



We now focus on chapter 2 of Revelation, where Christ directs His attention to this first church at Ephesus. It was the largest city of the seven churches and was situated at the mouth of the Cayster River. Paul had pastored the city for two years (Acts 19:10) and then Timothy (1 Tim. 1:3). Eusebius and many other church historians note John lived in Ephesus, returned after his Patmos exile, and died there. So he would have been very familiar with the conditions of this church.

Jesus evaluates this church, saying, "To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, 'These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands'" (Rev. 2:1).

The term "angel" in the Bible means a messenger, whether angelic or human. In Revelation, the word *angel* is used 67 times, with the general meaning of a heavenly angel carrying out God's will. Further, some angels protect God's people, as Daniel 12:1 says, "At that time [of the end] Michael shall stand up, the great prince who stands watch over the sons of your people." It then appears, just as the archangel Michael protects all of God's people, that each of these seven angels is assigned to protect one of those seven churches.

Christ's evaluations describe the *prevailing spirit or attitude* and the *works* of each church. Although the context does not explicitly say these churches also depict seven church eras with those dominant attitudes until Christ's return, there are five references which point to that conclusion.

1. Ephesus was the church where John, the last apostle, apparently oversaw the work. The Church began guided by the twelve apostles, with other apostles such as Paul and Barnabas doing the main work among the Gentiles. It started at Jerusalem but ended in *Ephesus* with John directing it.

2. Only in Ephesus is the term *apostles* mentioned and in history, *none* of the leaders after that first stage, approximately since A.D. 31 to A.D. 100, were called apostles. If false apostles had invaded Ephesus, surely the other six churches would also have been warned, *but they are not*.

3. Only the church in Philadelphia is promised to be *protected* from the great hour of trial that will

test the entire world. It would be strange to just protect one church and leave out all the other dozens of churches throughout the empire. Also, in Rev. 12, the Church is described as a "woman" that will flee to "her place" where she will be protected (except for a remnant). The reference here of protection at the end time is similar to the promise of rescue given to the Church at Philadelphia.

4. Christ evaluates each "work" of the seven different cities and towns. It would be puzzling to talk about all their hard toil to get the gospel out and of the great open doors being opened if it only applies to these mostly small local churches.

5. Finally, we have Christ telling the last church, Laodicea, that He is "at the door," or about to arrive, giving the impression of a *progression of time* from the initial apostolic age to the end times.

How does Jesus describe this first church era? He notes, "I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars."

This is characteristic of the first church period, when there would be vicious attempts by Satan to stamp out the true doctrine from its beginnings. He would use clever pretenders to infiltrate the Church, starting with Simon Magus in Acts 8--the sowing of "tares" among the "wheat" of Mt. 13:39.

It was the *Ephesian* elders who were warned by Paul, saying, "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock...For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves" (Acts 20:28-30). And that eventually happened!

At Corinth, Paul unmasks these false teachers disguising as apostles, warning, "For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works" (2 Cor. 11:13-15).

Although there were different types of heresies at that time which the apostles rejected, such as Jewish legalism (Galatians, 2 Corinthians, Hebrews), and Gnosticism (Colossians, 2 Thes., 1 John)--the best overall description of the main and lasting Gentile heresy would be *antinomianism*, the substitution of God's law by a false grace. Jude said it best, "Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn *the grace of our God into lewdness* and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ" (Jude 3-4).

When these false teachers spread their corrosive gospel of a grace that did away with God's law, they were "tested" and found wanting. What was that key test? John, who survived combating them the longest, put it this way, "Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is *a liar*, and *the truth is not in him*. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked" (1 Jn. 2:3-6). In Rev. 2:6, these false brethren are identified as "the Nicolaitans."

Jesus continues, "And you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary" (Rev. 2:3).

This first stage of the Church not only maintained the doctrines pure, but they had tremendous energy to cover immense regions and set up churches from Jerusalem to the farthest reaches of the Roman Empire and beyond. By the end of the Apostolic Period, the Christian Church was a well-known religion with many converts.

Now comes the first correction to this church: "Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love" (Rev. 2:4). Although they had great zeal for spreading the gospel, at the end, they were mostly going through the motions and had lost their early enthusiasm. Why?

We can see three factors that caused this state of affairs: (1) Christ had not come as early as they

had expected (My Lord delays His coming, Mt. 24:48); (2) The apostles and key leaders of that first generation had largely been martyred or died of other reasons; (3) Many brethren had been led away by false teachers, divisions or heresies, leading to discouragement and lack of respect.

So Christ admonishes them not to lose their first love. Another version says, "But I have this complaint against you. You don't love Me or each other as you did at first!" (NLT). As the decades passed, false expectations, martyrdom and divisions had taken their toll. The great spiritual fellowship and love for each other and for God (*koinonia* in Gk.) on that first Pentecost was now petering out. This was unacceptable for Christ--especially after all He had done for them!

So He gives them the solution in three parts, which also works for today. He says, "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent" (Rev. 2:5).

Therefore, the first thing to do is to remember the former works or conduct—how things had been before spiritually slipping up. Sometimes it's easy to forget how far down one has fallen. Secondly, is to repent—to want to climb out of the hole and do it. Thirdly, to hang in there and not slip again. Christ says if He doesn't see progress or effort, He will intervene—usually meaning doing a thorough and painful deep-cleaning!

Once given the correction, Christ focuses on the positives lest they get too down on themselves, saying, "But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate" (Rev. 2:6).

Again He commends them for their doctrinal purity and how they have not weakened in their zeal to keep all "the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Rev. 12:17).

These Nicolaitans are frankly a bit difficult to pin down. Little actual history of them has been found, probably because the false church of Rev. 17 did not want the evidence and trail to lead to it. The earliest stories of the Nicolaitans are many decades after the writings of John and it seems a pretty thorough job has been done of "historical cleansing" by destroying much of the evidence. Several noted church historians bring this out.

The great church historian, Edward Gibbon, relates, “The *scanty and suspicious materials* of ecclesiastical history *seldom* enables us to dispel the *dark cloud* that hangs over the *first age of the church*” (*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* – Portable Edition, 1952, p. 260).

S. Gusten Olsen comments, “As the apostolic age comes to a close, the Church seems to pass through a *dark tunnel*. When it comes out at the other side, *the original bond of unity, the clear standards, and the love of God seem to have been replaced by an unsettling, institutionalized spirit of domination and by beliefs which are more Gnostic than Christian*. What happened? We are now confronted with the possibility that the *original identity and true definition of Christianity have become lost*” (S. Gusten Olsen, *The Apostasy of the Lost Century*, 1986).

Jesse Hurlbut mentions, “For fifty years after St. Paul’s life, *a curtain hangs* over the Church, through which we strive *vainly to look*; and when at last it rises about A.D. 120 with the writings of the earliest church fathers, we find a church in many aspects *very different* from that in the days of St. Peter and St. Paul” (*A History of the Christian Church*, 1954, online version).

The first church historians state the Nicolaitans are a sect that had turned the grace of God into license to sin—mostly by sexual immorality.

After this praise of the Ephesian church, Christ gives them more encouragement, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God” (Rev. 2:7).

Jesus wants them to carefully heed what He has spoken. Again, the intention was that this final book in the Bible was going to be read by God’s Church throughout the ages, and all should be encouraged as well as warned about what the Ephesian church had done—both good and bad.

So Christ’s spirit is talking to members who had God’s Holy Spirit in them. Who is “the Spirit”? Is it a Being apart from God the Father and Jesus Christ? Absolutely not! The Bible interprets its own symbols and we read in 2 Cor. 3:17, “Now the Lord *is the Spirit*.” It is none else. So He is using a literary device called a metaphor to express His

spiritual communication to the Holy Spirit in the member. As Christ said in John 14:23, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and *make Our home with him*.”

He encourages all of the churches to “overcome” or gain the spiritual victory of faith. This admonition shows one can fail in this endeavor, so the “once saved, always saved” belief is false and actually stems from the early error described in Jude of turning grace into licentiousness.

What is there to overcome? Above all, three things: (1) our own carnal human nature; (2) the false values of the world; and (3) the wiles of Satan. All these conspire to try to bring us down and be dragged back into doing the sinful things before conversion. As Peter says, “For if, after they have *escaped* the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are *again entangled* in them and overcome, the latter end is *worse* for them than the beginning. For it would have been better for them not to have known *the way of righteousness*, than having known it, to *turn from* the holy commandment delivered to them. But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: ‘A dog returns to his own vomit,’ and, ‘a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire’” (2 Peter 2:20-22).

Finally, Christ mentions the reward, “I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.” We know in the Garden of Eden, man was expelled and two cherubim were placed so none could again enter in and eat of the tree of life and “live forever” (Gen. 3:22).

So the tree of life symbolizes being given eternal life, and this will ultimately be celebrated when God the Father returns with the New Jerusalem and with the tree of life in its midst (Rev. 22:2).

Revelation repeats later what is being mentioned here, “Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city” (Rev. 22:14).

So ends the story and lessons to learn from this first historical period of the church at Ephesus.