

**EPHESUS: LOYAL BUT LACKING**  
**Rev 2:1-7 (3 February 2002)**  
**Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road**  
**Plymouth, Michigan 48170**  
**Royce Dickinson, Jr.**

“The letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor” or “the seven letters of Revelation”—these are common ways of referring to chapters 2 and 3 of the Book of Revelation. But these are *not* letters, not in any normal sense of the word. The whole Book of Revelation presents itself as one long letter, and there is no evidence that any of the messages to the seven churches ever circulated separately. These messages resemble the format of the oracles of Old Testament prophets (e.g., Isa 13-23; Jer 46-51; Ezek 25-32; Amos 1-2). Instead of “the seven letters,” chapters 2 and 3 should be called “the seven messages” or “the seven oracles” of Jesus Christ to the churches.

The messages themselves mix encouragement with threat, and scolding with praise. Nowhere is the old saying, “If the shoe fits, wear it,” better demonstrated than here. At or near the end of each message comes the appeal to listen to “what the Spirit says to the churches”—to the *churches*, not just to a particular church. If the shoe fits, wear it!

Ephesus may be addressed first because it played a leading role in the beginning of the Christian church in the Gentile world. It was the center of the Apostle Paul’s missionary work and eventually became the home of the Apostle John. Ephesus also had geographical priority since it was the best port of entry into that part of Asia Minor.

Ephesus has been called “The Vanity Fair of the Ancient World.” It was arguably the most illustrious city of Asia Minor, with a population of more than a quarter of a million in New Testament times. As a great seaport, it was a center of travel, trade, and commerce, and the seat of the Roman governor of the province of Asia. Ephesus was also the center of the imperial cult, boasting six imperial temples. During the reign of Domitian, Ephesus became the “guardian” (νεοκόρος – *neōkoros*) of the imperial temple in the province of Asia. The city had a major stadium, a marketplace, and a theater. The theater was built on the west slope of Mt. Pion overlooking the harbor and it seated more than 25,000 people. And since today is “Super Bowl Sunday,” how could I fail to mention that Ephesus was the center for the Pan-Ionian Games? Most folks are familiar with the Greeks’ fondness for athletics, and the Pan-Ionian Games ranked with the Olympic Games as athletic occasions. In short, Ephesus was a city where people might look on the pageant and panorama of Graeco-Roman life at its most brilliant.

But the pride of Ephesus was the Temple of Artemis or, as it was known in Latin, the Temple of Diana. The Greek saying ran: “The sun sees nothing finer in his course than Diana’s Temple.” The Temple of Artemis was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was about four times the size of the Parthenon, measuring 425 feet long, 220 feet wide, and 60 feet high. The fact that Ephesus was known for the worship of Artemis and for the practice of magic is reflected in Acts chapter 19.

Now, let’s read from Rev 2:1-7 the message of the risen and reigning Christ to the church at Ephesus.

Rev 2:1<sup>1</sup>“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands:

<sup>2</sup>“I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false. <sup>3</sup>I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary. <sup>4</sup>But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. <sup>5</sup>Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. <sup>6</sup>Yet this is to your credit: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. <sup>7</sup>Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God” (NRSV).

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus predicted that “many false prophets will appear and deceive many people” and that “the love of most will grow cold” (Matt 24:11-12). The message to Ephesus was that it was no good to avoid the first of these warnings only to fall victim to the second. *All that the Ephesian Christians were doing right was not enough to excuse what they were doing wrong.*

The church at Ephesus had two great qualities: strength and soundness. They were hard workers who refused to quit. Christ says to them, “I have seen your hard work and your patient endurance. . . . You have patiently suffered for Me without quitting” (vv. 2-3, NLT). Not only that, they did not tolerate evil people (v. 2). Again Christ says, “You have examined the claims of those who say they are apostles but are not. You have discovered they are liars. . . . [Furthermore,] you hate the deeds of the immoral Nicolaitans” (vv. 2 & 6, NLT). Here was a hard-striving church that was sound in doctrine. They were willing to pay the price for the purity of their preaching and their practice. But they lacked one thing, *and that lack undid all the good the other virtues might have done.* The church at Ephesus lacked love. The risen Christ said sadly, “But I have this complaint against you. You don’t love Me or each other as you did at first!” (v. 4, NLT). Love for Christ and for His children are inseparable.

What had happened? How did the Ephesian church end up in this shape? It seems that the Ephesian Christians had become so busy heresy-hunting that they had lost the atmosphere of brotherly love. Soundness of doctrine had been achieved at the price of fellowship. Hatred for false teaching had left no room for those who differed in their beliefs. To a church willing to suffer for the truth, to a church praised for its stand on the truth, Christ—the head of the church—says, “Without love, you have lost your reason to exist.” And to modern-day Churches of Christ, the Spirit declares, “If the shoe fits, wear it!”

Many years ago when I was ministering with a congregation in another part of this country, there arose a serious conflict between our congregation and a sister congregation. Previously, the two churches had joined hands in work and in fellowship. But on the eve of a planned joint worship and lovefeast together, the other church withdrew from the activity. Without any personal contact, we were simply sent a letter stating the reasons why the other congregation could not worship with us. The letter spelled out our alleged errors in doctrine and practice. We, elders and ministers, were

deeply hurt, and we met to discuss how we would break the news to our church family. After much prayer, and through our heartache, we decided that we would say nothing critical of the other church. We knew that our church family would know that there was more to the story than what we would say, and that some would be less than satisfied with our approach. But the Lord gave us the strength to tell bad news without accusing anyone of being bad people. In time, our leadership met with the leadership of the other congregation. It was a meeting that I will never forget. We listened as we were charged with crime after crime; in short, we were liberals who played loose with scripture and were too accepting of other people. Finally, when I could bear it no more, I spoke. I believe that I was controlled in my speech, but I know that there was fire in my eyes and firmness in my words. I said something like this: “Assuming that we *are* guilty of everything of which we have been accused, you did not treat us as Christians should treat one another. How we treat one another *is the issue!* We can never resolve our differences unless we begin with the Golden Rule—treating each other as we would want to be treated.” With the tenacity of a bulldog—or the stubbornness of a mule—depending on which side of the table you were sitting, I persistently pursued this point. Well . . . the meeting came to a close. We prayed. We shook hands. We hugged. And we parted company . . . for years. But the Lord works in mysterious ways. In time, we became united again. We worshipped together. We broke bread together. Their minister and I exchanged pulpits, and on occasions we preached together. I was the featured guest-speaker at their church the day they dedicated to the Lord a completed building project, and he was the featured guest-speaker at one of our youth rallies. What happened? We never did meet and “hammer out” our differences. The congregation to which I belonged did not change its preaching or practices. So, what happened? In the words spoken to me by members of the other congregation, “It was how you treated us.” I confess that I, and the church with which I was ministering, did a lot of things wrong. But we did one thing right: *we did not stop loving*. And over time, the Spirit of God transformed the hearts of those loving and those being loved.

To the church at Ephesus, the sovereign Christ pleads, “Look how far you have fallen from your first love! Turn back to me again and work as you did at first” (v. 5, NLT). These are strong words. “Remember what it was like at the first, and redirect your life back to what it once was.” Sometimes . . . sometimes . . . we go forward by turning back. From the *Epistle to the Ephesians* by Ignatius, written around A.D. 110, we learn that the church at Ephesus heeded Christ’s warning. They listened to what the Spirit was saying to the churches. By the way, the Spirit is still speaking. Are we listening?

Perhaps some of you are wondering, “Who were the Nicolaitans?” They were likely those who claimed to practice idolatry and immorality under the banner of spiritual liberty. In other words, they had worked out a comfortable compromise with the pagan society in which they lived. We will run into them again when we read the message to Pergamum.

Then, there is this promise: “To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God” (v. 7). The Book of Genesis speaks of a “tree of life” in the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:9) that, after the “original sin” of the original couple, was guarded by a flaming sword so that Adam and Eve could not eat of its fruit and gain immortality (Gen 3:22-24). It is fitting that at the end of time the faithful be allowed access to this symbolic source of eternal life. In Jewish apocalyptic

literature, the “tree of life” exists as a reward for the righteous following judgment (1 Enoch 24:4-25:6; Testament of Levi 18:11; cf. also 2 Esdras 8:52; 2 Enoch 8:3). In Rev 22:2 the “tree of life” produces its perennial fruit in the heavenly Jerusalem. Even apart from scripture, the Ephesian Christians would find such an image familiar due both to the traditional royal gardens in Asia and the garden estates of the cult of Artemis. In the worship of Artemis, there were tree-shrines which served as a place of asylum. It is possible that the concepts of “tree” and “paradise” may also convey the ideas of the cross of Christ and the fact that the cross was the place of refuge for the repentant sinner.

The term “paradise” was originally a Persian word for “pleasure garden.” In later Judaism it was used to depict the dwelling place of the righteous dead. The paradise of God in the Book of Revelation symbolizes the final state in which God and people are restored to that perfect fellowship which existed before the entrance of sin into the world.

“*Loving others as Jesus loves us.*” That is the mission statement of this congregation. It is easier said than done. May we listen to what the Spirit is saying, so that these words are more than a motto for our bulletin; rather, these words define who we are and describe what we do. “*Loving others as Jesus loves us.*” When we do this, we are a lampstand on which the light of Jesus Christ shines forth.

---

Aune, David E. *Revelation 1-5*. Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 52A. Dallas: Word, 1997.

Aune, David E. *Revelation 6-16*. Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 52B. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998.

Aune, David E. *Revelation 17-22*. Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 52C. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998.

Barclay, William. *Letters to the Seven Churches*. London: SCM Press, 1957.

Barr, David L. “The Apocalypse of John as Oral Enactment.” *Interpretation* 40 (1986): 243-256.

Bauckham, Richard. *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*. New Testament Theology. Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Beale, G. K. *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

Beasley-Murray, G. R. *The Book of Revelation*. New Century Bible Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978.

Boring, M. Eugene. *Revelation*. Interpretation. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989.

Collins, Adela Yarbro. *Crisis & Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984.

Dudrey, Russell P. “Worship in Revelation 4-5.” Unpublished paper.

Hemer, Colin J. *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*. Biblical Resource Series. Eerdmans/Dove, 2001.

Keener, Craig S. *Revelation*. NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000.

Michaels, J. Ramsey. *Interpreting the Book of Revelation*. Guides to New Testament Exegesis. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992.

- Michaels, J. Ramsey. *Revelation*. IVP New Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997.
- Mounce, Robert H. *The Book of Revelation*. Rev. ed. New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.
- Reese, Jack. "The Crux of the Battle for Worship Renewal (Part 1)." *The Christian Chronicle* 57 (August 2000).
- "Revelation Now: What Is Jesus Saying to Today's Churches (Annual Bible Issue)." *Christianity Today* 43 (October 1999).
- Rudwick, M. J. S.; Green, E. M. B. "The Laodicean Lukewarmness." *The Expository Times* 69 (1957-58): 176-178.
- Stevenson, Gregory. "Preaching Apocalyptically." *Restoration Quarterly* 42 (2000): 233-244.
- Summers, Ray. *Worthy Is the Lamb*. Nashville: Broadman, 1951.
- Thompson, Leonard L. *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire*. Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Wall, Robert W. *Revelation*. New International Biblical Commentary, vol. 18. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991.
- West, W. B., Jr., "The Battle of Armageddon." *Gospel Advocate* 120 (February 23, 1978): 113, 122.