

# Foreword

We had lost three stalwart leaders in a matter of ten months – two to moral failures and one to sheer exhaustion. As local church leaders, we struggled to know what God was doing. Which way should we turn? What should we do next?

The wounded church over which I served as Interim Lead Pastor had seven campuses and over two-thousand people in attendance. The structure of our ministry complicated our search for solutions. It was in this context of church crisis that I heard about Mark Barnard and Kenneth Quick, consultants for Blessing Point Ministries, who turned out to be an amazing answer to prayer! As we got to know them and they got to know us, their unique ministry of insight, patience, kindness, and faith came to exemplify for me the “godly wisdom” described in James 3:17.

Mark and Ken guided our leadership team through the process of revisiting our corporate history in order to hear what the Lord Jesus, as the true Lord of our church, was saying to us through that history. And He commended, critiqued, and corrected us, following His pattern of communication with the seven churches of Asia Minor in the early chapters of Revelation.

We found irony in the fact that Crossroads Community Church had seven campuses, each with its own story and history. The people in each of our campuses desperately needed to hear from their Lord to find healing and a fruitful future as a body. Under Mark’s and Ken’s facilitation, we began to see the nature of local churches—and particularly our church—through His eyes. We are a body, His body and bride. He loves us deeply as His body, but in that love Jesus also disciplines us as a body (Rev. 3:19) so that we might be more faithful and fruitful.

After our leadership had heard Jesus' profound assessment of our history, we searched for the best way to communicate with all our people how Jesus had spoken to us. We looked again to Ken and Mark for suggestions, and they generously shared the resource you hold in your hands (which they were in the process of writing). We crafted a series by the same title – *The Eighth Letter* – and relied heavily on this well-written resource. We realized that this was what the process had given us, an “eighth letter” of Jesus to our church. It was a holy moment of clarity for us and our people to hear what Jesus was saying to us as a church.

In this work, the authors unpack the messages of Revelation's seven letters with a focus toward equipping church leaders and members to hear Jesus speak today. One senses that these authors love His churches in the way the Apostle John did, and that Jesus has therefore empowered these modern writers to help all His churches know exactly how the Lord feels about what is going on and has gone on with them. It takes courage, but Ken's and Mark's commentary and application of Revelation 2-3 guides those church leaders who wish to hear what their Savior is saying to their church today.

So, the real question is: Are you willing to listen to what Jesus longs to say to your church? If so, then *The Eighth Letter* is an excellent guide to help you do just that. He has a specific message just for the body you lead or to which you belong. We are the BODY of CHRIST. Let us clearly hear the faithful words of the True Head!

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# Introduction

**B**efore our day of instant messaging, satellite radios and cell phones, powerful and important information was often communicated through letters. If you were born before 1985, the souvenir boxes in your attic probably have some significant letters in them – of admission into the school you wanted, the acceptance of the first article or book you had published, the espousals of love between you and your sweetheart, letters of gratitude for ministry well-performed, etc. We save these things because, at the moment we receive them, they are life-changing.

Other letters warned us of impending trouble, of recalls on our cars, of bills unpaid, of rejections from positions we sought. We don't necessarily keep these, but they too were of great importance to us, and we ignored them to our peril.

The letters Jesus wrote to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3 also contained powerful and important information for the faith communities, the corporate spiritual bodies to whom they were sent. These seven churches were under attack from a variety of forces, some from within and others from without, some physical and some spiritual. Their Lord knew what was happening and what had happened. He had crucial information for them that needed a response from them. For their own sakes they needed to hear what He said and respond. Indeed, because of Who the sender was, their corporate fate rested on their response.

Revelation gives us Jesus' letters to the churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. They address specific issues each congregation faced and His evaluation of things they had faced previously. He gives them correction, admonition, and incentives for overcoming. And yet while His letters are aimed at seven first century churches, they are also *open* letters, designed for all

churches to ponder and heed.

His final directive at the end of each letter is: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” Jesus obviously wants the seven churches to hear what He was saying to them in His letters, but not *just* them. Jesus wants His people with an “ear” to pay attention to *what* the Spirit said and the *way* He spoke to His churches. These letters are intended to start us down the path of understanding *how the Spirit speaks to churches today*. It is different from the way He speaks to us as individuals. It requires the whole “body” of a congregation using spiritual gifts to listen.

Let us say it clearly: North American churches in our post-modern culture may be facing their last stand. Many are weakened by sinful behaviors and attitudes on the part of both congregation and leadership. Mission fires are dying out, splits and false teaching are rampant, fewer and fewer are converted. What we may not realize is that there is an *eighth* letter that Jesus has sent to one last church, dealing with exactly what He sees going on and how to make it right. That church is *yours*.

Jesus delved into the corporate character of the Revelation churches, analyzing their history, affirming their strengths, exposing their weaknesses, and assessing the unique culture each church had come to express. He identified the threats they faced and corrections they needed to make, and called some of them to corporate repentance. We believe these seven letters address the kinds of challenges, blessings, sins, and setbacks all churches face, but that they do *more* than that. These are written so every local church can learn how Jesus speaks to them, the kinds of issues—both positive and negative—He addresses with them. That includes *your* church. We want you to finish this book with a sense of just how Jesus speaks to corporate bodies, and particularly to your congregation, about what has happened and is happening. If you listen to Him, He can and will restore blessings your church may have known in its history but long ago lost.

This is not about adding words to the canon of Scripture, but about the utilization of what Jesus has created His local churches to be. The seven letters show us how He speaks to churches, and He wants every one of us, to hear and heed what He is saying. This eighth letter to your church is one you don’t want to ignore, and we can guarantee it’s one you will never forget.

# Section 1

The Guiding Features of the Letters  
and their Author





# Chapter 1

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## The Lord of the Letters

**H**ave you ever written a letter or an email that was misinterpreted by the recipient? I once made the mistake of sending a hastily prepared note to a new friend and it came back to haunt me. I had to clear up several misunderstandings and eat a little humble pie because of my hasty and poor choice of words.

Consider a few of the ways communication can go wrong: you write something, thinking to be funny, but it touches the wrong nerve and your reader gets offended. Or you speak in a way or with a tone that those who know you might overlook, but other listeners, unfamiliar with your idiosyncrasies, find abrasive. Perhaps your written message fails to convey how you really feel and the other party misconstrues your motive. There are many dangers in communication, especially when one party doesn't know the other well enough to properly interpret what is written.

When seeking a word from the Lord to your church it is important to recognize how He communicates. Only then will the message you receive be seen in the proper light. This chapter will portray for us the One whose word we seek, the same way He portrayed Himself for John and the seven local churches to which Christ commissioned him to write.

In the opening verses of the Book, John explains how the Revelation came to be. He starts out with the where and the why. He “was on the island called Patmos, because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.” This was no short-term mission trip. He was in exile on the island because of the opposition of secular Roman authorities on the mainland. Patmos sits just off the coast of Asia Minor and served as penal colony for the Roman Empire. He was banished there in AD

95 and, according to the historian Eusebius, released 18 months later.<sup>1</sup> Thus the shadow of Roman persecution hangs over the opening verses of John's record, and it reappears throughout the seven letters to the churches.<sup>2</sup> But in the midst of those 18 months on an isolated and inhospitable island, the book of Revelation was born.

### **The Patmos Vision (Revelation 1:9-20)**

<sup>9</sup> I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. <sup>10</sup> I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet, <sup>11</sup> saying, "Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."

<sup>12</sup> Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; <sup>13</sup> and in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash. <sup>14</sup> His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire. <sup>15</sup> His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. <sup>16</sup> In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength.

<sup>17</sup> When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man. And He placed His right hand on me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last," <sup>18</sup> and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades. <sup>19</sup> Therefore write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things. <sup>20</sup> As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

The book of Revelation, after the introduction in 1:1-8, starts with the Apostle John's vision of the Lord Jesus Christ in High Priestly garb standing among seven lampstands. It is from that place that He dictates seven letters to different churches in the Roman province of Asia Minor. Why does John position this vision of Jesus Christ before the letters? John wants the recipients to understand the nature and role of the letters' author. Jesus not only announces himself as the Writer of the seven letters, but uses symbolic garb, appearance, and setting to disclose who He is to the intended recipients. By revealing His character first, the



Lord reminds His readers of the authority with which He writes. The churches certainly would have acknowledged His positional authority if He had simply stated that He was the author. However, the “revelation” of His character sets the tone for the letters and establishes His right to communicate the things He does. He is their Lord, standing in their midst! It is His ministry now to tend to them. This minimizes potential confusion of meaning or intent.

Picture it: the churches need clarity. They face opposition that challenges their very existence. Jesus discloses Himself and speaks directly to the challenges they face. The revelation of His character encourages the churches to be conscious of Who their Lord is. His presence in their midst, His awareness of their plight, His majesty, power, authority, and deity shine so brightly that the churches could not help but be strengthened. Even before He speaks a word, Jesus opens their eyes to Who He really is. The Lord turns their attention away from their challenges and to the One who overcame *all* challenges – the one who can help them to overcome as well. But they must first *listen to Him*.

The vision of the Lord in Revelation 1:9-20 serves the same purpose for us as it did for the churches of John’s day. Reviewing it quiets us, humbles us, prepares us, and reminds us whose opinion and counsel we seek.

John himself was taken aback at the sight of His glorified Lord. During Jesus’ earthly ministry John repeatedly described himself as “the disciple whom Jesus loved.”<sup>3</sup> This is perhaps underscored by the fact that Jesus entrusted John with the care of His mother.<sup>4</sup> But, in the Presence of this vision of His glorified Lord, astonishment grips John and fear immobilizes him. His body seizes up and he falls on his face “like a dead man.” The Jesus he sees contains the unsearchable power and authority that framed our universe. This is the One the churches called their Lord. What a friend we have in Jesus and what a fearsome Lord as well. As C.S. Lewis said of Aslan in his Narnia chronicles, “He is not a tame lion!”

### **John’s Vision of Jesus Starts and Ends with Local Churches**

Interestingly, the vision John has of Jesus begins and ends with Jesus focused on the seven churches. Jesus tells John, “Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches” (Rev. 1:11). The vision ends with Jesus’ explanation that “the seven lampstands are the seven

churches” (Rev. 1:20). While John focuses on the vision’s central figure, Jesus targets the churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

But what did Jesus have in mind when He addressed these churches? Was he addressing real churches or do they, as some interpreters suggest, allegorically represent the chronological ages of church history?<sup>5</sup> We know that the seven cities John mentions were real places in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). Each city had a long history and several were quite prominent. If visited in the order addressed, one would follow a circular course.<sup>6</sup> They were all within 4 days of walking distance from each other.<sup>7</sup>

The Bible elsewhere references three of the seven cities. The church at Ephesus is mentioned often.<sup>8</sup> References to Laodicea are found in Colossians 2:1; 4:13-16, and Thyatira was Lydia’s hometown according to Acts 16:14. To ascribe allegorical interpretations to both their names and the messages Jesus sends to them is risky at best. John does use symbolism in the book (i.e. “Babylon the Great” mentioned in the later chapters), but there is no compelling reason to treat any of the seven churches symbolically or allegorically.

We thus believe they were real groups of believers gathering in the real cities mentioned. The challenges they faced have been experienced by most local churches at some point in their histories. In that sense we can say that the seven churches Jesus selects are representative. There were many other churches in Asia Minor He chose to ignore, except with the exhortation to “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” By extension we believe that what the Spirit said to them, the Spirit also says to us. As the Lord spoke to them, He uses them to draw attention to the kinds of things he might say to our churches.

### **The Revelation of Jesus Reveals that Churches Are Under His Care**

We’ve looked at the geographical location of the churches, but what about their location as revealed in John’s vision of Jesus? He presents four different ways these churches are near to Christ and under His watchful eyes.

John introduces the first in Revelation 1:12-13: “Having turned I saw seven golden lampstands and in the middle of the lampstands one like a son of man . . .” Later, the Lord Jesus identifies the lampstands as the seven specific churches He names (vs. 20). John describes Jesus as a priest amidst His churches, signified by His priestly clothing. Revelation 2:1 tells us he walks among His churches. His proximity to the churches and His inspection of them enables him to declare, “I know,” when He reveals the state of each of the seven. He knows, as the letters themselves reveal, not only the long-term history and the weekly activities of each church, but also the hearts of all those involved (Rev. 2:23). William Ramsey suggests the letters were written by one who was familiar with the situation, the character, the past history, and the possibilities of future development of those seven churches.<sup>9</sup>

It reminds us of the familiar words of Matthew 18:20: “For where two or three have gathered in my name, I am in their midst.” That simple yet profound promise becomes more sobering when put in the context of what Jesus knows about some of the churches, yet still dwells with them. We theoretically assume the Lord’s omniscience, but the immediacy and depth of His knowledge of what is taking place in our corporate setting goes unappreciated by most church leaders. If we saw Jesus as John did – the High Priest amidst His churches – and then found him walking down the aisle of our church, looking at parishioners with eyes as of fire, searching their hearts and motives, who could endure it? If we saw Him as presiding over board meetings and fellowship gatherings, would we be more or less comfortable? Would we say the things to each other we often say or feel about people around us what we often feel?

We would doubtless fall on our faces as John did and would desperately need the reassuring word and touch that he received when Jesus said to him: “Do not be afraid” (Rev. 1:17).

Despite the fearsomeness of the vision, Jesus’ Presence in their midst had to be a tremendous encouragement to these seven little churches, each under siege in its own way, each struggling with some internal or external problem. Some were facing crises, others were headed for one. Some were already in such spiritual destitution and corporate sickness

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that Jesus' continued willingness to deal with them, to speak to them, demonstrates the depths of His grace. Keep in mind that He dwelt among some churches who were in deep need of repentance. One even left him standing outside their fellowship, seeking entrance if anyone heard His voice and opened the door. But He still knocked! He had not left them yet.

Why does He abide? This brings us to the second aspect of the Lord's relationship to His churches. The lampstands John sees were *golden*, the most valuable metal of their age and still a most precious element in ours. The fact that they are of gold suggests the timeless value Jesus places on each of these churches. He treasures them! Had He chosen to, he could have shown John brass or iron lampstands, but that would not convey the truth behind their golden makeup.

His commitment has limits, as reflected in what He says to the churches at Ephesus and Laodicea. Local churches, unlike individual believers, do not get eternal life. He will cease to dwell with them corporately if they cease listening to Him, but He stays committed to a local body as long as some continue to respond to Him. None of the churches in Revelation 2-3 were perfect. There has not been a perfect local congregation yet, but each church is golden in Jesus' eyes until the day He reluctantly has to remove their lampstand from its place.

Local churches, unlike individual believers, do not get eternal life. He will cease to dwell with them corporately if they cease listening to Him

Then John sees yet a third symbol of Jesus' involvement with His churches, one that is more challenging to interpret: "*in His right hand He held seven stars.*" (Rev. 1:16). As often occurs in Revelation, Jesus later explains the meaning/significance of a representation John sees, saying in 1:20, "*As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.*" What or

who are the "*angels of the seven churches*"? We will grapple with that in the next chapter. What we can say about it now is that each of the seven churches *has* an angel and that this "angel" bears some measure of mediatorial responsibility toward Christ for communication with, and even the condition of, the church. They are "in His right hand", the symbolic place of power. These "angels" ultimately carry the message

of the seven letters to each of their respective churches (see 2:1, 8, 12, etc.).

One of the more common interpretations of “angel” is that it refers to a church’s pastor or “bishop”. If that were the case, would any of us want such a role? If that is what is meant, then the accountability of these “angels” to their Lord becomes frighteningly clear.

Why is that? One of the more important facts of these letters is the use of the second person singular (“you”) in the Greek throughout them. At no point does Jesus use “you” plural, which is what one would expect in addressing a congregation. We have discussed this in our previous books.<sup>10</sup> But some might think the “you” singular refers to this “angel of the church” whom Jesus addresses, in which case these angels become responsible for *every single thing* Jesus says about the church, both celebratory and critical! However, this interpretation breaks down when we see *all* the works of a church being attributed to one of these “angels.” It is doubtful that could have been Jesus’ intention, at least not when the consequence is the discipline of the church.

That being said, leaders in a church do carry a unique accountability to the Great Shepherd, an accountability which should make all who are His under-shepherds squirm (Heb. 13:17). However, we know that the Lord calls courageous individuals—both full-time ministers and laypeople—to fill that role. With such responsibility, it takes courage to serve faithfully as a leader in the body of Christ. And if, as such a leader, you have never sought to hear what Jesus is saying to your church, you have yet to plumb the depths of courage required to lead properly.

The fourth and final indication of Jesus’ intimacy with His churches is the most endearing. He says he *holds* the stars in His right hand. Whoever these angels are, they *represent* the churches and are closely identified with them. They are “in His grip.” These churches, some of whom are vying for survival in a culture that seeks to crush them and with spiritually malevolent forces surrounding them, are not ultimately at the mercy of their oppressors. Though they pay a price for following their Lord, they are still secure in His right hand, firmly in His grip. William Barclay brings this out in His commentary:

The seven stars and the seven candlesticks both stand for the seven churches. The Greek verb for “to hold” is *kratein*, which is normally followed by a genitive

of that which is held. The genitive case is the case which in English we express by the word of; of the book is the genitive case. The reason for this genitive case is that when we take hold of something, if it is a large thing, we take hold, not of the whole of it, but part of it.

. . . When *kratein* does take an accusative, which is the case of the direct object, it means to hold the whole of an object within one's hand. For instance, I would hold the whole of a Hazelnut within my hand, and that would be expressed by *kratein* with the direct accusative. In this sentence *kratein* is used, not with the usual genitive, but with the much more unusual accusative. The meaning is that Jesus Christ holds the whole of the Church within His hand . . . He holds all the churches in His hand, for all the churches are His and all belong to him.<sup>11</sup>

More than that, it is His *right hand* that holds them, the hand of strength and favor. The symbolism is hard to miss. Given the opposition they face, the churches and their leaders may feel insecure, but in reality they are in the safest place they can possibly be.

### **Jesus' Revelation Counters the Forces Arrayed against His Churches**

Before we delve into the seven letters themselves, we need to understand a little of what it was like at the end of the first century in the region of Asia Minor, what becoming a Christian and attending a local church might mean to an individual in places like Ephesus and Pergamum. That individual focus must be balanced with the more corporate focus of these letters. It is not an "either/or" situation but a "both/and," both the individual and the corporate body matter to Jesus.

Sometimes the Lord reveals Himself to us individually with an encouraging word or a personal touch, as he did to John in Revelation 1:17: "*And He placed His right hand on me, saying, 'Do not be afraid . . .'*" Jesus demonstrates to John the kind of compassion we often see him extend to hurting people in the Gospels. John needed it when he was undone by the sight of His Lord revealed in authority and glory. Today we also need Christ's reassuring touch as we commit to hearing from Him.

However, the situation the churches faced called for a different kind of reminder. They needed a reminder of their Lord's ability to overcome and His promise to them if they do the same. He challenges individual believers to do so, repeating that challenge at the end of one of the seven

letters with a glorious kingdom promise if they succeed in overcoming. John's vision reveals aspects of Jesus' character that speak directly to the opposition the churches were confronting and how to overcome it. The believers and churches in Asia Minor faced four main challenges.

## **Jewish Opposition**

The first main source of opposition was one that extended back to the earliest days of the Church's existence: opposition by unbelieving Jews. This opposition began with Christ's rejection and crucifixion, but we know that the Jewish establishment did not stop there. In the opening chapters of the book of Acts, the harassment of the Apostles escalated, culminating in the execution of Stephen and a crusade against the early church by Saul of Tarsus. Upon his conversion Saul the persecutor became Paul the persecuted.<sup>12</sup>

Opposition of Paul by the Jews began with his first stop as a missionary, in Pisidian Antioch, but it heated up in Iconium and Lystra.<sup>13</sup> What an introduction to ministry! Luke later tells us the unbelieving Jewish community upset the entire church in Thessalonica.<sup>14</sup> In fact, Jews from the province of Asia Minor, the very region of the seven churches, put Paul on a path to Rome and His eventual death.<sup>15</sup>

Violent Jewish opposition to Christ and the Christian message was part of life in the Asia Minor province

Violent Jewish opposition to Christ and the Christian message was part of life in the Asia Minor province. Jesus describes such opposition in His letters to the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia. He pulls no punches as He refers to the Jews persecuting His churches as belonging to the "synagogue of Satan."

All the churches of Asia Minor faced some resistance and persecution from the Jewish community. Some of the initial converts in these cities were probably of Jewish descent, as Paul modeled going to the "Jew first." The Diaspora had insured that there were multitudes of Jews in the region,<sup>16</sup> many of whom gave their wealth to establish the very cities the churches occupied.<sup>17</sup> As more and more Jews converted to Christianity, the unbelieving Jews saw their synagogues depleted and their community divided. Their jealous reactivity resulted in severe suffering for those who followed the Lord, especially in Smyrna and

Philadelphia, but generally throughout the province.

The symbolism of the lampstands in John's vision makes clear who the true sons of Abraham are now, the ones in whose midst God dwells by faith

Jesus knew what His people were enduring at the hands of Jews in the region, and the symbolism of His appearance in priestly garb had its roots in things with which Jews would have been very familiar. John again writes in Revelation 1:12-13, "*Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands.*" The imagery here, drawn from the Holy Place in the Jewish temple, would not be lost on Jewish converts. While not an exact correlation with the golden lampstands mentioned in Exodus 25:31-40 or Zechariah 4:2, the imagery is strikingly similar. The earlier lampstand appears to be of one piece with seven branches. The lampstands in Revelation chapter 1 appear to be seven individual sources of light. Nevertheless the imagery of the seven lampstands, representing the churches, symbolically hearkens back to the Tabernacle/Temple of Judaism. That God is building such a new "Temple" out of the churches, founded on the apostles and prophets, is affirmed in Ephesians 2:19-22.

The symbolism of the lampstands in John's vision makes clear who the true sons of Abraham are now, the ones in whose midst God dwells by faith. This was designed to let the churches know their Jewish roots, and, in a larger sense, to understand the prophetic basis for much of what was to come in Revelation. The book itself, in its 404 verses, has over 281 *direct references* to the Old Testament, mostly out of the prophets. Moreover, there are 348 *allusions* to the Old Testament, some of which are found here in 1:9-20. The Jews have a promised future, but for the time being, Jesus dwells in the midst of a new "people of God" made up of Jews and Gentiles united by their faith in Him.

Jesus further illustrates the connection of the new people of God to their Jewish roots through the clothing He wears and description He bears. John writes, "*and in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash.*" Jesus is dressed as the Jewish High Priest! For Jewish believers who had lost their temple in 70 AD, the fact that they did not lose the mediatorial ministry of a High Priest would have meant the world! He stands among His churches with the same mediatorial



authority as the Jewish High Priest did.

Moreover, John describes Jesus as “*one like a son of man.*” This not only has deep prophetic roots, but is a title Jesus used of Himself. In Daniel 7, Daniel describes his dream of the beasts rising from the sea, the parade of Gentile empires through history, but at the end of them he sees “one like a Son of Man” Who comes to take over.

I kept looking in the night visions,  
And behold, with the clouds of heaven  
One like a Son of Man was coming,  
And He came up to the Ancient of Days  
And was presented before Him.  
And to Him was given dominion,  
Glory and a kingdom,  
That all the peoples, nations and men of every language  
Might serve Him.  
His dominion is an everlasting dominion  
Which will not pass away;  
And His kingdom is one  
Which will not be destroyed (Daniel 7:13-14).

Jesus is the *Son of Man* the Jews sought, but in searching elsewhere they overlooked the One sent to them. He is *the* High Priest and Mediator for the new people of God. With this kind of visual statement, Jewish converts and their Gentile brethren would gain insight into His ministry to their churches. Though Jewish believers suffered for what they believed, John’s vision – with its Jewish symbols – confirmed that they believed aright. It would anchor their souls as they faced the “synagogue of Satan.”

### **Political Intolerance**

Secondly, Christians in the province of Asia Minor lived out their faith within a challenging political environment. Roman government was normally religiously tolerant. You could believe in and worship whatever god you liked *as long as you demonstrated loyalty to Rome.* However, the political system did not tolerate anyone whose loyalty was suspect, who refused to accord the emperor status with their gods. They saw failing to do so as seditious and came down on such people with an iron fist. The Roman Empire gave teeth to its idea of being “politically correct.”

This originated with both the egos of emperors and Rome's attempt to unify the citizens of their vast empire. In the beginning, emperor worship was optional, a simple demonstration of political affiliation, patriotism, and military commitment, but with each new deified Caesar came the tightening of regulation.<sup>18</sup>

By the time the seven letters were written, every citizen was obligated to demonstrate fealty and devotion to the emperor.<sup>19</sup> Once a year citizens were required to offer a pinch of incense and declare, "Caesar is Lord." This attribution came to connote not an earthly ruler, but a god-man.

To decline, avoid, or ignore the required offering signified disloyalty to Rome, and Christians were often the most resistant, having no Lord but Jesus Christ. This increased governmental suspicion toward Christians as a whole and the persecution of believers empire-wide began to increase. Asia Minor did not escape.

The Lord reveals Himself to His children as something other than they can fully comprehend. He breaks all boxes in which they might seek to place Him

As a church leader, how would you advise your congregants if the State enacted a loyalty oath that encroached on your commitment to Christ? The day may soon come when we face such a choice. What encouragement would you offer your people? What comfort would you supply should some of your congregation find themselves in prison, or worse, for their

commitment to Christ? Just as the Jewish believers received comfort from the symbols in John's vision of Jesus, there are also great comforts and encouragements that speak to those suffering persecution at the hands of the government.

John describes Jesus' appearance in Revelation 1:14-15: "*His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters.*" No Caesar could match the vision of Jesus standing among His churches. Citizens of the empire might voluntarily bend the knee before Caesar, but did one ever fall at His feet in astonishment and complete immobilization like John did before His Lord? John knew and loved Jesus in His earthly manifestation, even saw Him in His Transfiguration, but when he saw Him in His glorified state, it stunned him completely. Jesus among His churches—His brilliant, flaming,

glowing, and thunderous appearance—completely overwhelms John. His Presence among His churches should still have such an impact on them.

The Lord reveals Himself to His children as something other than they can fully comprehend. He breaks all boxes in which they might seek to place Him. He is categorically different than any earthly ruler; indeed He is “the ruler of the kings of the earth” (Rev. 1:5). We see His supremacy and preeminence in the revealed imagery. Jesus radiates glory and authority that surpasses anything Rome could muster. The seven local churches must have seen Him this way—as must the eighth i.e. *your church!* With this picture of Christ emblazoned on their minds, how much easier would it be to resist the temptation to bow down to any human governor as their “Savior and Lord.” How much more a disappointment if they did so?

In the movie, *The Lion King*, a young lion-prince flounders in self-doubt. His father, the former leader of the pride, appears to him in a dream and encourages his son by repeatedly telling him “Remember who you are.” Jesus likewise says to His churches, “Remember who *I* am, and therefore who *you* are!” To be faithful in the face of death, the believers in Asia Minor needed a confirmation of Who Jesus was.

### **Internal Corruption**

Internal corruption has threatened the health of churches since the earliest days of Christianity. It takes many forms. Ananias and Sapphira made a back-handed attempt to have the cake of appearing outwardly generous and eat the financial benefits of not actually being so. This was only the first of many such political maneuvers in the history of the church.<sup>20</sup> Simon Magus wanted to purchase status and influence from the apostles, and the church at Corinth tolerated a corrupting immorality among their congregation.<sup>21</sup> “Judaizers” sought to influence the Galatians with their legalism. The churches of Asia Minor were not immune to such troubles either. Most of them struggled with some sort of in-house corruption, whether the waning love of the church at Ephesus or the moral laxity taught in Pergamum. The church at Thyatira had its false teacher, and Sardis, drained of spiritual potency, limped along on its outdated reputation. The congregation at Laodicea suffered a form of “mental illness,” arrogance and pride blinding them to their actual spiritual condition.

The local church is a body, and as such becomes subject to all kinds of illnesses and infections. Though your church may be healthy and fine, you need to let Jesus speak and reveal any potential dangers that are lurking. The seven churches addressed in Revelation faced both internal and external problems. Those facing external threats the Lord encouraged and called to remain faithful; the remaining ones Jesus warned of internal danger.

Satan is not passive in this corrupting and his attempts to undermine the Bride of Christ seem to be more effective when they originate from within. He gains a foothold and slowly begins infecting a church, and, like the proverbial frogs in the kettle, church leaders allow the illness to go untreated because they fail to recognize its subtlety until it is too late. The New Testament shows that corporate infections will come, for almost every apostolic letter to churches addresses them. The question is, will leaders see it or allow it to spread? In the context of unaddressed sin, the Apostle Paul warned the Corinthians that “*a little leaven leavens the whole lump.*”<sup>22</sup> He goes on to prescribe a remedy: “*Clean out the old leaven.*”<sup>23</sup>

The seven letters show that the churches in Asia Minor needed to do a better job cleaning house. So do we. Left unaddressed, ungodly attitudes, inappropriate behaviors, or insidious teaching begin to reshape the culture of our church. When we listen to Jesus corporately, He will put His finger on those things we need to address, things to which we may have become blind or insensitive.

Some of the churches were farther along in their deterioration. Jesus lauded the Ephesians for protecting the truth, but sometimes that militancy can also produce a lack of love. The Laodiceans’ self-sufficiency created strong delusions on the part of their congregation, a warning to many of us in the prosperous West. Sardis’ basked in the glory of their past and their reputation, but had become spiritually impotent. How did these things come to be among churches where Jesus stood as ministering High Priest?

The answer to that question reveals Jesus’ purpose in writing the letters in the first place. The leaders in these churches had failed to shepherd most of the churches with the kind of oversight Jesus expected, one where they learn to use their spiritual ears to “hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” As a result He sends them prophetic encouragement, exhortation, and warning.

He called some of the churches to repent – and not a general repentance either, but for specific issues rooted in choices they had made. If churches received these letters, they needed to address the issues Jesus raised and reclaim the full Lordship of Christ over their church. They needed to “clean out the old leaven.”

Correcting such corporate corruption after it has been in place for a long time can be difficult. Some unhealthy dynamics in modern day churches have developed over *decades*. Pastors may have come and gone, some having no awareness of the historic nature of the church’s unhealthy behaviors. The relatively short tenure of most pastors can result in leaders never sensing that the problems they face are maladies of previous eras.

Even if one is aware of historic dysfunction in a congregation, what church leader wants to open *that* can of worms? Is it worth the danger? Is it worth the potential injury to the minister or his family? Leaders of at least five of the seven churches in Asia Minor faced a similar decision. The few churches in that part of the world today may suggest that they were unwilling to address the problems Jesus raised with them. As said earlier, churches do not get eternal life. Jesus can, and obviously does, remove lampstands! However, at the time of John’s writing, Jesus saw hope for each of the seven congregations *if they responded to him*.

John’s vision lets churches know that Jesus means business when it comes to their response: “*In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength*” (Rev. 1:16). We have touched on the comfort of the stars being secure in Jesus’ right hand, but it also indicates His full Lordship over them. But not nearly so comforting is the image of the sharp, two-edged sword proceeding from His mouth.

We might like to think that sword is wielded against Satan, but that is not the case here. Jesus uses this imagery in the opening of His letter to the church at Pergamum (2:12) and then again in Revelation 2:16 to refer to those who spread questionable teaching, “*Repent therefore; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with*

We might like to think that sword is wielded against Satan, but that is not the case here. Jesus uses this imagery in the opening of His letter to the church at Pergamum

*the sword of my mouth.*” The presence of those who teach falsehood should result in corporate repentance. The sword is not an instrument of comfort here.

When Jesus warns, “or else I am coming to you quickly,” He is not coming for a friendly visit. He instead comes bringing chastisement, corporate discipline, and pain. His discipline will impact the entire church. Here’s an interesting thing to ponder: Jesus indicates here that He will bring conflict *into* the congregation if they do not deal with an issue that is important to Him. That should change our perception of some congregational conflict.

Finally, John sees Jesus’ “*face like the sun, shining in its strength.*” The brilliance of His Presence can expose the roots of a church’s corruption. The churches of Asia Minor faced deadly threats to their existence from without and within. Jesus’ Presence illuminated the situations they faced, and can do the same for us. If church leaders fail to listen and repent and receive His counsel, divine corporate discipline will follow.<sup>24</sup> The churches may have felt somewhat helpless in the face of external challenges like persecution, but Jesus expects full compliance from church leaders in addressing moral and attitudinal issues in His churches. If they fail to do so, that two-edged sword may indeed cut both ways, doling out pain to the perpetrators and to those who should be protecting His church from them.

### **Lesser Gods**

A fourth danger to the Christian community of Asia Minor was the pervasive presence of idolatry. Idolatry permeated the landscape. It was more than just a part of the culture, *it defined the culture*. If the symbol of the early church was the ICTHUS, the sign of a fish, idolatry was the foul water in which that fish had to swim. Idolatry was woven into the fabric of society. Local economies were often built on it. Belonging to one temple or another often facilitated one’s profession. Tradesmen participated in feasts at the temples, ate meat offered to idols, and frequented temple prostitutes as a part of doing business. The decisions of the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 allude to some of this when they defined what expectations to place on Gentile converts (Acts 15:19-20). Paul uses the pervasiveness of idolatry in his evangelistic message at the Areopagus in Athens.<sup>25</sup> He utilized the Greeks’ fear that they had left some god out of their pantheon when they constructed an altar “to an unknown god.”

The commitment to idols could be strong, as the episode in Acts 19 made clear. Driven by those whose business was idol manufacturing, and who rightly saw conversion to Christianity as diminishing their business at the temple of Diana/Artemis, Luke records that “no small disturbance” arose. The other cities of Asia Minor had similar “city idols.” If not as renowned as Diana, they were just as significant to their local religious interests. Smyrna’s famed “Golden Street” was lined with temples and shrines.<sup>26</sup> Pergamum focused on Asklepios, the god of healing.<sup>27</sup> Thyatira promoted a resident female oracle called a Sambathe.<sup>28</sup> Sardis was home to a shrine for the goddess Cybele.<sup>29</sup> Philadelphia was so overrun with shrines that it was sometimes referred to as “little Athens.”<sup>30</sup> Laodicea was known for the god Men and his healing powers.<sup>31</sup>

Jesus knew the Christians in the province of Asia Minor saw signs of idolatrous influence every time they stepped out their front doors. The smells of incense and offerings from altars and shrines floated on the air they breathed. The last part of John’s vision speaks most clearly to the temptation they faced to worship lesser gods: Jesus proclaims, “*I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and Hades*” (Rev. 1:17-18).

Jesus makes three claims that speak directly to His greatness as opposed to lesser gods of the culture that surrounded those churches:

- 1) Jesus claims exclusive authority from start to finish over all things. *I am the first and the last*. He is the author and finisher of their faith and of everything else.
- 2) He is the sum of all power beyond the grave. *I am . . . the living One; and I was dead and behold, I am alive forevermore*.
- 3) Finally, He holds the power of death, meaning there is no realm of which He is not the Master and over which He does not have final authority. “*I have the keys of death and Hades.*” G. H. Lang says that Jesus’ claim goes something like this: I have “supreme control of that underworld . . . It is I who can banish thereto . . . and can release therefrom.”<sup>32</sup>

Jesus clears the fog from the minds of early Christians about the idols around them. He calls the believers of Asia Minor to live their lives untainted by the superstitious practices permeating their culture. He is the true Creator and Sustainer of all things; the idols are cheap imitations that entrap the simple. Jesus surpasses in every imaginable

way the lesser gods with which they are familiar. Jesus alone is the first and the last (see Isaiah 44:6).

### **Simpler Times?**

Though we may be tempted to think the early Christians lived in simpler times, their lives were anything but quaint and quiet. They faced real threats. They put their livelihoods and lives at risk by their faith. Jesus revealed Himself to them in a way that put the challenges they faced in perspective. He wanted them to feel His authority in the face of the problems, obstacles, and fears they encountered. They needed an awareness of that authority as they read the letter to their church. He was available to help them overcome the dangers they faced from without or corruption from within, if they responded to him.

As you seek to hear what Jesus is saying to your church, realize that He knows the forces arrayed against your ministry. We may not have Jewish opposition today as the early church did, but we do face growing pressure to accept opposing religious viewpoints. Does that pressure to accommodate subtly shape our message? Does it limit our obedience or hinder our faithfulness?

Are we succumbing to the subtle but coercive force that desires us to tolerate evil in our church and our society?

In the U.S. at least, we don't yet suffer as the early church did, but do we feel the temptation to look to political "saviors" and fear political "demons?" Have we over-identified with one political party or another and forgotten to step back and ask what God is doing in our nation? How do these things shape what Jesus would say to your church?

Are we succumbing to the subtle but coercive force that desires us to tolerate evil in our church and our society? We may not have prophetesses pushing false doctrines that promote immorality or idolatry, but have we begun to accept standards that are clear erosions of what God wants? Have we started following spiritual "gurus" to whom we have granted the sole power to tell us what the Bible means, and follow *them* rather than Christ? Are our churches free of immorality, of divisions, or do they lack love for Christ and for our brethren?

When it comes time to hear what Jesus is saying to your church, His message will be specific, clear, and relevant. But be aware of the



broader cultural challenges we face, which can subtly shape who we've become as a church. They are not much different than those faced by the early church.

Fortunately, Jesus Christ abides with His churches today just as He did in the first century. He stands among us as One having all the resources we need to bring our churches in line with His word. G. H. Lang says of Him:

It is this majestic One who walks amidst the churches on earth, His flaming eyes searching into all hearts, perceiving all ways and all works; His reproving words, as a sword, ready to smite evil in His people; but His long robe telling of His powerful intercession for their help as the royal priest. How solemn to be perpetually under that piercing gaze; how perilous to dare that two-edged sword, with which He reproves and chastens; how encouraging that the humble may count unreservedly upon the illimitable resources of Him in whom dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead.<sup>33</sup>

While seeking His message, recall His authority and majesty. This is not the place to rush in without such a consciousness. Let us humble ourselves, release our opinions, set aside our judgments, and listen carefully to what the Spirit says to our church.