

STUDIES IN REVELATION —

(3) HOW JESUS THINKS ABOUT THE LOCAL CHURCH

Bible Passage : Revelation 2-3

I wonder how you are finding church this morning? Did you get your car parked without a problem? How about your seat? Did you get the seat you wanted? What about the person you're sitting beside? Are you sitting beside someone or stuck beside someone? What about the temperature this morning? Is it too hot, too cold or just right? What about the singing and the songs? Are they to your taste? Are they too old or too modern? Are there too many of them or not enough? What about the prayer and Bible readings? Were they to your taste? What about the people? Have enough people spoken to you? Or do you feel ignored?

Whenever we gather with the church we all form an opinion of the church. We judge that experience by all kinds of criteria. Perhaps I've already mentioned one of your favourites this morning. But we are not the only ones with an opinion of the church. Jesus Christ, the Lord of the church, also has an opinion of the church. He also has criteria by which He judges the church. But it's not the temperature of the pews or whether a song was written before or after 1995.

Instead as we turn to Revelation 2 and 3 we begin to see how Jesus forms His opinion of the local church. John Stott's little book on the seven churches in Revelation is rightly entitled, 'What Christ thinks of the Church.' Jesus has an opinion of the local church. Each local church has its own particular character and Jesus has an opinion of that.

Now I've already mentioned that we are not going to spend time on our Sunday mornings looking in detail at the

seven churches. That will be left for another occasion. But nor do I simply want to skip over these churches. Because they do create the setting for the rest of the book. And so what I would like to do in this study is to give a little background to the seven churches and to consider the big picture created by what Jesus says to these seven churches.

Now the seven churches that are addressed here in chapters 2 and 3 were real churches, mentioned in 1:11. They were in the historic Roman province of Asia, which we know today as western Turkey. People occasionally think of these churches as being merely symbolic or referring to historical epochs. But they were real historic churches. That much is clear from the various historical references that Jesus makes to these seven churches. But why these seven churches when we know that there were more than seven churches in Asia at this time?

When we read through Revelation we see that the number seven is an important number amongst the symbols in the book. It is a number identified with completeness, perfection and God. We have already noted that in chapter 1 where the Holy Spirit is described as 'the seven spirits.' So here the seven churches, whilst real churches with real issues, also symbolise the whole church. The messages delivered to the seven churches are messages for the whole church. This fact is reiterated when at the end of each message we read, 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.' There is in these messages a universal appeal to the whole church.

So let us as we consider the messages to these seven churches have ears to hear what God is saying to us. To the church in our day and to our own local fellowship.

Whenever we turn to actual messages themselves we see that they are messages. They are not letters, as they are often described. Revelation itself is the letter and these are messages contained within the letter. And they are messages addressed by the risen and reigning Christ to 'the angel of each church.' Now this idea of the angel of the church is one of those puzzles that scholars love. Is the angel literally an angel, is it the pastor, is it a messenger, is it some other figure? And everyone has their own idea. But the critical issue is not the discovery of the angel's identity but the fact that through this figure Jesus addresses His church. These messages are to the churches.

Now if you look at these messages you will discover that they have a common formula, a common pattern. Some think the pattern is modelled upon the messages addressed to the nations at the beginning of the book of Amos. More recently some scholars have identified the similarities between these messages and the form of imperial proclamations. Again it's not a critical issue.

Now each of the messages follows a certain pattern. Again scholars of the book of Revelation love this one. What is the pattern of the messages? How many elements are there in each message? Well, I'm going to suggest seven part pattern but I'm not going to argue with someone who finds six or ten parts!

1. The instruction to the angel
2. The identification of the Speaker—in each case it is Jesus described in terms of one of the features present in John's original vision.
3. A statement of Jesus knowledge of the church
4. Statements of commendation and/or failure
5. Words of exhortation
6. A call for all who have ears to hear

7. A promise to the church if it will overcome its present struggles or failures.

Now that is the general pattern and background to each of these messages. And we will look at each of these in some detail in subsequent studies on the individual churches. But I want to confine myself to some general remarks this morning.

(1) The first is to notice that the church is imperfect. It may seem a rather obvious thing to say. But sometimes we need to state the obvious. Whenever we look at the NT church we have a tendency to idealise it. But the NT church was an imperfect church. And that much is clear from these seven portraits of local churches here in Asia. When we read through their profiles there is much to commend them. But we also see that they had problems and often very serious problems. The local church in the NT was not perfect. Any more than the local church in our own day is perfect.

Yet still today we idealise the church. We often idealise the persecuted church. If only we were like the persecuted church we would know what was what. It would sort us out. But the persecuted church is not perfect. It has its problems. The churches here in Asia were persecuted churches but they were not perfect. They had problems, and not just those related to persecution. And so it is with the persecuted church today. We should not idealise the persecuted church. A former director of Release International reminded us of this when he told us not to forget that persecution not only refines churches and Christians, it also destroys them.

But of course today we also idealise other churches. We think to ourselves if only our church were more like that church down the road. If only our church would learn some lessons from those mega-churches in the US. But the ideal church does not exist. The perfect church does not exist. And indeed what becomes clear in these

seven messages is that the more perfect a church looks very often the bigger its problems are. We see that for example in the churches at Sardis and Laodicea. And the danger is not only that we idealise these apparently perfect churches but we in fact idolise them. Our goal is to be like them. Not to be like Christ and to serve Him in the concrete reality in which He has placed us in fellowship with one another here. But to be like them and to complain about the present reality of our own situation.

The reality is however that church is imperfect. The local church is imperfect. Because the church is full of people like you and me—imperfect people. People full of sin and short of glory. Since the imperfection of the church is caused by imperfect people we must see that what needs to be addressed in the church is not what we do. Very often we think of this as the solution to our problems—if we only did this or did that—then that would solve the problems. It would not. Because we would still have imperfect people in new structures.

The issue that needs to be addressed is what we must become. The answer that needs to be addressed is how we as people must be changed to become the people that God has called us to be in Christ. It is as we grow, as we change, as we submit to the word of God, and are filled the Holy Spirit, so that we grow in ever increasing conformity to the character of Christ, that the character of the church will be changed.

We will of course continue to be imperfect. The church will continue to be imperfect until at the end of time the people of God are glorified. Until then we strive amidst our imperfection to be what we will one day become.

(2) The second thing we should notice as we consider these seven churches is that they face a number of issues. But the issues they all face might be categorised under three broad headings. And as we look at them we will see that they are issues that are always before the church.

(i) The first is that the churches in Asia faced the problem of persecution. The churches at Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira and Philadelphia all faced the reality of persecution. And as we have noted previously it was soon to be an issue that would confront all the churches in Asia. So here was the first big issue that confronted these churches—that of persecution.

And persecution is that universal problem that confronts the church. We read about it back in the book of Acts. We know about the persecution of the Christians at Rome under Nero. About the persecution of the Christians in Asia under Domitian and under successive Roman emperors. And so we could go on tracing the history of the persecution of the church throughout its history.

Indeed we are apt to forget that persecution has also been the lot of Christians in the British Isles across the centuries. The 16th century saw the martyrdom of hundreds of Protestants under Queen Mary with many more forced to flee England. The 17th century saw the persecution of many Christians under Charles II when many ministers were forced out of their churches. Where preachers were forbidden to preach. Where many were imprisoned and even put to death. And well into the 19th century many Christians, including Baptists, experienced widespread discrimination with regard to marriage, employment, political office and education. We should not take the freedoms we enjoy today for granted but realise that they too have been obtained at very great cost across the centuries.

Wherever there are Christians we will find that persecution is part of the fabric of the church. Either historically or as a present reality. We will also find that persecution and discrimination are never very far away.

So one of the big issues that we will see addressed in the course of this book is that of persecution. But we must be careful to note that it is not the only issue that confronts the churches in Revelation. Or indeed in the history of the church.

(ii) For secondly, we also see confronting the churches here is the problem of apostasy. That is the danger of rejecting the truth and embracing false doctrine. We see that this was a particular problem in Pergamum and Thyatira. That though they faced persecution yet they had compromised themselves with false teaching. And it is notable in Jesus address to these churches that the issue of their embracing false teaching looms as large in His thinking, if not larger, than the persecution they are about to face.

The problem of apostasy, the problem of doctrinal compromise is a very real one. Persecution is not the only issue in town. And that is something that we need to get a hold of. Because sometimes we can think that the physical persecution of the church is all that matters. If we are not facing persecution then we are not really facing anything. But there are other struggles for the church. Notably the struggle with false doctrine. And it is we see also a struggle for churches that are persecuted. That they too face the problem of seeking to keep their doctrine pure.

And I would suggest that this is one of the big issues facing the church at this time. The struggle to keep our doctrine pure. For we live in an age that is not very interested in doctrine. We live in an age which is not very interested in truth. An age where we often measure the Christian life in terms of the experiences that we have. Where people's response is very often, 'Well you have your ideas and I have mine. Let's just agree to disagree. And live our lives with our own version of Christianity.' But such a view is fatal to the health of Christianity.

The great appeal of Islam in our day. The reason that Evangelicals can be found converting to Catholicism or in the US to Eastern Orthodoxy. Is that they have a sense that these faiths have a solidity about them. They know what they stand for and they offer a sense of direction. Whereas poor old Protestantism and even Evangelicalism doesn't know what it's about. Its beliefs

are just being moulded by the culture. And doctrinal compromise is everywhere.

Within Evangelicalism today there are these great struggles about some very basic issues. The so-called 'new perspective on Paul' championed by Tom Wright undermines the church's historic belief in justification by faith. Whereas the work of Steve Chalke and others attacks the very idea of the atonement. Others in the emergent church movement speak of 'a new kind of Christianity' which they proudly proclaim is a departure from the historic faith of the church. Others advocate the idea of the 'openness of God' which undermines the idea of God's sovereign rule. And all of this is within Evangelicalism.

The problem of apostasy is a very real one confronting the church today. And unless we are alert to that it can be every bit as destructive of the church as physical persecution.

(iii) The third issue that we see confronting these churches is the problem of worldliness. The problem of compromise with the surrounding culture leading to a lack of distinction between the church and the world. This is the problem confronting the churches at Sardis and Laodicea. They had every appearance of prosperity. Indeed Ephesus even had much to commend it. But slowly they were being compromised with the world.

And that of course has been, historically, a problem for the church—compromise with the world. We perhaps see it most clearly in the high Middle Ages when church and state are so cosily intertwined. Where bishops lived in palaces. Where the church was a money spinning enterprise. An international power broker. But we also see it very clearly in the age in which we live. Where Christians have very often simply fitted in comfortably with the world in which we live. And remarkably they are often set before us as examples.

The American mega-churches are often set before us as these great examples to aspire too. They have vast congregations. They have pots of money

to do whatever they want to do. They have vast staffs for ministry. They have every conceivable facility you could imagine for a church and then some. Yet there are tracts of the US with no gospel witness. More than 80% of US missionaries come from churches of less than 100 members. And whilst these mega-churches diversify into life insurance, theme parks, hair dressing, package holidays and enter into marketing arrangements with Starbucks and Burger King, growth in evangelicalism remains static.

It is of course easy to sit back and point the finger at the churches in the US. But we would not be far behind them if we had the same money. These churches are set up before us by many as to what we ought to aspire to. And already we have churches here with state of the art gyms. Churches advertising themselves as providing Starbucks coffee at the morning service. Already the picture is changing here where the consumer mentality grows—big is beautiful—because big has lots of activities for my family.

The issue of our struggle to remain distinctive from the surrounding culture is a real one. Where if we do not wake up to it, it is as destructive of the church as persecution. For years we have prayed for the church in countries where they are persecuted. Whilst we have done so, they have prayed for the church in the west with the pressures of materialism. They have realised what we have not—that worldliness can destroy the church. Physically the church can keep going. It may even appear to grow. But the salt has lost its saltiness and is rendered useless.

Here are the big issues that confront the seven churches and indeed the church in all ages—persecution, apostasy and worldliness.

(3) The third general point that might be made about these churches is to consider what Jesus calls them to do. And Jesus essential message to the churches, whatever their particular situation, is a call to persevere. He calls

upon them to repent of their apostasy and their worldliness. But overall He calls upon all of these churches to persevere. And in persevering He promises them that they will overcome.

For those who are persecuted, even unto to death, if they persevere they will overcome. For those who persevere in holding onto the faith amidst the inroads of false teaching they will overcome. For those who persevere in clinging to Him amidst the allure of the world they will overcome.

Jesus calls upon each of these churches to lift their eyes and to look to Him. To lift their eyes and to set their focus not upon their earthly circumstances but upon their eternal reward. This, He reminds them is for each of them the true perspective that they must adopt. Not the pressing nature of the present but the ultimate eternal perspective. As the old puritan preacher Thomas Brooks put it they must look upon things now as they will look upon them millions of years from now.

And surely that is the great challenge to us now. To look upon our lives in terms of that eternal perspective. That is the nature of the Christian life. That is the nature of faith. Whilst all around us there is the pressure to compromise. To just go along with whatever the government wants. To just say those things that our world wants to hear. To just live our lives as indistinct from the world. The nature of the Christian life is not to conform to the patterns of this world but to be transformed through the renewing power of the Holy Spirit. And to persevere in following Christ and submitting to His lordship, though the whole world should stand against us. That is the life of faith.

Throughout the messages to the seven churches time and again our attention is drawn back to John's original vision of Jesus. Risen, ascended, glorified, the Son of God, reigning over all. And we are called time and time again to look to Him and to persevere. Yes, there will be struggles, Yes, there will be suffering. Yes, there will be the need for patient endurance. And in the

midst of that we must fix our eyes upon Jesus and adopt that eternal perspective.

We must heed the exhortation of the writer to the Hebrews, 'let us lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance, the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.'

Message: How Jesus thinks about the local church

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