Jesus through His Word and by His powerful Spirit continues his commitment to his Church to conform them to His image. Jesus is committed to his people because of his grace and his promise that he will never leave them nor forsake them. Jesus disciplines his disciples so that they will live more excellently as they were called to be. There are still promises for obedience and curses for disobedience!

I’ve been asked by folks before if one denomination or congregation can be holier and more theologically correct than others (the assumed answer is usually “no” and is informed by the relevant spirit of the age that denies objectivity. When I have responded “Of course that is what Revelation 2-3 teaches,” they are often surprised.

But that is what is taught in Jesus addressing the *works* and the theological knowledge of the seven churches. Not all churches and congregations are equally as faithfully, healthy, holy, and theologically astute and accurate. Not all churches and congregations are equally as loving. That is to say state in the positive: Some churches and congregations are more faithful, healthy, holy, theologically astute and accurate, and loving.

Dear Ephesus: Or more precisely: “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write” (2:1a). Some commentators have understood the word “angel” here to be just a messenger (that is what it can mean); some have thought perhaps it refers pastors of the particular churches. More consistently with the revelation of heaven in the Book of Revelation, many argue that God assigns an angel over each particular congregation of saints (see Poythress, pg. 85; cf. Beale, pg. 230).

I think this final meaning is the right one. God has place an angel over each congregation of his people. I think this because the Apostle John is informed by much Old Testament Scripture, particularly the Prophecy of Daniel. In Daniel 10:12-11:1 (particularly Dan. 10:12-13, 20-21) we learn that heavenly “princes” (that is, “angels”) are attached to specific nations; it would seem good to interpret that if God assigns specific princes for nations, then the meaning here would be that in a manner analogous, he also assigns heavenly angels.

Dr. Vern Poythress writes: “God’s heavenly presence is the power center of the entire universe. The heavenly and earthly realms therefore interlock, and situations and processes in heaven have correspondences in mysterious fashion to processes on earth.

Thus, the same messages go both to heavenly angels and to corresponding churches on earth.”

The address of the Risen-Ascended-Glorified Speaking King would be revealed specifically to the angel (or “prince”) of the church in Ephesus and a copy would also be sent to Ephesus to reveal and declare God’s will for the Church.

From: “He who holds the seven angels and walks among the seven golden lampstands” (2:1b).

“I know your works” should cause us all to fear- -but there is grace from our Lord (v. 2a).

Jesus says: “I know your toil and patient endurance” (cf. 1:9; v. 2a). The Church militant lives between the tension of new creation and consummation (already- not yet) that is characterized by tribulation.

Jesus says: “I know how you cannot bear with those who are evil” (v. 2b). Ephesus was a faithfully confessional church. They “test the spirits” (1 John 4:1).

Jesus says: “I know you take doctrine seriously” (v. 2c)

Jesus says: “I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake and have not grown weary” (v. 3).

This was an outwardly orthodox (“Presbyterian”) church of Jesus Christ. Faithfulness on the surface of things; outwardly standing against evil; they take doctrine seriously; they were patiently enduring.

Outwardly this is a faithfully solid and conservative conversation. But inwardly, although they’re walking before God rightly, their hearts have turned away a bit from Jesus. Because their hearts had turned a bit away from Jesus, their loving hearts had grown a bit cold.

The congregation was no longer as loving as it once was. Ephesus was to evaluate its dedication to love for one another displayed in reliance upon God’s grace.

Jesus says: “But I have this against you...” (v. 4a)

Always room to grow, always room to learn, always room to be more reformed by and through the words of our Risen-Ascended Glorified LORD!

Jesus says: “You have abandoned the love you had at first” (v. 4b). This is not merely the Ephesians had forsaken Jesus as their first love, but that is implied.

The point of this is that we as a congregation in Christ’s True Church might be reformed and ever reforming as Christ speaks to us through Scripture. We should desire to and

strive together as disciples to be the congregation that God has called us to be in Christ. We must do this together in reliance upon God's grace.

This takes love. 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 reminds us of the definition of biblical love for one another:

ESV 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a: Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸ Love never ends.

Is this what characterizes our congregation? I think we strive to be faithful, healthy, holy, even theologically astute and accurate, but are we loving? Do we show the love from the grace of God to one another; do we show this love to others who may disagree with us, while we correct them gently, speaking the truth in love?

Remember the loving gentleness the Apostle Paul spoke to Timothy about (who was the first pastor of Ephesus)? Read 2 Timothy 2:23-26; this reveals to us the love that should be displayed *especially* to those who might disagree with correct teaching and how we should rely upon God's work through the correction.

Ephesus was overall a pretty good congregation. The Lord says good things about them. However, they lacked love. This seems to be a scriptural echo of what Jesus had said in Matthew 24:12-14 about the visible Church when he returns:

ESV Matthew 24:12-14: And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³ But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ¹⁴ And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

You may remember that the Apostle Paul had started the Church at Ephesus as a mission church. He had remained at Ephesus for three years preaching, teaching and training disciples. He left Pastor Timothy to continue what he had started; Timothy was the first called and ordained pastor of the congregation as it went from mission status to a self-supporting, self-governing, self-conscious, and self-propagating congregation of Christ's Church.

The Apostle Paul had warned the elders that threats from within and from without would threaten the life of the Church (Acts 20:17ff).

The Church at Ephesus was one of the exemplary model "flagship churches" of the Churches of Asia Minor. When Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesian Christians he had commended them for their great love for one another:

ESV Ephesians 1:15 For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love¹ toward all the saints...

The Apostle Paul had taught the Ephesian to live a life of love rooted in God's eternal love for them in Jesus Christ. Through a meditation and daily realization of God's love for them in Christ, they were to live a life of love; walking in love, speaking the truth in love to one another and those outside their congregation.

ESV Ephesians 3:17-19: ...so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith- that you, being rooted and grounded in love,¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth,¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

SV Ephesians 4:2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,

ESV Ephesians 4:15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

ESV Ephesians 5:2 And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Marriages were to be characterized by husband and wife loving one another, and children showing love by honoring their parents (5:21-6:4).

But something had changed since the first. Some of the gains that the Ephesian Christians had gained by God's grace had been lost because of a lack of love.

Jesus says: "Remember" (v. 5a). This is an "eschatological remember". This means "don't forget" the grace of God and the mercy that should lovingly motivate your theology to make Christians like Christ in knowledge and actions.

Jesus says: "Repent" (v. 5b). With Jesus there is always the opportunity to repent, to turn and find mercy with our Great High Priest.

Commendation ("This you have right...to be more loving and NOT to compromise. To be loving does NOT mean to compromise truth": "You hate the works of the Nicolaitans that I also hate" (v. 6). No one knows a lot about the Nicolaitans, but it is obvious they were a heretical group who taught false theology and whose practices were immoral and impure. They were probably those from within the congregation that were compromising with the world of paganism in the City of Ephesus.

You may recall that the City of Ephesus was the city of the Temple to Artemis or Diana. Thousands of priests and priestesses served at this temple. The temple was full of idolatry, impure and heinous behavior, and practiced wickedness in an abominable way. However, this was one of the main sources of income for the city.

Many within the Church of Ephesus were tempted to give into the pressures of the temple staff, especially since the Church of Jesus Christ was to preach against the practices involved in the idolatry. To stand would have made it doubly difficult for Gentile Christians at Ephesus who didn't want to lose their wealth, social standing, or even their life. Many made compromises with the world in order to avoid persecution and death. Many tried to be "culturally relevant" so that the Church was not so different from the world.

Jesus particularly hates the practices or works of the Nicolaitans, but we must remember that all bad behavior is informed spiritually by bad theology. Jesus is teaching Ephesus and us today by focusing on the bad works of the Nicolaitans, that we should take teaching seriously.

We can be tempted in our time to reinvent the church and her mission in order to avoid persecution. Like the Nicolaitans, we can be tempted to think that a little compromise never hurt anyone. We can be tempted to forget the offense of the cross and the full-life commitment that Jesus calls his people to- -to stand against the world.

As the people of God we must take false teaching and bad theology. Jesus says here that he cares so much about doctrine that he can hate those who teach wrong doctrine and practices. So much for all theology and practices having something to commend them before God! The Nicolaitans were a threat to the Ephesians' purity in the way they lived their life and their doctrine and life were to be hated.

Implicitly, we would evangelize Nicolaitans but there are some groups who are rooted deeply in error and impure living. Although we should reach them with the gospel if it is possible, it can be very difficult humanly speaking to ever leave groups like these. Most of the time, they know what they believe and how they live is abominable to God- -but keep doing them and approve of others who practice them as well (Romans 1:28ff).

Nicolaitans have exchanged the truth of God and His Christ for a lie in a Romans 1 way! They have compromised the truth and so compromised the gospel. If there is no clear offensive gospel of the cross presented to the world there is no hope of repentance.

Jesus says: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (v. 7a). This is how judgment begins at the household of God (cf. 1 Peter 4:17) as we learned about in our last sermon on the Speaking King. The "judgment" we receive as Christ's congregation is rebuke for what we are not doing biblically, and we are to be disciplined by this word of judgment, and to repent and seek to be obedient.

"He who has ears to hear" is from the Prophecy of Isaiah (Isa. 6:9-10). In Isaiah's prophecy, Isaiah was sent to preach to congregations of Israel. Those who had ears to hear and repented in light of God's Word were the remnant, the true elect of God; those who rejected and had no ears to hear were the unbelievers (even if they were in the visible Church):

And he said, "Go, and say to this people: "' Keep on hearing,¹ but do not understand; keep on seeing,² but do not perceive.'¹⁰ Make the heart of this people dull,¹ and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."

Jesus also used this language in his parables during his earthly ministry (see Matthew 13). Preaching God's Word is the way or means Jesus with the double-edged sword of his word brings straightness and aligns God's people with God's Word and Will. For those who have ears to hear there is salvation even in judgment because they become more like Christ through disciple. For those who reject the message of Christ through His Word by His Spirit, there is judgment.

To the conquerors: I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God (v. 7b). This is one of the great benefits of being heirs of God with Christ (Romans 8:15ff). The sacrament Tree of Life that appeared in the Garden of Eden and was denied our disobedient parents is present not in Eden, but in the New Jerusalem. We are invited to partake of what this sacramental tree symbolized in Jesus Christ alone.

The Tree of Life is a sacramental tree symbolizing the eternal life found in Jesus Christ for those whom he loves. Those who partake of the Tree of Life will never die but live at Shalom-Peace with God in the New Heavens and New Earth for eternity.

Though for now they may experience the Kingdom of God in the tension with tribulation and suffering, they are to remain patient (1:9), and seek the life of the Kingdom in Jesus Christ even now (Matthew 6:33), awaiting the full revealing and Revelation of this Kingdom when Christ returns.

ESV Revelation 22:1-2: Then the angel¹ showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb² through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life¹ with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

For now, we as the Church of Jesus Christ must hear and respond obediently to Jesus' letter to the Ephesian Christians, understanding it is a letter addressed also to us. We must love in response and reliance upon God's grace and we must not compromise truth. We must speak the truth in love and know that we will be persecuted for it.

For now, even as we live under tribulation, and we suffer, and we struggle against false doctrine and impure practices that God hates, we must seek to love one another as we did at the first.

And Christ enables us to do that by granting us the life now that we need that is found in Jesus Christ. Christ provides for us the grace to live the eternal and abundant life now. As John wrote elsewhere in His gospel:

ESV John 10:10 I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

Christ grants this life to us now by faith as we hear and believe His Word. Christ grants the life we need as we partake by faith of the Sacraments.

As Jesus addresses not only Ephesus, but also KCPC, how are we doing in love?

Let us end with Paul's prayer for the Ephesian Church. Let us turn to Ephesians 3:14-21 and pray together:

ESV Ephesians 3:14-21: For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵ from whom every family¹ in heaven and on earth is named, ¹⁶ that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷ so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith- that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. ²⁰ Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

It is true that a church can be doctrinally orthodox and yet unloving about it. Being loving does not mean to compromise the truth.

CRB