

The Message to Ephesus

2 "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands:

²"I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false. ³I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary. ⁴But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. ⁶Yet this is to your credit: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.

The Message to Smyrna

⁸"And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of the first and the last, who was dead and came to life:

⁹"I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say that

they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death.

The Message to Pergamum

¹²“And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword:

¹³“I know where you are living, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you are holding fast to my name, and you did not deny your faith in me^[a] even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan lives. ¹⁴But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice fornication. ¹⁵So you also have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and make war against them with the sword of my mouth. ¹⁷Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.

The Message to Thyatira

¹⁸“And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These are the words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze:

¹⁹“I know your works—your love, faith, service, and patient endurance. I know that your last works are greater than the first. ²⁰But I have this against you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants^[b] to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols. ²¹I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her fornication. ²²Beware, I am throwing her on a bed, and those who commit adultery with her I am throwing into great distress, unless they repent of her doings; ²³and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve. ²⁴But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call ‘the deep things of Satan,’ to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden; ²⁵only hold fast to what you have until I come. ²⁶To everyone who conquers and continues to do my works to the end,

I will give authority over the nations;

²⁷to rule^[c] them with an iron rod,
as when clay pots are shattered—

²⁸even as I also received authority from my Father. To the one who conquers I will also give the morning star. ²⁹Let

anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

Revelation 3 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The Message to Sardis

3 "And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars:

"I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead.² Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God.³ Remember then what you received and heard; obey it, and repent. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. ⁴Yet you have still a few persons in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes; they will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. ⁵If you conquer, you will be clothed like them in white robes, and I will not blot your name out of the book of life; I will confess your name before my Father and before his angels.⁶ Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

The Message to Philadelphia

⁷"And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

These are the words of the holy one, the true one,
who has the key of David,

who opens and no one will shut,
who shuts and no one opens:

⁸“I know your works. Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. ⁹I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but are lying—I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. ¹⁰Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth. ¹¹I am coming soon; hold fast to what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. ¹²If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name. ¹³Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

The Message to Laodicea

¹⁴“And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin^[a] of God’s creation:

¹⁵“I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. ¹⁶So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷For you say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered,

and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. ¹⁸Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. ¹⁹I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. ²⁰Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. ²¹To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. ²²Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches."

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Revelation 2-3

“To the Seven Churches...”

I am always a bit skeptical of those who proclaim, “Jesus told me to say this.” Some of the current shenanigans going on in state legislative bodies who name Christianity as their moral guidepost concern me. It concerns me especially when what “Jesus told me to say” doesn’t sound anything remotely like the Biblical Jesus. When the rhetoric is more about hate than love, when it’s more about who is shunned than who is offered welcome, I wonder if they have really been listening to Jesus or to the nervous voices inside their own heads.

Initially, I started to feel the same way in reading how John of Patmos was called to speak to the seven churches of Asia. During his exile for being too radical of a Christian himself, he heard a trumpet blast and was told to write down everything that would come to him in a vision and then get word out to these particular churches along a cultural trade route in what is now modern Turkey. His admonitions seemed to me to be the same kind of moralistic code we hear every time religion gets trotted out to tame what is considered to be capitulation to the culture. He shamed them for loosening their sexual values. He told them to reinstate the food rules that would hold them together as a community. He blasted them for listening to false prophets and

following after idols. He encouraged them to risk their own lives for the sake of Jesus' message. It's better to be imprisoned or die than be found worshipping pagan gods like Balaam or Jezebel did. And then he claimed all these messages in the name of a sword-bearing, "angry as hell" Jesus.

It was all starting to sound too familiar. This isn't how I preach. This isn't a message I would choose to communicate. This is what I hate about how Christianity always comes off as so judgmental. What could possibly be going on here? How did this end up in the Bible? Is this an early instance of Jesus' name being used to shame people into religious submission? Religion does have a habit of operating in that way. And yet, Jesus preached freedom from sin, and a loosening of his own religion's stiff and unwieldy legalisms. But just a couple generations after his death, Jewish converts in the big city of Ephesus and its surrounding suburbs were losing sight of the vision. John must have known these churches well, and as I dug in a little deeper, I realized that perhaps he was preaching in a more compassionate way than my modern eyes were seeing it.

I don't look at biblical commentaries very often, but for this book of the Bible, it does help to have a greater insight into the historical context. Too often this book is read as a vision for some distant future. Apocalyptic literature is like that. It lends itself to reading into it what "could" happen in any generation. From leaders like Domitian or Nero about the time of this writing, to Popes and Emperors throughout

the Roman Empire up into the Reformation, and then the Superpowers and nationalistic interests today, the “bad guys” of this book get re-named for just about every generation.

But John wasn't writing for us, he was writing specifically to these seven churches. He says so. And his characterizations of the seven churches of Asia are written specifically to suit each of those locations' personalities. In Catherine and Justo Gonzalez's commentary on this book, they describe each of the cities according to their geography, and trade practices, and personalities of their time, and they mark how John seemed to know each of them so very well. For instance, the word to Laodicea, the one we know as the “lukewarm” congregation is an apt metaphor for this location known particularly by its particular shortcoming – good water. The Gonzalezes' commentary helped me with both geography and history on this one. The city to its southeast was Colossae, famous for its cool mineral springs. And to the North, you can see the ruins of Hierapolis and the white cliffs that are there due to the many mineral deposits and its medicinal hot springs. So between the cool refreshment of Colossae and the hot springs of Hieropolis is Laodicea, a city that received its water from pipelines coming from these two other towns, meeting there as something tepid and awful for drinking. John used their geography to say why they were the kind of congregation you wanted to “spit out of your mouth.” They were so

wealthy from their trade in luxury goods that they didn't need God anymore, and their lack of problems became their one true problem.

See, it helps to know this. Imagine if we were given a vision of our area, if we were going to describe Metropolitan Richmond, adding in Ashland, Short Pump, Midlothian, Petersburg, Hopewell, and Mechanicsville. Each one would have a different "angel" to guide it; each one would have different strengths and weaknesses. To apply general guidance to them together might not fit. Richmond is the hub – just as Ephesus was the main city, and all these smaller cities contributed to, and supported the work of this metropolitan area.

I don't know what that vision or that letter would look like, but I suspect that in it, Jesus would have compassion and love and kindness for the individual people, and yet a harsh word or two about the idols and mistaken priorities in each city. There are neighborhoods in our own metropolitan area that are so rich they don't think they need God, and there are neighborhoods that are so poor that they will do anything to make a living. We still struggle in our own time with maintaining the kind of relationships that hold families and communities together, and the kind where people end up feeling used and abused. We are continuing to create food deserts where your choices are either super-processed food at Walmart or exotic and expensive produce from Whole Foods. We've created our own food idols and inequalities. Funny how the categories don't change all that much, and that we can see one era as critical and

rigid, and fail to see our own need for reform, but even more importantly our own need for Jesus.

What I learned from reading this joint letter to the seven churches of Asia is that there are times when religious visionaries give different answers on morality to different locations and different people. The letters aren't the same, but they are shared so that each group might come closer to God and have their hope and faith renewed in Christ Jesus. That these letters are also personal and contextual tells me that we are all on our own journeys, and yes, we do need to think about how we treat one another in relation to economics, and sexuality, and physical needs, and spiritual understandings. There's not only one answer for all times and all places.

Maybe the sword bearing, star holding, manna providing, light carrying Jesus is exactly who we need him to be sometimes. And may our own critiques and congratulations also reflect the kind of deep love that cares for the places and people we know so well. We are indeed called to love our neighbors, and even to love our enemies in the circumstances we find them in. Amen.

Catherine Gunsalus Gonzalez and Justo Luis Gonzalez. Revelation: Westminster Bible Companion Series. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1997.

