

A number of years after Jesus ascended to Heaven, one of His disciples, the Apostle John, was in prison on the Island of Patmos. And while he was in that prison, he had a vision. It was a vision of Jesus Christ Himself. And in this vision, Jesus unveiled to him, much of what's going to occur into the future. And we're pretty lucky, because this vision has been written down, and we now know it as "the Revelation of Jesus Christ" – It's the very last book that we have in our Bibles. And it also happens to be the book of the Bible that we began studying a few weeks ago, and we'll be in it for a number of months yet.

Chapters 2 & 3 of this Revelation, are what's known as the letters to the 7 churches. And we're just beginning on Chapter 2 today.

Jesus dictated to John, 7 letters, to 7 churches who were in (what was then known as) Asia (We now know it as Turkey). And each church would get to read all 7 letters. Only **one** letter was specifically addressed to each church, but they (like us) were able to read all the letters, so they could learn from them as well.

And as I've studied these 7 letters, I cannot think of **any** church that I know of, that is not very much like at least one of these churches – I cannot come up with an example of a church that at least one of these letters don't directly speak to it. And so we find that these 7 churches are like prototypes of all churches that would exist throughout history. And as such, the letters from Jesus, are very relevant for us today.

So, over the next 7 weeks, as we read these letters, I want us to be asking ourselves the question "Is this a letter for us?" It's going to be a little bit like waiting for the mailman to

come each week. Knowing that Jesus has posted us a letter, or maybe He's posted us a **few** letters, and yet we don't know, each morning, if the letter that's going to arrive today, is going to be the letter for us.

- Is today's letter, a letter to Bush Disciples?
- Or is it a letter which is for one of the churches who listen to these messages via video?
- Or is it a letter for a church of somebody who's listening to it on their iPod?

But even so, we can be certain, that each week, as we read these letters, Jesus will be speaking to us – individually; and as a church.

Righto, Let's pray, and then I'll read it.

Lord Jesus Christ,

We live in an age where it isn't very common to receive a letter any more. And when we do, it can sometimes be something which is very significant for us. But how privileged we are today, to be receiving a letter from the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Lord, help us to recognise, if this is a letter from You, to our specific church.

And Lord, I ask that we would not only learn from this correspondence from Yourself to us, but that by Your Grace, we would apply it, to our lives and in our church.

Lord, open our eyes, so that we would be able to see, what Your eyes of fire see. Open our ears, so that we

would hear the truth about ourselves and about the way we behave, (no matter how hard it is for us to hear).

And Lord, by Your mercy, enable us to be “overcomers” – that we would go on in what is good, and that we would repent of what is evil, so that we would become the church that You are calling us to be.

We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.

Revelation 2:1–7 (ESV)

To the Church in Ephesus

2 “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

2 “ ‘I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. **3** I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary. **4** But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. **5** Remember therefore from where 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. **6** Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. **7** He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.’

The 7 letters to the 7 churches, have some remarkable similarities to each other. And today, I want to do things a little bit back-to-front. I want us to look at the **climax** of each of these letters first.

The **climax** to each of these 7 letters is the promise of inheriting eternal life in Jesus Christⁱ. For **some** churches, this promise is at risk, because of the way in which the church is behaving. But **always**, the promise is there before them. Eternal life can be restored – It can be assured. And this promise of eternal life is key for understanding the reason why these seven letters have been written.

Each of these letters deal generally with the issue of witnessing for Jesus Christ in the midst of a culture which is not Christianⁱⁱ. Wow!!! Maybe it's relevant for us in Australia... - Witnessing for Christ, in the midst of a culture which is not Christian. Churches with problems are exhorted to strengthen their witness, and the 2 churches without problems are encouraged to continue to persevere in the faithful witness they have been maintaining.

Now, as we study these letters, some of us may notice, that they have a very similar structure to each other.ⁱⁱⁱ. Some of them have elements that are missing, but, in general, they are all quite similar. And this is the structure.

1. There's a command to write to an angel of a church
2. Christ describes himself
3. He congratulates the church for its good works (unless there's nothing good to say)
4. An accusation is levelled at the church because of some sin.

5. There's a warning to change their ways, with either notions of judgement or encouragement.
6. The reader is asked to decide for themselves whether what is said is true or not. "He who has an ear, let him hear." Are you going to listen to what I say, or are you going to live in denial?
7. There's a promise to those who conquer the problem.

And so let's see how the letter to Ephesus fits into that formula.

1. There is a command, to write to the angel of the church in Ephesus.

2. Jesus describes Himself.

And here, Jesus describes Himself as the one **who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.**

Last week, we discovered what that meant. The book of Revelation, uses a lot of images, to give us a message. And we were told last week, that the 7 stars in Jesus' hand, represent the angels (responsible for each of the churches), and the Lampstands represent the churches.

This imagery reminds us that the Christian church, is not simply a physical, human institution. There is a spiritual dimension to the church. The church is a lampstand, but Christ is the source of its light. And Jesus Christ walks among the lampstands – that means, He is very well aware, of everything that goes on in a church.

And because He is well aware of what's going on, He knows the good, and He knows the bad, which brings us to the 3rd step of the letter:

3. He congratulates the church for its good works (if there are any)

And “Yes”, the church in Ephesus, **are** congratulated for their good works...

Now, I just want to pause here for a moment, to clarify the relationship between “faith” and “good works”.

The understanding that most of society have about Christianity, is wrong. The popular belief, is that we get saved by doing good works. And if that is your understanding of Christianity, it is quite wrong. We are **not** saved by being good people, and by doing good things.

- We don't get right with God by helping little old ladies across the road;
- We don't get our sins washed away by selling everything we have and giving it to the poor.
- And we don't earn our way to heaven by reading 3 chapters of the Bible a day and singing 36 hymns...

We are saved by faith.

Alright, neither you, nor I, could ever **be** good enough, to get right with God – it's out of our reach. And that's why Jesus came. That's why Jesus died on the cross. Jesus died, so we could be forgiven. **We** deserve to die, because we're so sinful. Our very rejection of God, itself

is what sin is. And Jesus saves us from sin, as long as we believe in Him, repent (that means “turn from our sin”), and trust in Him, and follow Him as Lord...

Alright, so are you getting this? We are **not** saved by doing good things. We are saved by faith.

Now, unfortunately, some churches get so fixated on this knowledge (that “we’re saved by faith”) that they will tear down, anyone who would suggest, that we should also be doing good deeds (legalism / living by law). And about this time last year, we were studying the Book of James, and James is addressing this very problem. And he said “**Faith without works is dead**”.

The Christian faith, isn’t **only** about believing. If you believe in Jesus, and that faith is real, your faith will be a very active faith. It is not a passive faith – we don’t just have it done to us. Christianity is something we live and breathe and do... And so it begins with faith, and it is expressed by works.

And so the Lord Jesus Christ – when He looks at our church – He wants to know “What are your deeds????” “What do you do????” “How are you living out, what you believe?” (and of course, **we** don’t have to answer that – He can see for Himself) And as a church – what we do – that is, “how we behave” – has eternal ramifications.

Righto, let’s come back to the church at Ephesus: What does Jesus congratulate them for **doing**?

He said to them:

- I know your works
- I know your toil – another word would be “Labour” – It’s hard work; It’s difficult work; It’s painful work; It’s hard labour, to work for the Lord in the service of His Kingdom. Don’t you ever think for a moment, that it’s an easy ride.

You know, sometimes we might hear the words of Jesus “Come to me all who are weary and I will give you rest” And the picture we can come up with, of the Christian life, is as a life of restful inactivity. **Not so.** Jesus relieves us from the burden of carrying sin – that’s the rest He gives us (and it’s a good rest, let me tell ya). But He **congratulates** those who **toil**. He congratulates those who work hard; He congratulates those, who **labour**, in the service of His Kingdom. And so He congratulated this church in Ephesus, for the hard labour that they do in the service of the Kingdom.

- And He also then commended them for their patient endurance. It’s not easy, being a Christian in a world opposed to Christ... But we patiently await His return, bearing whatever the world might throw at us.

But then Jesus commends this church for something that our society, would almost certainly, condemn:

- Intolerance.

Yes, you heard it right, Jesus commended them for their intolerance.

When somebody would try to introduce a teaching that is not the true Gospel, into their church, they would not tolerate it. They would not put up with false teaching. Anybody who

claimed to have an authority to teach – well, they tested them. – “What do you believe?” “What are you going to be teaching our church?” And when they found that what they were teaching was false, they wouldn’t have it.

You know, in the earlier days, Paul had urged the Ephesian church to watch out for false teachers^{iv}. We can find this in the books of Acts and Timothy. And the Ephesian church took this command very seriously. They tested what they were being taught, and when they found that it wasn’t the truth, they rejected it.

Some churches today, pride themselves on their tolerance – they’re proud of the fact that they’ll accept all sorts of teachings – even if it’s not Biblical... But not the church in Ephesus. And Jesus Christ congratulated them for it...

So what we have here, is a description of:

- a hard-working church;
- Passionate for the truth – always on the look-out for wrong teaching and guarding against the lies of the Devil.
- And it is a church that patiently endures in the faith – they keep on following the Lord Jesus Christ, no matter what the world throws at them

Sounds good. But then we come to Step 4:

4. An accusation is levelled at the church because of some sin.

Hard work and correct doctrine alone is not enough for a church. What do you think’s missing? Love...

Jesus said: ⁴ **But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.**

Now, we don't know exactly what that means:

- Did they abandon their love for Jesus?
- Did they abandon their love for each other?
- Did they abandon their love for their neighbour?
- Or did they just lose the joy of their first love – you know, that passion that we all have for Jesus when we first become a Christian? But then, over time, the initial passion fades – we lose the first love, and our Christian walk, which once was extraordinary, becomes just ordinary & every-day....

I don't know. Maybe it's one of these. Maybe it's all of them. So, let's not make it specific. Jesus didn't make it specific. He simply said **you have abandoned the love you had at first.** Alright, they no longer loved, like they used to love.

I suspect that He's most probably talking about losing their passion for the gospel, and they want to keep everything "correct", and so they're not bringing new people into the church...

You may now be starting to get a bit of a picture of the sort of church that He's talking about... There is a trap, you see. When a church strives for truth, and for doing things properly, the trap is, that that church can become very legalistic... Some churches are so stringent on their rules and regulations, so they can get their doctrine right, but they forget about love. Sometimes the legalities of what's right and wrong leads to

judgemental attitudes, where people are victimised, and hurt, and rejected....

That's not the way the church is supposed to be.

I find it very interesting, that when **Paul** wrote to this very church in Ephesus, he talked about the job of preachers and pastors and teachers, and about how their job, is to build the church up, to maturity, so that we'll know Christ... And that way, they won't get deceived by false teaching, and then he said:

Ephesians 4: ¹⁵ **Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.** Truth and Love should not be separated. In fact, they cannot be separated. They go together hand in hand. Because the truth of the matter is, "We are commanded to love."

And I believe, this is something that we here at Bush Disciples, need to be very aware of. We're only a recent church plant – we've not long begun. And I, myself – I left a church, because I was convicted that that denomination, had fallen for a lie – the world had gotten into the church, and the Lord had said, "It's time to leave" ... And it's all very good and nice, for us to stand for truth, and to stand against lies... And it's right for us to do so. But let's always, speak the truth, in love. Let's never ever become a legalistic church, and let's hold truth and love together.

What did Jesus say about His disciples? Did He say “They will know you are my disciples by your correct doctrine”?...

Not at all. What did He say??? ^{John 13:35} **By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."**

But let's not limit the type of love. As Christians, we should:

- love one another;
- we should love our neighbour; and
- we should love the Lord Jesus Christ, with all of our heart, and soul, and mind, and all of our strength

Step 5:

5. There's a warning to change their ways, with either notions of judgement or encouragement.

V⁵ Remember therefore from where you have fallen;
(alright, they once **used** to love. And they can love again.)

repent, - and this, a very important word – we're going to encounter this word again and again – “Repent”. To repent, means to change the way we're going – change the way we're doing things. “Change your ways”. In this case: Love like you used to love... **do the works you did at first.**

And they are warned that if they **don't** change their ways – if they don't begin to love again, they will be judged. And Jesus says: If you don't change, I'm going to remove your lampstand from its place... Do you understand what this image means? To put it bluntly, it means, as far as Christ is concerned, if we don't love, we're not His church... ... Do

you understand the ramifications of this: A church is not an institution – it's not an institution that He's going to remove from His presence – A church, are the people of God. And if the people who claim to be the people of God don't love, they're not really God's people...

Step 6

7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Alright, Jesus is saying, "Listen up". "Take note of what I'm saying". Are you going to accept that what I have said is true? Or are you going to live in denial?

And finally, Step 7

There's a promise to those who conquer the problem.

What's the promise? **To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.** It's a picture of eternity.

The promise is, if that church in Ephesus was to repent, and to begin to love like they used to love, Jesus will grant them eternal life – He will welcome them into the paradise of God...

And there are many people in the world today, who will not accept, what Jesus says here: What's He saying? He's saying, "If you stop loving, you're no longer my church, and you're no longer saved. But if you repent, of this, and begin to love again, like you once used to love, you are saved."

Now, if you're someone who believes in the human phrase "once saved, always saved", you're going to have a lot of trouble with this letter, and you won't accept what Jesus says, But that is what He says.

That's very challenging, isn't it?

Truth, and hard work alone, are not enough. Because unless we love, we're not the church of Jesus Christ.

Now, I want to finish off, by saying one final thing: True love – to love like Jesus loves, does not mean that we turf truth out. Towards the end of the letter, Jesus reiterated to them how much He admired their intolerance of false teaching.

After He'd given them a dressing-down for not loving, He said this in V⁶ **Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.**

I understand that the Nicolaitans used to teach that it was OK to participate in idol worship (alongside your Christianity). And Jesus hated it. And He was pleased that the Ephesian church hated it too.

The point? Truth and love must go together. Truth without love, is not truth at all. And love without truth, is not love at all.

Questions.

ⁱ Beale GK. The Book of Revelation NIGTC. (p.226)

ⁱⁱ Beale GK. The Book of Revelation NIGTC. (p.227)

ⁱⁱⁱ Beale GK. The Book of Revelation NIGTC. (p.225)

^{iv} Beale GK. The Book of Revelation NIGTC. (p.229)