

The Seven Churches of Revelation (Conclusion)
Revelation 2-3; Ephesians 4:1-16 (NIV)
“Let’s Build up The Church”

Introduction

Over the past several weeks we have examined the seven churches of Revelation. We have seen a church that was so strict in their doctrine that they forgot to love (Ephesus), and another church so focused upon loving that they neglected the teaching of sound doctrine (Thyatira). We have seen a church that was just going through the motions with no spiritual fire (Sardis), and we have examined the Church of Laodicea, whose members were very wealthy and self confident about their standing before Christ, but were, in fact, sickening to Him. We have also seen churches like Smyrna and Philadelphia, who were considered to be weak and helpless, and yet, they were true followers of Christ allowing His strength to shine through their frailty. The seven churches of Revelation have given us tremendous insight into what Jesus desires in His Church today. We must then, accordingly, examine our own hearts and motives, striving to become the kind of church that Christ expects us to be here at Freedom. After all, this is HIS church, and He alone has the right to judge whether or not our deeds are pleasing to Him.

Many *Bible* scholars have said that the seven churches of Revelation were not only real churches in John’s day, but they also represent seven different eras of the church age. Ephesus, then, would represent The Church from A.D. 33-100. The first century Church slowly began to fall away (the word *Ephesus* actually means “to let go”) from its love for Christ, replacing it with legalism. Smyrna was the suffering church and would truly be a good representation of the torturous persecution that The Church endured from A.D. 100-300, under Roman Emperors Nero and Diocletian. The third church age would be well represented by Pergamum, who allowed false doctrine to be married (Pergamum actually means “marriage”) into the teachings of Christ. From A.D. 300-500, this was exactly what happened to the church as Roman-Catholicism commingled pagan doctrines into the church to allow for the co-existence of The Church and the rest of Roman culture. Thyatira represents the continuation of this trend as Roman Catholicism introduced even more false doctrines into the Church, which included the worship of Mary and the conversion of pagan religious idols into celebrated church “saints”. As a result, the church began to bow down to graven images and worship Mary as a deity. These things occurred during the “Dark Ages” A.D. 500-1500.

After many centuries of paganism becoming part of The Church, from A.D. 1500-1700 the Church was, for all intents and purposes, quite dead (Sardis), and was in desperate need of revival. During this dark period of time, a real effort was made by devoted followers of Christ, such as Martin Luther and many others, to wake up the church and have it return to its original glorious doctrine of salvation by grace through faith. The scriptures were translated into languages that the people could read and therefore, have the Word of God for themselves. The stage was finally set for a revival of the church. This revival (represented by the church at Philadelphia) happened in A.D. 1700-1900, when pulpits around the globe were once again set afire for the gospel of Jesus Christ. The fresh wind of The Holy Spirit breathed life back into The Church and gave rise to many great preachers such as Taylor, Wesley, Finney, Whitfield, Spurgeon, and D.L. Moody. This era of revival has been unprecedented in the age of the church, and the gospel message was indeed taken into all the world, which brings us to the modern church age 1900-Present Day (represented by Laodicea). There could not be a better word to describe the church age in which we are currently living than “lukewarm”. Just like Laodicea, we look around at our nice homes, nice jobs, and beautifully adorned churches and convince ourselves that we are doing just fine. People are content with just a little “religion” to round out their busy lives. Oh, they try to “be good” and follow most of the Christian rules, but by and large, the Church today, especially in America, is devoid of any consuming fire. We have replaced being Spirit-filled and eager, with the need to be entertained by the music and wowed by the message of our preachers. The Church has become more about the show, than about worshipping in truth and in spirit. We think we are doing well, but sadly, Christ will one day judge us otherwise. Lukewarm churches make Him sick (***Revelation 3:16***). We need to get back to the basics of doing church, when it was about loving Christ and the spreading of His gospel.

If the Church is to be all that Christ intended, we need to get to work. ***Ephesians 4*** tells us that we are to be about “Building Up” The Body of Christ. The purpose of The Church is to make disciples.

Disciples are to be taught and trained, so that they will one day become leaders who make more disciples, and the cycle continues. If we are to become the kind of church that Jesus will be pleased to call His own, then we must, under the direction of His Holy Spirit, “build up the church”. We must Build it in *HUMILITY, MEEKNESS, PATIENCE, PRAYER*, and in the *TEACHING* of sound doctrine, never forgetting to LOVE Christ, as well as, those whom He loves. The purpose of every Christian leader is to work diligently, so that every disciple finishes “ahead” of him. Jesus said that the greatest in His kingdom would be the one who routinely puts himself in last place (**Matthew 26:16**). Imagine a church where everyone there was striving to help others to become greater than themselves. That is the kind of church that we have been commanded to build here at Freedom. So let’s start BUILDING IT!

Built in HUMILITY

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope, when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says:

**“When He ascended on high,
He took many captives
and gave gifts to His people.”**

(What does “he ascended” mean except that He also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very One Who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) So Christ Himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip His people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of Him Who is the head, that is, Christ. From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. Ephesians 4:1-16

Paul began this portion (**Chapter 4:1-16**) of his letter to the church at Ephesus by reminding them that he has been imprisoned for his faith in Christ. I think that is a pretty good way of setting up what he is about to ask them to do. Juxtaposed against being imprisoned, what Paul is asking of them isn't very hard at all. I mean, he just wanted them to be unified. Some people are harder to get along with than others. Have you noticed? But Christ went to the cross to bring us together as ONE (**John 17:21**). It may be difficult. It may even seem impossible at times, but compared to prison, or a cross, I'd say that it's pretty doable. How about you? Paul reminds us that we are to live a life worthy of our calling (**vs. 1**). Simply put, this means that since Jesus DIED for us, then the least that we can do is to LIVE for Him.

When we look closely at this passage of scripture from verse one to sixteen, it is about one thing and one thing only; building up The Church of Jesus Christ in the complete unity of agape love (**vss. 3,13,15-16**). The Church is the Body of Christ, and there can be no schism within the body. When we get sick (physically), we go to great lengths to get well. We go see doctors. We take medicine. We simply do whatever it takes to heal ourselves. When I hit my finger with a hammer (Yes. It has happened many times), I don't just cut it off. I bandage it and try to get it to heal. The same should be true of the body of Christ. We don't have “expendable parts” (**1 Corinthians 12:20-22**), but rather, each part of the church has been assembled by the grace of God (**vs. 7**). Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to honor Christ by

honoring those that He places within the church. Will this always be easy? No, but in view of what Christ has done for us, it isn't too much for Him to ask.

So how on earth can we learn to treat each other the way that God intends? Paul actually tells us how in **verses 2 and 3**. It all starts with HUMILITY. In Paul's day, neither the Greeks, nor the Romans, had a word for humility. To their culture, the concept of thinking less of oneself was offensive. They believed, much like the world today, that the only way for one to achieve his own potential was to have a certain swagger about them. Humility, in a culture such as theirs, was considered weakness. Paul actually combines two Greek words here to make his point. The word Paul uses for humility in **verse two** is *tapeinophrosyne*, which literally means to be "low-minded"; to think of oneself as lowly. While this may have been an undesirable quality in Greco-Roman culture, it is, in fact, the very first step in becoming a child of God. Jesus said in His sermon on the mount; **"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matthew 5:3)**. Most people do not realize that this famous section of His sermon, commonly called "The Beatitudes", is actually a progression describing what happens when a person is born again. It ALWAYS starts with a broken spirit. No proud person ever found God's forgiveness, **for He resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble (James 4:6)**. You cannot be saved without first humbling yourself before God! There comes a point, when each of us must come to grips with just what miserable, wretched sinners we truly are, and then fall to our knees to beg for God's mercy. THEN, and only then, can Jesus make a real change in our lives. He begins a work of GRACE within us. Grace is undeserved. So, whatever good thing happens in us, it is purely because of Him and has nothing to do with us at all! To be humble is to realize that without Him, I am nothing.

Without humility, we will never truly be able to build up others within the church. Pride wants to keep people down, but humility wants to build them up. Have you ever truly seen Jesus for who He is and yourself for who you are not? Trust me. When this happens, you won't have the desire to exalt yourself. When we realize that our spiritual gifts were given us simply by the grace of God (**vs. 7-13**) for the building up of The Church, and when we realize that **apart from Christ we can do nothing (John 15:5)**, then the appropriate response is a desire to see everyone included in His grace, to see everyone excelling within the church, to see the church being "built up"! **Philippians 2:3** (one of my all time favorite verses) says this, **"Let nothing be done in strife or vain glory, but in lowliness of mind (tapeinophrosyne), let each esteem others better than themselves"**. Anyone who has truly kneeled at the foot of the cross understands this concept: "I am a sinner saved by grace, therefore LORD, what would you have me to do?" The prophet Isaiah, when he fell down before the LORD in His holy temple, proclaimed, **"I am ruined" (Isaiah 6:5)**. Isaiah then received the grace and forgiveness of God, and his response was, **"Here am I (Lord), send me (6:8)"**. Christ has called each of us to do our part in the "building up" of His church, and we can only do that in true humility.

Built in MEEKNESS (Gentleness)

Paul continues by saying that we are to build up the church in meekness (gentleness). The word actually means "*strength under control*". It does NOT mean weakness. The best definition that I can give for meekness is what happens as a result of breaking a horse to ride. I used to raise and train horses (in my younger days), and one thing is for certain; a "broken horse" never loses its strength. It simply yields it over to its master. The horse is just as strong as it ever was. It just allows its trainer/rider to take control of it. When we, in humility, yield ourselves to Christ, He becomes our master. We are just as capable of being our uncontrollable, unbroken, old selves as we ever were, but rather than act upon our own foolish impulses, we allow Christ to lead us where He wants us to go. The process begins with humility, and humility leads us to the conclusion that we are not capable of doing what is right and good in and of ourselves. Therefore, we must hand over the control of our lives to someone far more capable. In short, we need a Master, and His name is Jesus. Before we can adequately build up the body of Christ, we must first yield to Him total control over our lives; over our thoughts and over our actions. This is what it means to be meek.

The believer who refuses to yield up his will to The Savior will never be able to help other believers become all that they can be. A person who acts on their own natural (sinful) impulses will always put self above others. This is called "human nature", and it is the very antithesis of Christian

living. Jesus emptied himself of all His divine rights and privileges to make himself nothing (humility), and then He surrendered his own desires of self preservation to obey his Father's will and die upon a cross for our sins (meekness). He never once became any less powerful. He never once became any less GOD. But, He made Himself nothing and accepted God's plan for his life (***Philippians 2:5-8***). Because of this, He was able to build us up! He rescued us and set us upon the path that leads to righteousness. He gave all that He had so that we could be better. If we are to really make a difference in the lives of others, then we must humbly yield ourselves to God and to His plan. Then, and only then, can we build up the church. We will build it in meekness.

Built in PATIENCE

The word Paul uses here for patience actually means *long suffering*. Another way of saying it is... rather than having a "short fuse" on your temper, you have a longggggg fuse! Simply put, you don't lose your patience when dealing with, shall we say, the "less than nice" people, who are immature in their faith. One of the hardest things for me to learn in my early days of ministry was that lost people ACT like lost people, and baby Christians ACT like baby Christians. It is impossible to build up the church when we have no patience with those who want to become part of that church. Do you want to see a pastor get frustrated? Watch him work tirelessly to build up, to be inclusive, to encourage people to serve, only to see supposedly "mature" believers in the body treat these newcomers with disdain and discourage them until they retreat from service. It is cancerous for a church to have people in leadership who think it is their God-given right to "weed out" those whom they consider to be the undesirables. Our job is to BUILD UP those who are weaker in the faith, not to tear them down. When people make mistakes, do all that you can to correct them in love. Help them to understand that you are trying to make them better, and not bitter. Be an encourager. The Holy Spirit is called the "Encourager" in scripture, while Satan is known as "the accuser". So, I guess it all depends on which of those two "spirits" are really in control, when it comes to how we respond to the weaknesses of our brothers and sisters in Christ. A mature Christian, who is HUMBLED before God, who has yielded himself up in MEEKNESS to The Savior's control, will be PATIENT in his dealing with others in The Body. Simple as that. We don't "beat up". We build up.

Built in PRAYER, TEACHING, and LOVE

Paul goes on to say that with patience we "***bear with one another in love***" (***vs. 2***). The word used there for "*bearing*" actually means to "*put up with*" those who are difficult. Paul is forewarning us that some folks in the church will be harder to deal with than others. Can I get a witness?!! And just how are we to deal with those folks? By "putting up with them" in agape love. That is the love that only God can give. It is the same love that drove His only Son to the cross for a world of people who didn't deserve it in the least. That means us. If this realization doesn't humble us, then nothing will. Jesus died to give us grace (***vs. 7***). Grace (*Charis* in the Greek) is simply getting something that you do not deserve. God's grace was given freely upon calvary's cross to a people who had done nothing to earn it. If God, can give us such amazing grace, then we, who claim that He is living within us, ought to be able to show that same grace to others, when they have not earned it as well.

Jesus gave His life so that The Church would be built up in unity (***vs. 3***). We are instructed here to make every effort, make it our life's work and study, to promote this unity in the body of Christ. Paul goes on to describe that Jesus came down from Heaven, died upon a cross, and descended into hell to deliver us from bondage and give us this unity (***vs. 7-10***). Paul is actually referring to the three days that Jesus spent in the grave, when He actually descended into hell to allow the wicked to see that they had "bet on the wrong horse" as it were. There He proclaimed His victory over sin and the grave. He set the faithful captives free! There is a deep theological truth in what actually occurred during this time period, but that discussion is for another day. Suffice to say for now that Christ put Himself through hell in order for you to be built up.

As a result of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, his followers were given "grace gifts" (spiritual gifts - *charismata* in the Greek). And what was the purpose of these gifts given to the church

(vs. 11-16)? For the “building up” of The Church. We all, as Christians, have been given spiritual gifts. My gifts are different from yours, and yours from mine, but they are to be used in conjunction to build up the body of Christ. We are required to use our gifts to help others develop their gifts, working in unity to make disciples, teaching them sound doctrine so they will be firmly rooted in their faith. When this is done correctly, as we speak the **“truth in love” (vs. 15)**, then the church will grow stronger and stronger, with a solid foundation of doctrine and held together with the unbreakable bond of agape love **(vs. 16)**.

The 1st Century church knew full well that they would never be able to live up to the standards that Christ demanded from them, apart from His leading. Therefore, they adhered themselves to three things that were vital to every church’s wellbeing. The Book of Acts tells us:

They devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. Acts 2:42

And as a result of these things (prayer, teaching and love), the church was growing in strength and in numbers, for this is how a “Spirit-Filled” church must function in order to survive.

But just as people are often given to do, the early church drifted away from these great disciplines and began to replace them with rigid legalism, becoming more religious and less loving. They became less dependent upon God and more focused upon their own self-righteousness. Then with no solid foundation based in prayer or sound teachings, false doctrines began to infiltrate. The church began to tolerate things that were detestable to God. And as a result, the downward spiral of the church began and continued through the ages, only briefly interrupted by just a few short periods of genuine revival. For many years, the Church was sterile and ineffective.

We have been set apart by Christ to be both holy **and** loving; to live in accordance with the commands of Christ as we love Him with all our heart, mind, and soul, and also loving our neighbors as ourselves. Religion without love, sound doctrine, and prayer will always devolve into emptiness. We too, like the Church at Ephesus, must be reminded to adhere to our “first love”, fanning the flames of fervent devotion to our LORD, and allowing Him to love others through us. Let it be said of us that we loved well and were found to be devoted to prayer always seeking His guidance, and committed to sound teaching. Let us be a church that lives up to the standards set by Christ Himself. If He were to evaluate us this day, what would He have to say about our church? My prayer is that He would find us faithful! Anyone can tear down others to make themselves appear larger, but would you be willing to make yourself less in order to build up the church?

Let us make disciples in Humility, Meekness, and Patience, being grounded in Prayer, Teaching, and Love.

Truth!

The Church Through The Ages

The seven churches are also representative of the seven church ages that have taken place in church history.

1) Ephesus - Lost Their First Love - A.D. 33-100

The Post Apostolic Church Love for Christ began fading, with dead works taking its place.

2) Smyrna - Suffering church - A.D. 100-300

The church was brutally persecuted through this church age.

3) Pergamum - Pergamum means "marriage" - A.D. 300-500 "The Doctrine of Balaam"

This is the church age when the church compromised with Rome under Emperor Constantine and continued for 200 years. The Roman Catholic church was born. Pagan temples became "churches" and heathen priests became clergy.

4) Thyatira - Adulterous church - "That Woman Jezebel" - A.D. 500-1500

The church through the dark ages brought idolatry to the church. Idols of various saints, angels and the virgin Mary were worshipped.

5) Sardis - The Dead Church - A.D. 1500-1700

The church had become so lifeless and intolerable that Martin Luther walked away and the Protestant Reformation began. Out of this "dead" era, a new revival was coming.

6) Philadelphia - "An Open Door" - A.D. 1700-1900

Age of revival and missionary expansion; Hudson Taylor, John Wesley, Charles Fining, George Whitfield, Charles Haden Spurgeon, and D.L. Moody were some of the fiery preachers who came from this era. The gospel was spread like never before.

7) Laodicea - A.D. 1900-Present - Lukewarm

This is the best descriptions of the overall church today. Though a few pockets of "fire" remain. The condition of the church as a whole is lukewarm indeed. Jesus is coming soon. There are no more "church ages" left.