

Christ Counsels the Church in Culture
Introduction to the Letters to the Seven Churches

Franklin Church of Christ Edwin Crozier January 15, 2006 PM Worship
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Introduction:

If I were to ask you what is the one thing that most causes problems in Christ's church, how would you respond? No doubt we could list numerous issues and different ones among us would point to different sources of problems. If asked this question, I believe I would have to say the greatest cause for problems in the church is the world. The world constantly beckons to the church trying to find some kind of middle ground, some common ground on which the church and the world can relate to one another and walk hand in hand. As churches respond to their culture, they take different approaches. Each church needs the counsel of Christ to learn the appropriate response. That is exactly what Jesus provided in the letters to the Asian churches found in **Revelation 2-3**. Each congregation provides a different example regarding how to respond to the cultural pull around us. Our goal as a congregation this year is to impact the world. With that in mind, I think it is important to learn to keep the world from impacting us inappropriately. Throughout this year we are going to occasionally take a look at each of these churches. In this lesson, we are going to take an introductory and overview look at these letters. Hopefully this will help us as we deal with each letter individually in lessons to come.

Discussion:

- I. Embattled churches: the churches in the **Revelation** context.
 - A. Sadly, we often take these letters out of their original context. We struggle to understand the rest of **Revelation**, but believe we have a good grasp of the seven letters. As such, we rarely consider why these letters are in this book. Why aren't they a separate book or seven separate books like the other epistles in the New Testament?
 - B. For all the disagreements about the book of **Revelation**. Nearly everyone is universally aware of its ultimate purpose. This book was written to let Christians know God wins the battle against Satan. Satan recruits the aid of the beast (ungodly government) and the false prophet (ungodly religion) and attacks the people of God. These seven letters are written because these churches are in that battle. Their members are part of Christ's kingdom, they are enduring the tribulation and they need to be encouraged to persevere (**Revelation 1:9**).
 - C. As we examine each church individually, this is the most important consideration. Each of these churches responded to their cultural battle differently. They represent the different approaches we might take to dealing with the world. Where we mirror each congregation's approach we need to heed Christ's counsel to each one.

- II. The Jesus who counsels.
 - A. Consider the description of the one who counsels these churches in **Revelation 1:12-20**. Clearly this is Jesus. **Revelation 1:18** says He is the living one who was dead and is now alive forevermore. The eyes of flaming fire and the two-edged sword coming from His mouth call to mind **Hebrews 4:12-13**. The gaze of the Jesus who counsels cannot be fooled. We may, like Sardis, fool men, but we cannot fool this Jesus who counsels us. His gaze burns away our deceptions and His word cuts us to the quick assessing not only our actions but even the thoughts and intention of our hearts. The voice of His word is like the sound of many waters. That is, His voice is powerful and overwhelming (**Psalms 93:4**).
 - B. His white head and hair and face shining brightly like the sun shining in its strength is a picture of His purity and holiness. This Jesus who counsels us, by sheer fact of perfect holiness after even living in this world has the right to counsel us, to call us to account and to issue rebukes and challenges. We who are steeped in sin do not even have the ability to gaze into His brilliantly shining face of holiness.
 - C. Jesus walks among the lampstands, that is, the churches, and He holds the stars in His right hand, that is, the angels of the churches. Jesus, though He has ascended to sit at the right hand of His Father in heaven, is not far away from His people. He walks among His churches witnessing their deeds. He holds each church's angel in His hand. There are multiple theories regarding these angels. Some suggest they are angels assigned to each congregation. Some suggest they refer to human messengers to the churches whether evangelists, bishops or sim-

ply those who will read this book to the churches in question. Still others suggest this is another figurative representation of the churches themselves. I believe I can come up with as many arguments in favor of each of these positions as I could opposed to each one. The important point for us to note is that Jesus is connected to His churches. He is not on high looking down. He is among us and sees.

- D. This draws us to the most important point of this description. Each letter begins with a personal description and then the words "I know..." (**Revelation 2:2, 9, 13, 19; 3:1, 8, 15**). Jesus sees us and knows us. We can hide nothing from Him. Therefore, He has the right to counsel us.

III. Sometimes congregations need to change.

- A. We live in a day and age in which everyone wants to be right. If you say some church is wrong, you will be immediately castigated as arrogant, unloving and mean. In the midst of this cultural mindset, the religious world tries to claim that everyone, despite all of their differences is right. This simply cannot be.
- B. If there is one lesson taught from these seven letters, it is that churches, at times, need to change. Five of these seven churches are charged by Jesus to repent, that is, rethink their state and change accordingly (**Revelation 2:5, 16, 21-22; 3: 3, 19**). Perhaps this point is too simple to be stated as a point all by itself. However, I think we have to recognize that churches can be wrong sometimes and churches need to change. This is important for us because we may look at these individual churches and find that we are right there with them. We may, in fact, be wrong. We may not be dealing with our culture and fighting the battle properly. In the end, we may learn we are called to repent. If so, what must we do?

IV. If we need to change, then we must change.

- A. If we read the counsel to these churches and find we are right there with them, then we must change. We must not fight it. We must not get mad at **Revelation**. We must not get mad at the preacher who is simply conveying the message. We must change.
- B. As John wrote to Ephesus, we will need to remember from where we have fallen and do the deeds we did at first (**Revelation 2:5**). As he wrote to Pergamum, we may need to remove the negative influences and erroneous teaching (**Revelation 2:14-16**). As he wrote to Thyatira, we may have to encourage various members to repent of their sins and immoralities while the rest hold on to what God has given us (**Revelation 2:21-23**). We may need to wake up and remember what we have been told by God and follow through with it (**Revelation 3:2-3**). Or we may need to turn to God for spiritual wealth, sight and purity, accepting His discipline, stepping up our zeal (**Revelation 3:18-19**). Granted we may find that we are not like the churches counseled to repent. But if we are, we must repent.

V. Rewards await us.

- A. How tempting it is to succumb to our culture. How tempting it is to just get along, throwing our hands up in the air and acting as if there is really nothing for us to do. However, we must keep in mind what is at stake. This is a battle, not a game. These churches were in a fight, as we are. God has promised great rewards if we overcome. If we learn from His counsel and excel we will be rewarded. As we face our culture, let us take the counsel of Christ and receive His reward.
- B. **Revelation 2:7**—eating of the tree of life in the paradise of God. **Revelation 2:11**—unhurt by the second death, which is hellfire (**Revelation 20:14**). **Revelation 2:17**—hidden manna, a white stone with a new name written on it. I believe a picture of spiritual strength, sustenance and permanence. **Revelation 2:26-28**—Authority and rule with Christ over the nations. **Revelation 3:5**—we will be clothed in white and Jesus will confess us before the Father. **Revelation 3:12**—made a permanent pillar in the temple of God. And **Revelations 3:21**—we will sit down on the throne of Jesus.
- C. What amazing rewards await us if we take Christ's counsel to these seven churches and overcome with Christ in the battle we face.

Conclusion:

I am excited about our upcoming look at these churches and I hope it is beneficial to us all, whatever we might learn from it.