

Session Two:
The Letters to the Seven Churches—Part One

Revelation 2:1-29

Outline Reference: John Stott, *What Christ Thinks of the Church: An Exposition of Revelation 1-3*, Baker, 2003.



Figure 1: Mosaic of the Seven Angels St. Mark's Basilica Venice, Italy

To the church in Ephesus

2:1-7 ¹"To the angel¹ of the church in Ephesus write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: ²I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. ³You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. ⁴Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. ⁵Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. ⁶But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

The Letter to Ephesus: Love

1. The City of Ephesus
 - a. 60 Miles from Patmos
 - b. "the metropolis of Asia"
 - c. The Ionic temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.²

¹ Or messenger; also in verses 8, 12 and 18

² It was described by Antipater of Sidon, who compiled the list of the Seven Wonders: I have set eyes on the wall of lofty Babylon on which is a road for chariots, and the statue of Zeus by the Alpheus, and the hanging gardens, and the colossus of the Sun, and the huge labour of the high pyramids, and the vast tomb of Mausolus; but when I saw the house of Artemis that mounted to the clouds, those other marvels lost their brilliancy, and I said, "Lo, apart from Olympus, the Sun never looked on aught so grand".

2. Paul and Ephesus
 - a. Ministry Acts 16:6; 18:24
 - b. Riot Acts 19:21
 - c. Farewell Acts 20:7-38
 - d. Letter to the Ephesians
3. 1&2 Timothy and 1 John

A Commendation

1. The church at Ephesus exhibited three virtues as evaluated by the Lord Jesus (cf. Matt. 18:20):
 - a. The Church's Deeds (Hard Work)
 - b. The Church's Endurance
 - c. The Church's Orthodoxy
 1. Nicolaitans (p. 17)
 2. Warning: Acts 20:28-31; Eph. 4
 - d. A Pure Church³

A Complaint (Matt. 24:12)

1. God's Bride (Ezek. 16:8; Jer. 2:2; 2 Cor. 11:2,3; Ephesians 5)
2. First Love (Hosea 2:14-16; 19-20)⁴
3. Undying Love (Ephesians 6:24)
4. "The Greatest thing in the World" 1 Cor. 13

A Concluding Command

1. Remember
2. Repent
3. Resume
4. A Solemn Warning (v. 5)
5. A Promise to the Penitent (v.7)

³ A decade or two later, Ignatius of Antioch would write to them that their bishop, Onesimus, had praised them because "you all live according to truth, and no heresy dwells among you; in fact you will not even listen to anyone who does not speak about Jesus Christ in truth" (Ignatius, *To the Ephesians* 6.2). "I have learned," Ignatius added, "that some from elsewhere who have evil teaching stayed with you, but you did not allow them to sow it among you, and stopped your ears, so that you might not receive what they sow" (*To the Ephesians* 9.1)

⁴ Wilson Carlile, founder of Salvation Army said, "Jesus captured me. For me to know Jesus is a love affair."

To the Church in Smyrna

⁸"To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. ⁹I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.

The Letter to Smyrna: Suffering Revelation 2:8-11

- Smyrna
- “The pride of Asia”
- One of the Most Prosperous Cities in Asia Minor⁵
- Temple to *Dea Roma* “Goddess Rome”

The Sufferings they Endured for Christ

1. Christ and Caesar
2. Jewish Opposition⁶

What Form Did the Persecution take in Smyrna? How did the Christians Suffer?

1. Four Trials:

⁵ RH Charles

⁶ See Acts 13:45, 50; 14:2, 5, 19; 17:5-7; 18:5, 6; 21:27; 25:12; 28:17-28

- a. Poverty (1 Cor. 1:26, Heb. 10:34)
 - b. Slander
 - i. (John 8:44 “Father of Lies”)
 - ii. 1 Peter 2:23
 - iii. Fear of what others think, say or do to you. (v.10)
 - c. Prison
 - d. Death
2. The Death of Polycarp
 3. A Call to Suffer (Matt. 5:10-12; Luke 6:26; John 15:18, 20; 16:33)
 4. Hallmark of the Church
 - a. See 2 Cor. 11:23-27; 2 Tim 3:12; Phil 1:29
 - b. The Cost of Discipleship, Dietrich Bonhoffer⁷
 5. Compromise (Gal. 6:12)

The Comforts they received from Christ

1. He is Eternal v. 8 (cf 1:17)
2. He is Victorious v. 8 (1:18 Heb. 2:14, 15)
3. He is All Knowing v. 9
 - a. “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen, nobody knows but Jesus”⁸
4. He is Balanced v. 9 (2 Cor. 8:9)
5. He is in Control v. 10 (Job)
6. He is Purposeful v. 10 Luke 22:31; James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 1:7)
7. He is Generous v. 10, 11

⁷ “Suffering then is the Badge of the true Christian. The disciple is not above his master...Luther reckoned suffering among the marks of the true church...Discipleship means allegiance to the Suffering Christ, and it is not at all surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer.”

⁸ “Nobody Knows The Trouble I’ve Seen” is a traditional Black Gospel Song. The author is unknown.

8. To the Church in Pergamum

¹²“To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. ¹³I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives. ¹⁴Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. ¹⁵Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. ¹⁷He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.

The Letter to Pergamum: Truth

Revelation 2:12-17

Pergamum & The Imperial Cult

- **“A strong center of Paganism”**
 - Immense Altar to Zeus
 - Elegant Temple to Athena
- **29 BC Temple to Augustus – first provincial temple to a living emperor.**

Christ’s Concern for Truth

1. Love and Truth
2. Does Truth Matter?

“Unity in essentials, liberty in non-essentials and charity in everything.”⁹

3. Truth about Christ v. 13
 - a. Antipas the Martyr
 - b. “Confess the Name” Eph. 1:20; Phil 2:9-11; 1 Cor. 12:3
4. Truth about Holiness
 - a. Nicolaitans and Balaamites (2 Pet. 2:15, Jude 11 Num. 25, 31:16
 - b. 1 John 2:4, 22; 1 Cor. 5:11)
5. Travesty of Truth
 - a. Gal. 5:1; Rom. 6:1; Jude 4

Christ’s Recognition of the Source of Error

1. Satan’s Overthrow
2. A Dark Place

Christ’s Resolve that Truth shall Triumph over Error

1. The double-edged Sword v. 16 (Eph 6:17; Heb 4:12)
2. Message of Judgment (Num 31:8; Josh 13:12; John 12:47, 48)
3. Hidden Manna (Ex 16:32-34; Heb. 9:4; John 6:31-35, 48-51)
4. The White Stone
5. The New Name

1 Tim. 6:20; Jude 3

⁹ Rupert Meldenius 17th Century

Maps of the Seven Churches¹⁰



¹⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Seven_churches_of_asia.svg

Where are they now? The Seven Churches and Modern Day Turkey¹¹

Ancient Name (Modern Name)	Revelation Message	The Modern City	Related Sites
Ephesus (Ephesus or Efes)	Ephesus receives praise for its perseverance, but criticism for forsaking its "first love." (Rev. 2:1-7)	Ephesus is a major tourist destination and main stop for cruise lines due to its extensive archaeological ruins.	Basilica of St. John Ephesus Museum Great Theater
Smyrna (Izmir)	Smyrna's message speaks of false Jews and impending persecution, but encourages perseverance which will be rewarded. (Rev. 2:8-11)	Izmir is the 3rd largest city in Turkey, with 2.5 million people. It is known as the "Pearl of the Aegean" and is one of Turkey's most Westernized cities.	St. Polycarp Church Archaeological Museum Izmir Agora
Pergamum (Bergama)	Pergamum, described as having the throne of Satan (the Zeus altar?), is praised for its martyrdom and perseverance but those who hold false teachings are criticized. (Rev. 2:12-17)	Bergama is a small modern village overlooked by many tourists.	Archaeology Museum Red Basilica Zeus Altar (in Berlin Museum)
Thyatira (Akhisar)	Thyatira is praised for its increasing faith and service, but criticized for its tolerance of Jezebel, an immoral women who calls herself a prophetess. (Rev. 2:18-29)	The ruins of ancient Thyatira are in a fenced-off area in the center of modern Akhisar.	4th-6th cent. public buildings
Sardis	The church of Sardis is described as dead, and it must wake up. However, there are some who have not "soiled their clothes." (Rev. 3:1-6)	Sardis is about 50 miles east of Izmir, and is solely an archaeological site. A small village nearby is named Sart.	Sardis Synagogue Temple of Artemis Byzantine Church
Philadelphia (Alasehir)	Philadelphia is praised for having little strength but still persevering. Those who falsely claim to be Jews, but are actually of the "synagogue of Satan," will be judged. (Rev. 3:7-13)	Alasehir is a small town of about 40,000 people with narrow winding streets and a Byzantine wall. Few ruins remain at the site of ancient Philadelphia.	Byzantine Basilica
Laodicea (near Denizli)	The church of Laodicea is sharply criticized for being lukewarm. Its wealth hides its spiritual poverty. (Rev. 3:14-20)	Nearby Denizli is an attractive market town with a population of about 200,000. Laodicea is solely an archaeological site.	Stadium Sarcophagi

¹¹ Table from <http://www.sacred-destinations.com/turkey/seven-churches-of-revelation.htm>

Question: "Who are the Nicolaitans mentioned in Revelation 2:6, 14-15?"¹²

Answer: The exact origin of the Nicolaitans is unclear. Some Bible commentators believe they were a heretical sect who followed the teachings of Nicolas—whose name means “one who conquers the people”—who was possibly one of the deacons of the early church mentioned in Acts 6:5. It is possible that Nicolas became an apostate, denying the true faith and became part of a group holding "the doctrine of Balaam," who taught Israel "to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality." Clement of Alexander says, “They abandoned themselves to pleasure like goats, leading a life of self-indulgence.” Their teaching perverted grace and replaced liberty with license.

Other commentators believe that these Nicolaitans were not so-called from any man, but from the Greek word *Nicolah* meaning "let us eat," as they often encouraged each other to eat things offered to idols. Whichever theory is true, it is certain that the deeds of the Nicolaitans were an abomination to Christ. They, like the Gnostics and other false teachers, abused the doctrine of grace and tried to introduce licentiousness in its place (2 Peter 2:15, 19; Jude 1:4).

Jesus commends the church of Ephesus for hating the deeds of the Nicolaitans as He does (Revelation 2:6). No doubt the leaders of the Ephesian church protected their flock from these destructive heresies and kept them from committing the same evil deeds. All sin is hateful to Christ as it should be to His followers, as we hate men’s evil deeds, not the men themselves. To the church at Pergamos, He had not commendation, but censure. Unlike the Ephesians, they actually embraced the teachings of the Nicolaitans (Revelation 2:15). Jesus warns them that unless they repent, they are in danger of the judgment that is sure to fall on those who teach false doctrine, attack His church, and destroy His people. The sword of judgment is poised over their heads and His patience is not limitless (Revelation 2:16, 19:15).

The lesson for us is that the church of the Lord Jesus throughout the ages has been plagued by those of the Nicolaitan spirit. The only way to recognize false teaching is to be intimately familiar with truth through the diligent study of the Word of God.

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¹² www.GotQuestions.org

The Martyrdom of Polycarp

CHAPTER IX -- POLYCARP REFUSES TO REVILE CHRIST.

Now, as Polycarp was entering into the stadium, there came to him a voice from heaven, saying, "Be strong, and show thyself a man, O Polycarp !" No one saw who it was that spoke to him; but those of our brethren who were present heard the voice. And as he was brought forward, the tumult became great when they heard that Polycarp was taken. And when he came near, the proconsul asked him whether he was Polycarp. On his confessing that he was, [the proconsul] sought to persuade him to deny [Christ], saying, "Have respect to thy old age," and other similar things, according to their custom, [such as], "Swear by the fortune of Caesar; repent, and say, Away with the Atheists." But Polycarp, gazing with a stern countenance on all the multitude of the wicked heathen then in the stadium, and waving his hand towards them, while with groans he looked up to heaven, said, "Away with the Atheists." Then, the proconsul urging him, and saying, "Swear, and I will set thee at liberty, reproach Christ;" Polycarp declared, "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?"

CHAPTER X -- POLYCARP CONFESSES HIMSELF A CHRISTIAN.

And when the proconsul yet again pressed him, and said, "Swear by the fortune of Caesar," he answered, "Since thou art vainly urgent that, as thou sayest, I should swear by the fortune of Caesar, and pretendest not to know who and what I am, hear me declare with boldness, I am a Christian. And if you wish to learn what the doctrines of Christianity are, appoint me a day, and thou shalt hear them." The proconsul replied, "Persuade the people." But Polycarp said, "To thee I have thought it right to offer an

account [of my faith]; for we are taught to give all due honour (which entails no injury upon ourselves) to the powers and authorities which are ordained of God. But as for these, I do not deem them worthy of receiving any account from me."

CHAPTER XI -- NO THREATS HAVE ANY EFFECT ON POLYCARP.

The proconsul then said to him, "I have wild beasts at hand; to these will I cast thee, except thou repent." But he answered, "Call them then, for we are not accustomed to repent of what is good in order to adopt that which is evil; and it is well for me to be changed from what is evil to what is righteous." But again the proconsul said to him, "I will cause thee to be consumed by fire, seeing thou despisest the wild beasts, if thou wilt not repent." But Polycarp said, "Thou threatenest me with fire which burneth for an hour, and after a little is extinguished, but art ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. But why tarriest thou? Bring forth what thou wilt."

CHAPTER XII -- POLYCARP IS SENTENCED TO BE BURNED.

While he spoke these and many other like things, he was filled with confidence and joy, and his countenance was full of grace, so that not merely did it not fall as if troubled by the things said to him, but, on the contrary, the proconsul was astonished, and sent his herald to proclaim in the midst of the stadium thrice, "Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian." This proclamation having been made by the herald, the whole multitude both of the heathen and Jews, who dwelt at Smyrna, cried out with uncontrollable fury, and in a loud voice, "This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, and the overthrower

of our gods, he who has been teaching many not to sacrifice, or to worship the gods." Speaking thus, they cried out, and besought Philip the Asiarch to let loose a lion upon Polycarp. But Philip answered that it was not lawful for him to do so, seeing the shows of wild beasts were already finished. Then it seemed good to them to cry out with one consent, that Polycarp should be burnt alive. For thus it behooved the vision which was revealed to him in regard to his pillow to be fulfilled, when, seeing it on fire as he was praying, he turned about and said prophetically to the faithful that were with him, "I must be burnt alive."

CHAPTER XIII -- THE FUNERAL PILE IS ERECTED,

This, then, was carried into effect with greater speed than it was spoken, the multitudes immediately gathering together wood and fagots out of the shops and baths; the Jews especially, according to custom, eagerly assisting them in it. And when the funeral pile was ready, Polycarp, laying aside all his garments, and loosing his girdle, sought also to take off his sandals,--a thing he was not accustomed to do, inasmuch as every one of the faithful was always eager who should first touch his skin. For, on account of his holy life, he was, even before his martyrdom, adorned with every kind of good. Immediately then they surrounded him with those substances which had been prepared for the funeral pile. But when they were about also to fix him with nails, he said, "Leave me as I am; for He that giveth me strength to endure the fire, will also enable me, without your securing me by nails, to remain without moving in the pile."

CHAPTER XIV -- THE PRAYER OF POLYCARP.

They did not nail him then, but simply bound him. And he, placing his hands behind him, and being bound like a distinguished ram [taken] out of a great

flock for sacrifice, and prepared to be an acceptable burnt-offering unto God, looked up to heaven, and said, "O Lord God Almighty, the Father of thy beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, by whom we have received the knowledge of Thee, the God of angels and powers, and of every creature, and of the whole race of the righteous who live before thee, I give Thee thanks that Thou hast counted me, worthy of this day and this hour, that I should have a part in the number of Thy martyrs, in the cup of thy Christ, to the resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and body, through the incorruption [imparted] by the Holy Ghost. Among whom may I be accepted this day before Thee as a fat and acceptable sacrifice, according as Thou, the ever-truthful God, hast fore-ordained, hast revealed beforehand to me, and now hast fulfilled. Wherefore also I praise Thee for all things, I bless Thee, I glorify Thee, along with the everlasting and heavenly Jesus Christ, Thy beloved Son, with whom, to Thee, and the Holy Ghost, be glory both now and to all coming ages. Amen."

CHAPTER XV -- POLYCARP IS NOT INJURED BY THE FIRE.

When he had pronounced this amen, and so finished his prayer, those who were appointed for the purpose kindled the fire. And as the flame blazed forth in great fury, we, to whom it was given to witness it, beheld a great miracle, and have been preserved that we might report to others what then took place. For the fire, shaping itself into the form of an arch, like the sail of a ship when filled with the wind, encompassed as by a circle the body of the martyr. And he appeared within not like flesh which is burnt, but as bread that is baked, or as gold and silver glowing in a furnace. Moreover, we perceived such a sweet odour [coming from the pile], as if frankincense or some such precious spices had been smoking there.

CHAPTER XVI -- POLYCARP IS PIERCED BY A DAGGER.

At length, when those wicked men perceived that his body could not be consumed by the fire, they commanded an executioner to go near and pierce him through with a dagger. And on his doing this, there came forth a dove, and a great quantity of blood, so that the fire was extinguished; and all the people wondered that there should be such a difference between the unbelievers and the elect, of whom this most admirable Polycarp was one, having in our own times been an apostolic and prophetic teacher, and bishop of the Catholic Church which is in Smyrna. For every word that went out of his mouth either has been or shall yet be accomplished.

CHAPTER XVII -- THE CHRISTIANS ARE REFUSED POLYCARP'S BODY.

But when the adversary of the race of the righteous, the envious, malicious, and wicked one, perceived the impressive nature of his martyrdom, and [considered] the blameless life he had led from the beginning, and how he was now crowned with the wreath of immortality, having beyond dispute received his reward, he did his utmost that not the least memorial of him should be taken away by us, although many desired to do this, and to become possessors of his holy flesh. For this end he suggested it to Nicetes, the father of Herod and brother of Alce, to go and entreat the governor not to give up his body to be buried, "lest," said he, "forsaking Him that was crucified, they begin to worship this one." This he said at the suggestion and urgent persuasion of the Jews, who also watched us, as we sought to take him out of the fire, being ignorant of this, that it is neither possible for us ever to forsake Christ, who suffered for the salvation of such as shall be saved throughout the whole world (the blameless one for sinners), nor to worship any other. For Him indeed, as being the Son of God, we adore; but the martyrs, as disciples and

followers of the Lord, we worthily love on account of their extraordinary affection towards their own King and Master, of whom may we also be made companions and fellow-disciples!

CHAPTER XVIII -- THE BODY OF POLYCARP IS BURNED.

The centurion then, seeing the strife excited by the Jews, placed the body in the midst of the fire, and consumed it. Accordingly, we afterwards took up his bones, as being more precious than the most exquisite jewels, and more purified than gold, and deposited them in a fitting place, whither, being gathered together, as opportunity is allowed us, with joy and rejoicing, the Lord shall grant us to celebrate the anniversary of his martyrdom, both in memory of those who have already finished their course, and for the exercising and preparation of those yet to walk in their steps.

CHAPTER XIX -- PRAISE OF THE MARTYR POLYCARP.

This, then, is the account of the blessed Polycarp, who, being the twelfth that was martyred in Smyrna (reckoning those also of Philadelphia), yet occupies a place of his own in the memory of all men, insomuch that he is everywhere spoken of by the heathen themselves. He was not merely an illustrious teacher, but also a pre-eminent martyr, whose martyrdom all desire to imitate, as having been altogether consistent with the Gospel of Christ. For, having through patience overcome the unjust governor, and thus acquired the crown of immortality, he now, with the apostles and all the righteous[in heaven], rejoicingly glorifies God, even the Father, and blesses our Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour of our souls, the Governor of our bodies, and the Shepherd of the Catholic Church throughout the world.