

Seven Letters to Seven Churches, Part I: Ephesus
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There are a lot of strange images in the Book of Revelation: dragons, monsters, a lamb with seven horns and seven eyes, and so on. All of these are metaphors, many of which are hard to decipher from our vantage-point nearly 2,000 years after the book was written. Revelation was written by a Christian bishop named John, whose territory included seven churches to whom he writes the letters in our series.

The reason John writes in metaphors is that he was imprisoned by the Romans and much of what John writes about concerns a revelation, which John believes came from the Spirit of Jesus himself that the Roman Empire would eventually fall.

Since John wanted to keep his head attached to his body, and he was dependent on the Roman guards allowing his writing to be sent in the Roman mail to seven different cities where these churches could be found (the order of the letters follows the exact postal route of the time), John wrote in code language that his captors would not understand.

For instance, one of the main characters in the Book of Revelation is a great and mighty Beast who rises out of the sea with seven heads, who opposes God, utters continual blasphemies, and makes war on God's saints in every nation. Roman guards would have thought John is making up a dramatic tale of a monster. Many Christians assume he's talking about Satan. But John is actually talking about the Roman Emperor. Specifically, he's talking about Nero, the first emperor to persecute Christians.

Christians who read John's letter would be clued into the fact that he's not simply making up stories for their entertainment, and the fact that the Beast is said to have had seven heads, just as the city of Rome had seven hills, would not have been lost on them. John removes all doubt about who he's talking about, however, when he writes, "let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is 666." (Rev. 13:18)

The Romans would not have realized that if you write the name "Nero Caesar" in Hebrew, the numbers assigned to each Hebrew letter add up to 666.¹

By the way, John also refers to a slain lamb in Revelation, which any Christian would recognize as Jesus, the crucified "Lamb of God." John calls the lamb "King of King, Lord of Lords." If you convert that phrase into Jesus's native language, Aramaic, and run the same system of assigning numbers to letters and adding them up, guess what you come up with? 777!

Book of Revelation is about 666 versus 777. The power of Christ versus the power of the Romans. Guess who wins the fight?

¹ This system of matching Hebrew letters to numbers in order to signify something of greater significance is known as *gematria*, which was popular in the 1st Century.

Throughout Christian history, many have taken John's writing to be a prediction of wild and horrific events that will take place thousands of years later. In other words, it's not just the Roman authorities who were tricked by John's subversive approach, but even Christians who were no longer familiar with the code he wrote in.

By the way, we can find the same subversive approach being used today in popular story-telling genres. If you think, for instance, that the series *Game of Thrones* is just a violent story about kings and queens, dragons, wild fire, and "white walkers," from long ago in a far-away world, you'd better think twice! *Game of Thrones* is a sharp critique of power, violence and deception within our modern-day political, religious, and economic systems. If you miss the symbolism, all you're left with is a bunch of gruesome, bloody, so-called "entertainment."

The Book of Revelation is gruesome and bloody in places. But, like *Game of Thrones*, the surface story will throw you off if you're not paying attention. Revelation is about the everyday struggles of Christians living, suffering intense persecution, and dying in the late 1st and early 2nd Century after Christ. And it's about a dramatic clash John sees coming quite soon between the living Spirit of Jesus and the Roman Empire that will result in Rome's fall. To these early Christians, therefore, it is not a message of doom and gloom. It's a message of hope. Hope that even envisions the eventual salvation of those who are persecuting Christians – if you're paying attention and are familiar with the metaphors. But that's a sermon for another time!

Our focus in this series is not on the whole book of Revelation but on the seven letters to seven churches – actual churches, not metaphorical ones – in Revelation's opening chapters. By exploring these seven churches, we'll find that we in our time face struggles that are not so different from theirs. They may differ in terms of order of magnitude, but that's it. Therefore, the advice John offers the churches – or rather the Spirit of Jesus that John believes gave him the advice – can also be applied to us in our day. All of this helps us ask ourselves, "What kind of church are we, and what kind of church do we want to become?" at this critical transition point in our ministry.

In John's day, the church in Ephesus was like a large, mega-church with a long, illustrious history and a list of famous preachers as its leaders. The apostle Paul himself had founded the church back in the day when the church originally met in the ancient equivalent of a little shop in a strip mall just up from the harbor.

Ephesus itself was an important port city on the west coast of modern-day Turkey, serving as a gateway to the Mediterranean Sea and the Greek Islands. It also served as a gateway to one of the most important inland trade routes in Asia Minor. Thus, it was a very prosperous city from the start. In John's day, in fact, it competed with just a few other cities for the title, "First and Greatest Metropolis of Asia Minor": cities like Alexandria in Egypt, Corinth in Greece, and Antioch in Syria.

To this day, the ruins of Ephesus are some of the most spectacular ruins you can find anywhere in the world. You can still walk the marble streets meant to serve a bustling city of 250-300,000 people. In those streets you can still see the post holes where giant

cauldrons of oil were placed on top of poles so that the city could be lit at night. You can trace the outline of a wall that stretched for five miles around the city, and visit the ruins of an elaborate Roman bath house, an enormous coliseum that is still in use today, and the remains of a library that was one of the largest in the ancient world. You even find a giant complex of terraced “condominiums,” each with its own indoor plumbing, private mosaiced courtyard, and water fountain!

With respect to plumbing, the fact that Ephesus had plumbing at all is amazing since, after the fall of the Roman Empire, the technology was lost for a thousand years. It wasn't until 1596 CE when the world would see its next indoor, flushing toilet – one Sir John Harrington designed for his godmother, Queen Elizabeth I!

More amazing than any of these features, however, was the great Temple dedicated to Artemis (Roman Diana), goddess of the hunt and fertility. If the Temple of Artemis were to be compared to anything in the modern world, it would be the Vatican in Rome – so impressive it takes your breath away, and certainly as significant to followers of Artemis as the Vatican is to Catholics.

Artemis's Temple was considered one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. It was as large as two football fields. Its roof was covered with hand-cut marble tiles and supported by 127 marble pillars.

Just as Rome used to be almost entirely a city of Catholics, whose political life and economy revolved around the Vatican and Catholicism, so life in Ephesus revolved around Artemis and her Temple. So intertwined was religion, politics, and economics that in the Book of Acts we find the craftsmen of the city hauling the apostle Paul before a magistrate demanding he be executed. His crime? Apparently he was converting so many followers of Artemis to followers of Jesus that their statue manufacturing business was crashing!

Following Paul, the Ephesian church would be led by other famous Christian leaders. Leaders like Aquila and Priscilla – a married couple who also served as tutors to another famous Christian leader named Apollos, who is mentioned in three books in the New Testament (Acts, I Corinthians, and the Epistle to Titus). You may recall that the first letter to the church in Ephesus was not John's, but Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians, which he probably wrote while in Corinth. No other church in the New Testament gets this much attention over such a long period of time!

The fame and fortune of the church in Ephesus does raise a significant question, however: how on earth did the church grow? I mean, consider what converts to Christianity were up against in Ephesus. The whole religious and economic system of the day strongly privileged Artemis worship. And politics? Christians not only worshipped a God who was said to be revealed by a Jewish rabbi who was tried, convicted, and crucified for being an enemy of the state, but Christians themselves were considered enemies of Rome because they refused to offer yearly sacrifices to the Roman Emperor as a god. If you converted to Christianity, you were immediately seen as unpatriotic, an atheist (because you denied the existence of all gods but one), and a

subversive – especially after Nero set fire to a section of Rome and blamed Christians for doing it.

If you were lucky, you might lose your job for being a Christian. If you were less fortunate, then you lost your freedom and were sent to prison. Or, like many Christians, you lost your life, sometimes in the most horrifying and gruesome ways.

So why would anyone in their right mind convert?

The letter to the Ephesians in Revelation provides us the answer. Ironically, the answer comes through something the Spirit of Jesus says they once had but had now lost: Love.

Not just any kind of love. They had lost “the love you had *at first*.” Love for God, and others.

First love. *Wild and reckless* love that, while spiritual and platonic, could be compared to the kind of love two people might have for one another that leads them to marry.

First love. Love that *moves you to leave everything you have behind*, renouncing faith, family, and community and count the loss as nothing compared to what you have gained.

First love. *Vital* love. Love that finds all the heaven it needs in relationship with one’s Beloved, and considers hell to be even the most luxurious life if lived apart from one’s Beloved.

First love. *Courageous* love. *Fearless* love. Love that knows that the world can take away your job, your home, and take away even your very life on account of this love but it still can’t take anything that really matters from you. Therefore, there is absolutely no one to whom you will bow down, no one you will try to please or serve though they demand it, no one – except your Beloved.

A whole community caught up in this kind of love for God and each other is a force to be reckoned with, no matter how small or large. It is a community attractational power. One that people want to be a part of because the form of community they see makes their own community look lifeless, dull, and – most of all – disconnected from what’s truly important. It’s the kind of community that people will join though friends and family disapprove; though employers threaten; though state officials ban.

Given the kind of power inherent in a community with this kind of love, and literally biblically great leadership, one has to wonder how they ever lost sight of it.

Again, John’s letter is instructive. Ironically, our answer comes from what they are commended for, not what they are condemned for. They are commended for their careful attention to theological integrity. They actively test those who claim to be apostles but are not. They know their scriptures, and the essential teachings of Christian faith, and can sniff out false doctrine a mile away. The letter commends them for knowing that a sect of Christian libertines known as the Nicolaitans have hopelessly corrupted the true faith. They have reduced God’s amazing Grace into an excuse to do

whatever the heck they want and claim God's approval. The Ephesians hate that, and so does God.

The Spirit of Jesus promises the Ephesian church fantastic blessings if they can regain the love they had at first – blessings comparable to eating from the very Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden. But the Spirit of Jesus says that if they do not regain their love, “I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.” In other words, God's going to shut down this church, no matter how glorious its past. Why? They may hate what God hates, but they no longer love what God loves.

When any church forms its core identity around what it hates over what it loves, it may still be a church, but it is no longer the church of Jesus Christ. In the words of the famous, modern-day preacher, William Sloan-Coffin:

"True we have to hate evil; else we're sentimental. But if we hate evil more than we love the good, we become damn good haters, and of those the world already has too many. However deep, our anger, like that of Christ, must always and only measure our love."²

To this I can hear the Spirit's voice echoing across the centuries saying, “Amen!”

² William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2004), p. 20.