

STATE OF THE CHURCH
Revelation 2-3
By Raymond White

Self-evaluation is always a healthy thing. And in the church, self-evaluation simply means asking the simple question: “Are we what God wants us to be?” This question applies equally well to a church, a parish, a ward, any place where Christians meet in the name of Jesus.

In the Revelation, John writes God’s opinion of the seven churches in Asia. And God’s instructions to them apply equally well to us today.

[1] EPHEBUS: THE DISTRACTED CHURCH

Revelation 2:2 I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil, and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars. :3 And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name’s sake hast haboured, and hast not fainted. :4 Nevertheless, I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.

Ephesus looked like a really good church. They did everything right. They worked, they were patient, they resisted error — this was a busy church. So busy, busy, busy that they didn’t notice that they had a problem: they had left their “first love.” And what “first love” is that? For real Christians there is only one first love, and that is our love for Jesus Christ. Some Christians, it seems, are so busy doing that they’ve forgotten who they are doing it for.

[2] SMYRNA: THE SUFFERING CHURCH

Revelation 2:9 I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan. :10 Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: e thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life. :11 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death.

Smyrna, like Ephesus, also had good works, works that made the world mad but made God happy. The world gave them tribulation, poverty, and prison but God gave them a crown of life, free from any threat of the second death. Here’s the point: If you’re doing what God wants, you may draw fire from the world. But it is better to suffer the world’s ire than God’s. The world may hurt you, but not for very long. God’s judgment, however, is forever.

[3] PERGAMOS: THE WORLDLY CHURCH

Revelation 2:14 But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication.

What was the sin of Balaam? He accepted money from Balac to change his prophetic message. What was the sin of Pergamos? They preached for money, and accommodated their message to the highest bidder. Simply put, they were a bought church.

What is right and wrong? Well, it's whatever you want to be right and wrong, if you have enough money to buy influence. There are plenty of preachers in the world with feel-good messages who will gladly — for a price of course — ease your conscience about anything. “This is okay, that is okay. Whatever you want, it's okay. Just pay the preacher, the celebrity, the professor, the therapist, the politician, the whoever. Absolution is yours — for a price.” And that is the sin of Balaam, changing God's message for a price.

[4] THYATIRA: THE SINFUL CHURCH

Revelation 2:20 *Thou sufferest that woman Jezebel which calleth herself a prophetess to teach and seduce my servants to commit fornication.*

The church that tolerates sin in its midst is in sad shape. Paul faced the same problem in Greece. *1 Corinthians 5:1* *It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you...* and Paul dealt with it. Sooner or later there will be transgression in your church. The question is, will the leaders deal with it or just sort of ignore it. Whether a sin problem is widespread across a church nationally, or local in a community church, God demands purification, sin is not to be tolerated in his church. Maybe you'll complain, “But we're trying to grow the church. If we start kicking people out for sin, then the church will get smaller, not bigger.” Yes, growth is a good thing, but growth of a sin-tolerating church, that's not a good thing. We're trying to infuse righteousness and repentance into the world, not sin. Deal with it.

[5] SARDUS: THE DEAD CHURCH

Revelation 3:1 *...I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and are dead.*
:4 *Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy.*

The Sardus church was Christian in name only. They called themselves Christian but they were not. As a Christian church, they were simply dead. However, even there, there were true believers whom God had accepted. Salvation is an individual thing, individuals can rise above the failing of their church and transform their church into what God wants it to be. Dead, it seems, is not absolutely dead.

[6] PHILIDELPHIA: THE TRUE CHURCH

Revelation 3:8 *I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and has kept my word, and hast not denied my name.*

This church has an open door for everyone, keeps God's word, and firmly declares the name of Jesus Christ. This is what God wants every church to be.

[7] LAODICEA: THE INDIFFERENT CHURCH

Revelation 3:15 I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou were cold or hot. :16 So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.

Hot chocolate taste good and cold milk taste good. But when either drifts to room temperature, they are just kind of bland and make you gag, make you want to spit it out and start over. That's the picture that God paints here. The church that's just disinterested makes God what to spit it out. Maybe that's even worse than a bad church. At least with a bad church, there may be so energy that God has to work with.