

THE CHURCH OF THE TRUE EMPEROR AND TRUE GOD
(Third in a series of sermons on "The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ")

And to the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this:

I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot endure evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary.

But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you, and will remove your lampstand out of its place -- unless you repent. Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God.

....

And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write:

The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this:

I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth.

Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, "I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire, that you may become rich, and white garments, that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and eyesalve to anoint your eyes, that you may see.

Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; be zealous therefore, and repent.

Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me. He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with

My Father on His throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.
(Revelation 2:1-7, 3:14-22, NASV)

I do not know where I would be without the last book of the Bible. In the midst of all that the world is going through right now, in the midst of all that I am going through, in the midst of all that each of you is facing... I do not know where I would be without the last book of the Bible. No other book puts things into perspective the way the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ does.

As I have been emphasizing over the past weeks, apocalyptic literature, like the kind we just read, has two **practical purposes**, two very practical, pastoral purposes.

The first is to set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the future. To set the present moment – in all of its turmoil, uncertainty, cataclysmic change – in light of the unseen realities of the future. There is a future – it is good, and beautiful, and just. Jesus Christ Who died for the sins of the world, and Whom God the Father raised from the dead, is coming, and he is bringing with Him a new City – a City that actually works. A City that cannot be destroyed. A City where there is no pain, or tears, or death anymore. And if we can just get a glimpse of that City – if only for a nano-second, it will change the way we see our cities.

So the first practical purpose is to set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the future. But the second practical purpose is to set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the present. There is more to the present moment than we can know with our unaided eyes and ears. The purpose of apocalyptic literature is to set the present moment – in all its turmoil, uncertainty, and cataclysmic change – in light of that more. To open up what is ordinarily hidden, so that the unseen realities of the present can somehow be known to us.

And as we discover in the last book of the Bible, the greatest unseen reality of the present is a Person. Oh how I wish the whole world could know this today! I wish the people of New Jersey and New York could know this today! I wish all the people of Haiti, and Nigeria, and Syria, and the Sudan could know this today!

“Things are not as they seem. ... Things are not just as they seem.” There is more to the present moment than we can know with our unaided intellect, and emotions, and imaginations. That more is a Person. In the midst of it all, there is a Person Who knows suffering, Who embraces our suffering as His own, standing in our midst, walking in our midst. “In this very room,” as a song of the twentieth century put it. The incarnate, crucified, risen, ascended, and coming Jesus of Nazareth is in this very room. The glorified Son of Man, the beloved Son of God, the Great I AM is in this very room. Very close at hand, behind a very thin, permeable veil. How I wish the whole world could know this truth about the present.

And to know that He is speaking. As Francis Schaeffer used to put it, “He is there and He is not silent.” The greatest unseen reality of the present is speaking – to you, to me, to His churches, to all the cities of the world. From the last book of the Bible we know that He is saying, “Look!” And we know that He is saying, “Listen!”

Look! Look at Me! I was dead, but I am alive forevermore. I am the first and the last, the living One. And I hold the keys! And Listen! Especially listen. For it turns out that we obey His command to “Look!” by obeying His command to “Listen!” We look by listening; we see by hearing.

Yes, as they say, a picture is worth a thousand words, and sometimes only a picture will do. But often the picture does not speak to us until someone tells us what the picture is picturing. The Table before us this morning is a beautiful picture of the love of Jesus Christ. But we only know this because we heard someone tell us of it. If someone walked off the street this morning who had never been in a church and looked at the Table, they would see the bread and the cup, but that is all they would see until they, and you, and I, hear Jesus speak about the bread and the cup and say, "This is My body given for you... This cup is the New Covenant in My blood." We finally see when we hear.

Which is why in each of the seven messages Jesus sends to the seven churches of Asia Minor recorded for us in Revelation 2-3, we have the same exhortation: "Hear." "Hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches." Seven times: hear, hear, hear, hear, hear, hear, hear. It is when we hear Jesus that we see Jesus. I like the title of the Christmas CD by Canadian singer Matt Day: "Do you see what I hear?"

I trust that you took time to read Revelation 2-3 over the past week. This morning, let us listen to two of Jesus' seven messages, the first and seventh, the message to the church in Ephesus and the message to the church in Laodicea. Next week we will listen to the fourth, the message to the church in Thyatira.

Now, as many of you know, I have written extensively about each of the seven cities, churches, and messages in my book *Discipleship On the Edge* -- one chapter per church. I am going to commend that to you so you can get some of the background data. What I want to do today is step back from any single one of the messages and look at the package as a whole, and what I want you to see is that the form in which the seven messages is given itself is saying something about Who Jesus Christ is and what He understands His church to be in and for the world.

We are going to make an amazing discovery. Jesus is going to blow the circuit boards on our understanding of Who He is and who we are as his church. But first, some observations about Revelation 2-3. Seven cities, seven churches, seven messages. Why seven? In the last book of the Bible the number seven is the number of completeness. In speaking to the seven churches of Asia, Jesus is somehow speaking to the complete church, the whole church, in every place and in every age.

Why these seven churches? There were others congregations in Asia – Colossae, Hierapolis, Miletus – why not address them? Why these seven? I think it is that these seven congregations embody the issues that the church faces in any geographical, cultural, temporal context.

As you heard the first and seventh messages read, you noticed that they followed a similar pattern, or a similar flow. All seven messages do. Jesus first introduces Himself to each of the churches uses some kind of self-designation, using images from the initial apocalypse in Revelation 1. He uses different images for each of the churches and cities, images that tie into spiritual, cultural, and political dynamics of each city.

Jesus then tells each church what He knows about what is going on. He tells them what He likes: "I know that ..." and what He dislikes: "I have this against you." He has something positive to say about each church, except the seventh church, Laodicea. He has words of criticism for most of the churches, except the second and sixth churches, Smyrna and Philadelphia. Interestingly, those are the two cities that were under overt persecution, and churches under persecution he has no critical word for.

He then tells each church what they need to do – remember, repent, do what you used to do, wake up, open the door. He calls the churches to do a variety of things. And then He makes incredible promises to

those who “overcome.” We know from the rest of The Revelation of Jesus Christ, that to “overcome” means holding fast to Who Jesus is under pressure to compromise. A meaningful exercise is to take out a piece of paper, and write down everything Jesus promises “overcomers.” It will stir your soul!

And then Jesus says “Hear ... hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.” You may have noticed that whereas in the first letter, to Ephesus, the order is “Hear” and then “To the one who overcomes,” in the seventh letter, to Laodicea, the order is “To the one who overcomes,” and then, “Hear.” The order switched with the fourth letter, to Thyatira, a fact which has huge implications ... which I will develop next Sunday.

You may have noticed that I have been calling the content of Revelation 2-3, the “messages” – the seven messages. I have not been calling them letters, as they have traditionally been called. I am not calling them “letters” because the seven messages are not written in letter form! The whole of The Revelation of Jesus Christ is written in letter form; the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ is the longest letter in the Bible: “John, to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace ...” The whole book is a letter, but the seven messages of Revelation 2-3 are not in letter form.

It was New Testament scholar David Aune who helped me see this. In his massive commentary on the last book of the Bible, he points out that “the seven proclamations exhibit not a single characteristic feature of early Christian epistolary tradition” (125). Not a single characteristic feature of letter-writing tradition, which argues Aune, “must have been a result of deliberate choice.”

What we have in Revelation 2-3 is a new form of communication, a unique form of communication. A form of communication which itself is making a statement about Who Jesus thinks He is. The messages to the seven churches are crafted in a new, unique genre. We are all familiar with different genres of writing and speaking: Newspapers, magazines, tabloids, novels, poetry, medical journals, financial reports, philosophical treatises. There are different genre of music: classical, baroque, rock, country, and rap.

The genre of the seven messages is a combination of two genres with which the first hearers of the messages would be familiar. And here I am going to show you something that helps us see Jesus Christ as we have never seen Him before. The genre of the seven messages is a mix of the so-called “prophetic oracle” on the one hand, and the so-called “imperial edict” on the other hand. The prophetic oracle comes mainly from the Jewish world. The imperial edict comes mainly from the Gentile world, in particular Persia and Rome.

In each of the seven messages we hear the phrase “says this.” “The One Who ...” and some self-description by Jesus ... “says this.” Seven times, “says this.” In the original is it *tade legei*. And it comes at the beginning of the sentence for emphasis. “*Tade legei*, the One Who ...” “Says this, the One Who ...” Seven times: “says this the One Who ...”

Now, why am I bothering to bring up this detail? *Tade legei* was used, on the one hand, to introduce royal, diplomatic letters and imperial edicts in Persia and Rome. “Says this ... the governor of the territory of ...” “Says this ... so and so the magnificent, the great benefactor ...” “Says this ... the one who holds the sword over the land ...”

Tade legei was also used to introduce the prophetic word of God in the Jewish world. The Greek version of the Old Testament uniformly translates the Hebrew, “*koh amar YHWH*,” “Thus says the Lord,” *tade legei*. 250 times! “Says this the LORD.” “Says this the LORD.”

So, the genre, the form of communication, of the seven messages is a unique mix of the imperial edict of the Gentile world and the prophetic oracle of the Jewish world. And this new genre, this new form of communication, is itself making a statement. The medium is the message. The genre is itself making an enormous claim about Who Jesus is. Or, to put it more accurately, Jesus Himself created this new genre to make an enormous claim about who He thinks He is.

Tade legei. On the one hand, He is a King addressing His subjects (Aune, 127) – imperial edict. On the other hand, He is a God addressing His worshippers – prophetic oracle. Jesus is speaking as the royal Emperor “issuing solemn and authoritative edicts befitting His status as ‘ruler of the kings of the earth’” (Aune, 129). Jesus is speaking as the Living God issuing a word of warning and blessing befitting his status as the glorified Son of Man and beloved Son of God, the great I AM. The genre of the seven messages itself proclaims Jesus as the true Emperor and as the true God.

No wonder the early Christians were in trouble! Jesus of Nazareth is the true Emperor, and the true God. And are not Emperor and God the two meanings of the word *Kurios* – Lord? We say the confession “Jesus is Lord” so often that we lose touch with its massive implications. In the Gentile world *Kurios*, Lord, is the title given to the sovereign Caesar. In the Jewish world *Kurios*, Lord, is the substitute, the circumlocution, for the sacred name Yahweh. The genre of Revelation 2-3 is itself declaring Jesus is *Kurios*, the Emperor of Emperors and God of gods. Wow!

So we had better listen! When this Jesus speaks, we had better listen! Indeed, to whom else would we want to listen? Only He has the keys to life and to death! *Tade legei*. “Says this” – the One Who... .

“To the church of ...” Seven times. “To the church of ...” Ephesus and Thyatira and Laodicea. The word Jesus uses in the seven messages is *ekklesia*, from which we get our English word ‘ecclesiastical.’ But do we realize what it means?

In his book, *At the Origins of Christian Worship*, Larry Hurtado (who used to teach at Regent College and now is at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland) says the *ekklesia* is “an interesting choice” of words to designate a gathering of Christian believers. “Interesting” because in the first century the word *ekklesia* had no religious connotations (54). I have emphasized this at a number of our Congregational Meetings. In the first century, *ekklesia* had no religious connotations. Oh, everything in the first century was “religious” in one sense, but *ekklesia* had no intentional religious orientation. There were a host of other words at Jesus’ disposal that were religious.

As Larry Hurtado puts it: *Ekklesia* “designated the gathering of citizens of a city to conduct civic business” (54). Yes, the gods were honored: nothing happened in the Greek and Roman worlds without some acknowledgement of the gods. But the *ekklesia* was not about the gods per se. *Ekklesia* was about the business of the city.

What is important to also note is that the Greek Old Testament uses the word to translate the expression “the congregation of Yahweh” (Deut. 23:2). When God assembled the people for new acts of obedience in the world - *ekklesia*. Interestingly, the Jews in the Greek and Roman world did not use this term for their gathering. They preferred *synagogue* to *ekklesia*.

So, writes Hurtado, “it appears that the early Christians deliberately adopted and preferred a distinctive self-designation, a term not used by pagan or Jewish religious groups to refer to their gatherings” (55).

The term had a clear meaning: assemblies of people summoned by the Emperor in the Gentile world, and by the Living God in the Jewish world, to conduct the business of the city. Is this how we view our gatherings? Is this how we understand what it means to “be church” in our time? Gathering to conduct the business of the city? If Jesus is the Emperor of Emperors; if He is God of gods; then of course He cares about the business of the city.

“To the angel of the *ekklesia* of Ephesus ...”

“To the angel of the *ekklesia* of Laodicea ...”

The seven messages are spoken to people summoned by the true Emperor and true God to conduct the business of the true Emperor and true God in the city. To conduct the business of the kingdom of God in the midst of the kingdoms of this world. To conduct the business of the One Lasting Empire in the midst of those crumbling all around us. To conduct the business of the City of God In the midst of the cities of man. Or, as it will be put later in the last book of the Bible: to conduct the business of Jerusalem the Bride right in the midst of Babylon the Harlot.

This is why you have heard me say that the welfare of the city is tied up with the welfare of the church in the city. The health of the city is related to the health of the *ekklesia* of the city. Or, to put it differently: a city will be as holy, and therefore, healthy, as the *ekklesia* of the city. What we do when we gather in the name of the true Emperor and the true God has profound consequences for the city, even if the city is not aware of it.

In light of Jesus calling us congregations of believers *ekklesia*, I propose the following definition for “church”: “We are ordinary, broken people, summoned by and gathered around the crucified and risen and ascended and coming Jesus, to share in the life of Jesus [which means entering into and enjoying the life of the Trinity], and to be engaged in the business of Jesus in the city [the work of the kingdom of God, the Empire of God] in the city.” Isn’t that thrilling?

You see, as the emperor Caesar expanded his reign in the world, his kingdom in the world, he would set up *ekklesia* in all the cities – administrative outposts of his rule. So too, the Emperor Jesus, as he expands his reign in the world, his kingdom in the world, he sets up these *ekklesias* in every city in the world as administrative outposts of his rule. He gathers us together to become another city within the city, to have a vision, value system, and behaviours of a radically alternative empire.

And what does all that mean? Keep reading The Revelation of Jesus Christ. But first things first. You may have noticed that in the first and seventh messages, that the true Emperor has invited us to dinner. He does this a lot. The true God has set a Table before us. He does this a lot. “Look!” He says. “I am standing at the door and knocking.” What? I thought He was in the middle of His churches ... “In this very room.” Then, why does He speak of standing at the door and knocking? Because when we do not look and listen, He goes around to the front door, and knocks again, and says “Open the door again. If you open the door, I will come in, and you will eat with Me, and be with Me.”

The first business of the true Emperor and the true God, in the city is hospitality – feeding His people. “Come,” Jesus says, “let us have supper together.”