If I were to go down to Hell I would shout, "Glory! Glory! Unto my blessed Jesus, until I made the bottomless pit ring again, and that miserable old Satan would say, "Billy, Billy, this is no place for thee; get thee back.' Then up to heaven I would go, shouting, "Glory, glory, praise the Lord!"
Billy Bray

REVELATION CHAPTER TWO: Verses 1-7
THE SEVEN CHURCHES-Part One
A Look at the Church of Ephesus:
The Apostolic Church That Has Left Its First Love
Handout Three
Prayer Study #402
First Love Ministries of Perry, Georgia USA

(Most of the following is based on Rick Renner's
A Light in Darkness: Seven Messages and Seven Churches)

BACKGROUND OF CHAPTERS TWO AND THREE

Why did Jesus select these seven churches to address? We really don't know. They were in the most pagan of the cities of Asia Minor and perhaps were older and more mature than the other churches or perhaps they were the center of seven church districts. Scholars believe that these seven churches had been functioning for 40 years when John had his vision on Patmos. Most Biblical scholars believe there were hundreds of churches in Asia Minor besides these seven, and several others are mentioned in other parts of the New Testament. It is thought that these particular seven churches were established during Paul's ministry in Ephesus. No doubt John, from his hilltop home right outside Ephesus, served as the overseer of these particular churches and guided them for approximately 27 years after the death of Paul in 67 AD.

There is a teaching, which teaches that these were meant to be symbolic and prophetic and to represent the history of the Church. Those who teach this base their theory on Revelation 1:19, which says: *Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter.* According to this theory, each church represented a particular time period in the history of the church. Many believe, for example, that we are living in the Laodicean church age. Those who teach this theory divide church history in this way:

Ephesus: *The Apostolic Age* from Pentecost to 170 AD
Smyrna: *The Age of Persecution* from 170 AD to 312 AD

Pergamum: *The Age of False Doctrine* from 312 to 606 AD
Sardis: *The Remnant* (In Every age there has been a remnant company.)
Thyatira: *The Age of Darkness*-606 to 1520 AD
Philadelphia: *The Age of Missions*-1750 to 1906 AD
Laodicea: *The Age of Apostasy*-1906 to the present

This theory would be hard to prove, although it is interesting to think about it. It does not have strong historical support, and it ends the Church Age with a weak and powerless Church and is incompatible with the powerful Church that Scripture foretells in the last days. Still, I think there are some merits at looking at this theory, and many who are in the Church today see many similarities between the Church in America and the church in Laodicea.

EPHESUS

The Church at Ephesus was the first congregation of Christianity in Asia. It was started by Paul with the help of Aquila and Priscilla. Ephesus was a prosperous city and contained the largest temple of Artemis, which was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It also had a manmade harbor and saw people arrive from all over the known world. Some came for jobs for Ephesus was the biggest business center in that part of the world. In Biblical times Ephesus was the fourth great city in the world. (Only Rome, Alexandria and Antioch were considered greater.) Ephesus was called "The Light of Asia" because of its tolerance to new ideas. It also was known for its large prostitution business and for its large slave community.

Ephesus was a prosperous city and very pagan. The Ephesians had been heavily influenced by Greek culture, and the city had many statues of naked men and women made from white marble, but at the time of Paul and John these statues were painted flesh colored and were ideal, perfect physiques because the human body had become an object of worship. This really offended the Jews who were taught that the human body was holy, and that public nudity was an offense to God.

Ephesus, like most Roman controlled cities, had a large stadium. Here the Ephesians watched gladiators fight it out or criminals, which often included Christians, thrown to savage beast where they faced a horrible death. This provided entertainment to the people and was a cheap way to execute criminals. Chariot races also often took place in the stadium.

Paul wrote in 1st Corinthians 15:32 that he fought with wild beast at Ephesus. Most scholars believe this should not be interpreted literally. For one thing, Roman citizens, of which Paul was one, by law could not be put in an arena with wild beast. For another, there is no historical record of this nor is such an

event recorded in Acts. Obviously, Paul was writing symbolically and was referring to betrayers, deceivers, and possibly to Judiazers.

Also in Ephesus was a huge theatre or amphitheater where very vulgar plays and comedies were performed, giving further indication of how the Ephesians had sunk into immorality. The plays were full of cursing and sexual innuendo. In Paul and John's time believers were forced on stage with crude costumes and then were subjected to lewd acts design to humiliate the Christians in Ephesus. Perhaps that is why Paul wrote from Ephesus the verse in 1st Corinthians 4:9 "…*We are made a spectacle unto the world…*" The word *spectacle* is from *theatron*, which can be translated *a performance carried out on stage.*

1 To the angel (messenger) of the assembly (church) in Ephesus write: These are the words of Him Who holds the seven stars [which are the messengers of the seven churches] in His right hand, Who goes about among the seven golden lampstands [which are the seven churches]:

Verse 1: Here Jesus uses the Greek word *ekklesia* for His church. This word means *the called-out ones.* We are called out and suppose to be separated from the world for the purposes of God. The word rendered angel most likely refers to the human messenger or pastor or overseer of the church. Jesus reminds the Ephesians that He is in the midst or center or middle of His churches. *Golden* candlesticks show us the great value Jesus puts on these 7 churches. The churches symbolized by candlesticks reminding us that we are to be the light in the darkness of the world.

2 I know your industry and activities, laborious toil and trouble, and your patient endurance, and how you cannot tolerate wicked [men] and have tested and critically appraised those who call [themselves] apostles (special messengers of Christ) and yet are not, and have found them to be impostors and liars.

Verse 2: Jesus know the works of the Ephesian Christians because he has closely examined the condition of His people. He knows the specific details concerning the deeds and actions of His people, the works they had done, and their patience. This latter word means *a person who is under some type of heavy load but who refuses to stray from his position because he is committed to his task.* Jesus also commends the people for not tolerating and not allowing Christian phonies.

Who are true apostles? In Luke 9:1-16 Jesus sends out the twelve as apostles to preach the Gospel, heal the sick, and cast out demons. In Luke 10:1 the Lord sends out 70 more apostles two by two. Besides Matthias, who replaced Judas, and

Paul, at least eleven other apostles are listen in scripture: Apollos (1st Corinthians 4:6-13), Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25), James (the Lord's natural brother) (Galatians 1:19), Barnabas (Acts 14:4, 14), Andonicus (Romans 16:7), Junia (Romans 16:7), Titus (2nd Corinthians 8:23), Unnamed brother with Titus (2nd Corinthians 8:18,23), Another unnamed brother with Titus (2nd Corinthians 8:22,23), Timothy (1st Thessalonians 1:1; 2:6), and Silas or Silvanus (1st Thessalonians 1:1, 2:6).

One of the qualifications for being an apostles, I believe, is that one has seen Jesus in the natural or in a vision. In 1st Corinthians 9:1 Paul writes, "Am I not an apostle? Am I not free? Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord? Are not ye my work in the Lord?" Also, Paul tells us the signs to look for to see if one is an apostle: "*Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds"* (2nd Corinthians 12:12).

Note that Jesus says the Ephesians had done the right things and had suffered *for my name sake*. The Ephesians were not trying to make a name for themselves nor trying to bring glory to themselves. They were wanting to honor the name of Jesus.

3 I know you are enduring patiently and are bearing up for My name's sake, and you have not fainted or become exhausted or grown weary.

Verse 3: Jesus tells the Ephesians that He knows they have worked extremely hard for many years and had been faithful even in difficult times. This prominent church, perhaps the spiritual leader of all the churches in Asia Minor, had been started by Paul and Priscilla and Aquila. Timothy was its pastor. John had lived there. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a former member of the church there. It was the largest and most influential of the churches in all of Asia Minor. It was the church responsible for starting and overseeing all the churches in that region, and it was commended multiple times in Revelation 2:2 & 3. Yet it did have one major flaw.

4 But I have this [one charge to make] against you: that you have left (abandoned) the love that you had at first [you have deserted Me, your first love].

Verse 4: This one flaw made Jesus deeply disturbed to the point that He personally held this against them. The Ephesians had become so busy in ministry that they had left their first love. The word used for love in this verse is *agape*. This is what Rick Renner says about agape: "This word *agape* is so filled with deep emotion and meaning that it is one of the most difficult words to translate in the New Testament. *Agape* occurs when an individual *sees, recognizes,*

understands, and appreciates the value of an object or a person, causing him to behold this object or person in great esteem, awe, admiration, wonder, and sincere appreciation. Such great respect is awakened in the heart of the observer for the object or person he is beholding that he is compelled to love. In fact, his love for that person or object is so strong, it is irresistible. This kind of love knows no limits or boundaries in how far, wide, high and deep it will go to show love to its recipient. If necessary, *agape* love will sacrifice itself for the sake of that object or person it so deeply cherishes. *Agape* is therefore the *highest, finest, most noble,* and *most fervent* form of love." Renner goes on to say that the King James structure of this verse is wrong. In the Greek the phrase should be translated this way: *"because your love, the first one, you have left."* According to Renner, *"Jesus used this phrase here to remind the church of Ephesus of the esteem, awe, admiration, wonder, and appreciation that was first awakened in their hearts for Him when they received Him as their Savior many years earlier….If this could happen to the church of Ephesus, it must be taken as a warning for the Church at large in every generation. We must regularly allow the Holy Spirit to search our hearts and reveal whether or not we are still on fire for the Lord as we once were. It may be a painful revelation to realize that we have become doctrinally sophisticated yet powerless. However, if we are willing to remember from whence we have fallen and then to repent, we can be spared the tragedy of become irrelevant to our generation."*

5 Remember then from what heights you have fallen. Repent (change the inner man to meet God's will) and do the works you did previously [when first you knew the Lord], or else I will visit you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you change your mind and repent.

Verse 5: Here Jesus gives us the pattern for coming back to our First Love: remember, repent, and do the first works.

The Ephesians had a lot to remember: deliverance from idol worship, freedom from evil spirits, miraculous healings, the great bonfire where they burned all their magic and occult books, and public repentance with a pagan crowd looking on. They had hosted the "who's who" of Christian leaders in their church and were looked upon as the ideal church. To repent literally means *to completely turn around and completely change the way one thinks, lives, or behaves.* To *do the first works* means to *do the actions that were indicative of you at the first.* Some of the characteristics of the early Ephesian church given in Acts 18 and 19 were these: They possessed great spiritual hunger (Acts 18:20); they enjoyed great fellowship with each other (Acts 18:27); they were very eager to repent and to receive from the Lord (Acts 19:1-6); they loved the Word of God (Acts 19:8); they

did not care about their own reputations but did about the reputation of the Lord (Acts 19:9); they wanted to live by the Word, applying it to their personal lives (Acts 19:10); they were open to the power of God and the gifts of the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:11-12); they loved the name of Jesus (Acts 19:17); they were quick to confess their sins and to repent (Acts 19:18); and they severed all connections to their pagan past, even when it costs great personal loss (Acts 19:19). 1st Corinthians 15:32 tells us that they were publicly persecuted for the sake of their belief in Christ. Ephesians 1:15 tells us they were faith-filled and Ephesians 1:15 tells us they were known for their love of the brothers and sisters in Christ. These were the works they did at first.

Jesus warns them in the end that if they refuse to repent, He will move their position as the lead church in Asia Minor. Although they might remain as an active congregation, they would not have the influence in representing Jesus to the other churches.

6 Yet you have this [in your favor and to your credit]: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans [what they are doing as corrupters of the people], which I Myself also detest.

Verse 6: The Nicolaitans believed, much like those pushing the *hyper grace* doctrine that as long as they professed Christ, they could live licentious lives doing whatever they wanted to do, even practicing immorality. Nicolas was one of the seven deacons (Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas), selected by the original disciples as deacons, to care for the widows and the poor, so that the twelve could concentrate on prayer and teaching the Word. According to Acts 5, Nicholas was a proselyte from Antioch. This is very significant because it tells us that, unlike the other six deacons, Nicholas was not a Jew. He had been converted from paganism to Judaism and then to Christianity. He had deep pagan roots and had been very involved in the occult. According to the early Church fathers, Nicholas taught a doctrine of compromise, that basically said that the total separation of Christianity from occult practices was not necessary. Jesus and the Ephesian believers hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans. The word hate comes from the Greek word *miseo,* which means *to find utterly repulsive.*

7 He who is able to hear, let him listen to and give heed to what the Spirit says to the assemblies (churches). To him who overcomes (is victorious), I will grant to eat [of the fruit] of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

Verse 7: Jesus statement in this verse ***"He that hath an ear, let him hear…"*** implies that everyone does not have an ear to hear what the Spirit is

saying. This is a common phrase that Jesus uses seven different times in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 11:15, 13:9 & 43; Mark 4:9 & 23; Luke 8:8, 14:35).

The word for overcome is the Greek word *Nikao,* from which the name *Nike,* the Greek goddess of victory, comes. It denotes a victor or champion and can be translated *to control, to conquer, to defeat, to master, to overcome, to overwhelm, to surpass, or to be victorious.*

The "Tree of Life" was located in the Garden of Eden and would give perpetual life to the one who ate it. The "Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil" was also in the Garden of Eden and to eat this tree meant spiritual death. (Someone recently told me that one of the excellent Bible teachers in America explained that the problem with eating this tree was that man would decide himself what was good and evil instead of listening to God's definitions of good and evil.) If Adam and Eve had eaten of the Tree of Life after eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil," they would have been condemned to live forever in a fallen state. That is why the Lord placed cherubim at the entrance of the garden to prevent Adam and Eve from returning. The Tree of Life symbolizes the Cross. The promise of Jesus is that He will restore paradise to those who overcome.

In summary, the Lord is asking John to write a personal letter from Jesus to the shepherd or pastor of the Church of Ephesus. These were written to specific, real churches in Asia Minor in what we know today as Turkey. As mentioned earlier, if taken in order, they prophetically give the history of the Church. Each letter is to an individual churches, but the Words of Jesus apply to all churches from Pentecost to the Second Coming. He begins here with Ephesus a pattern for dealing with these churches. He names the specific church. He gives one of the titles of Himself that He has given in Chapter One of Revelation. He offers encouragement or commendation, much like a teacher assessing or grading a student. Then He gives a correction, followed by the consequences for not repenting in the area that needs correction and the rewards for repenting. Finally, He ends with specific words to conclude His letters: ***He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.***

In Ephesus, we see:

- **Name of Church:** Church of Ephesus (Ephesus means *desired one*)
- **Title of Jesus Christ:** He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands
- **Encouragement or Commendation:** The Lord says Ephesus is alive and busy about the Lord's work. The members are working hard and refuse to quit. They don't tolerate evil people and weed out apostolic pretenders. They are a courageous people and are willing to patiently suffer for the Gospel. What a

wonderful word from Jesus to this church!

  - Jesus also praises them for hating the work of the Nicolaitans. We will discuss the Nicolaitans in the analysis of the verses of Chapter Two below.

- **Correction:** Unfortunately, there is one big problem in Ephesus. They were so busy following doctrine and ministering that they had little time for Jesus, i.e. they no longer love Jesus as their *first* love. They are doing all the right things, but their heart is not in it because they have allowed other loves to take the place reserved *for Jesus only* as first place in their lives.
- **Consequences for not repenting:** Jesus will come and remove their lampstand, symbolizing their witness and their influence over the other churches.
- **Reward for repenting:** Jesus will allow those who repent and overcome, i.e. those who return to their first love, to eat of the Tree of Life in the paradise of God.
- **Conclusion:** ***He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches*** (Revelation 2:7a).