

Revelation 1-3: Prologue, Letters to Seven Churches

Let us take a look at Revelation 1, the vision of Christ and the seven churches. I will take you briefly through the prologue of the book. It says that “this is the revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to show His servants what must soon take place.” We receive it through John who testifies to what he saw and he blesses all who read the words of his prophesy because the time is near. There we see my idealist theme of blessing all who read the book. Then he gives greetings in Revelation 1:4-8 to seven churches. He is writing to seven real churches and he greets them with grace and peace from Christ. Not only does he greet them, but he tells them a few things about themselves. He speaks to them as his fellow sufferers. In Revelation 1:9 he says, “I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Christ Jesus.” He has words of encouragement. He says in Revelation 1:6 that Jesus “has made us into the kingdom and priests to serve His God and Father—to Him be glory forever and ever.” He tells us in verse 7 that the Christ is coming, and He is going to bring sorrow to those who pierced Him. Then he tells us in verse 9 that they need to patiently endure for the coming of that kingdom that is ours. He tells them in essence that in this life, our lot is suffering and glory. That is a familiar theme throughout the whole New Testament, suffering and glory, suffering and decay, and the wiles of the devil. But there is a seal on us that limits what we are going to suffer, he tells us. Satan does have power in his anger to cause the church misery, but there is also glory.

The book of Revelation says, as does the New Testament several times, that Christians are kings. They are possessors of the kingdom, and every believer is a king and reigns with Christ. As Revelation 1:5-6 says, He “loves us and has freed us from our sins and made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve God.” In chapter 2, verse 26, he says the same thing. “To him who overcomes and does my will, I will give him authority over the nations and he will rule them with an iron scepter.” Now that activity is applied to Jesus in Psalm 2 and Revelation 12. But he says here that even a Christian will have all authority and will rule the nations with an iron scepter. Revelation 5:9-10 says something similar. It says that Jesus is worthy to open the scroll because He purchased men for God from every tribe, language, people, and nation and has made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God and they will reign on the earth.

I want you to believe that this theme is to be found elsewhere. In Romans we are called more than conquerors. In 1 Peter we are told that even in the midst of your troubles, your persecutions, and your sorrows in life, you do reign with Christ now. If you are in a certain mood, you may laugh at that. You say, “Reign with Christ? I cannot even reign over my car. How can I reign with Christ when my telephone reigns over me with the tyranny of its jangling calls? How can I reign? Look at the weeds in my yard.” But no, Christ does call us really to reign over our cars, over our yards, over our work, over our family, and over our clock. He does not say that you *should* reign, but that you *do* reign—we *are* a kingdom of priests. That is our true nature. And when we think, “Well, the Lord saved my soul and the rest of it is out of control,” that is not biblical thinking. The Lord wants us to reign for Him and if the domain of our reign is small, then that is fine. But whatever reign we have, in whatever domain we exercise our governance of our world, we should take it seriously and seek to reign under Christ for His sake. Do you believe that? I gave you a few verses that indicate that is indeed what a Christian should do.

How should a Christian reign? It is never easy to answer this question. Think about John on the Island of Patmos, which was a prison colony where laborers worked themselves to death in the mines. There are different reports from ancient church history about the mines but it is agreed that when people went to Patmos, they usually died within a few years after that. How could John say he reigns from Patmos? In fact, that is almost a perfect illustration of reigning even as one suffers, because he reigned by governing

the churches. He was able to write them letters. He received visions from Christ that he was able to portray to the church, the seven specific churches, and all others throughout history. It is easy to lose sight of this reality in the midst of our daily tasks, inertia, opposition, sin, lethargy and persecution. But God finds a way that we should reign. That is the point of the overture or the prologue or the preliminary message of Revelation.

The first vision of Revelation is the vision of Christ. If you are the kind of a person who likes to do things this way, you might want to close your eyes and envision what I am going to read to you over the next moment or two. John says,

I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lamp stands, and among the lamp stands was someone 'like a son of man,' dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: 'Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.'

Let us attempt to detect the symbolic value of this passage. Let us start with the very first image, "When I turned, I saw seven golden lamp stands and one among the lamp stands was 'like a son of man.'" What are the lamp stands? They are the churches, as we are told shortly afterward in Revelation 1:20. The seven lamp stands are the seven churches. So first of all you have a vision of the Son of Man walking around. He is among the lamp stands, which means He is in the midst of the churches. He is dressed in a robe that goes to His feet and in a golden sash. A golden sash and a robe to the feet symbolized the opposite of someone who was ready to work. Workers had relatively short garments, which maybe went up to their knees, and they often kept them kind of short. They also had an undergarment they could tuck their outer tunic into when they were laboring. But if you are dressed in something down to your knees—this would be a male figure so we do not think of a fancy gown—you are not dressed for work. So you are not a worker. You might be somebody who does not need to work. You have got a golden sash and gold is the color and the metal of royalty. So we have a royal figure, shown by His clothing. We also have a white head and white hair. What does whiteness usually signify in the Bible? White is purity. What does white hair signify? It signifies wisdom.

So we have a royal figure among the churches, who is a very wise figure. And his eyes are like blazing fire. What do eyes do both in real life and symbolically? They see. And what do fiery eyes suggest? What does fire do? It judges and it purifies. Fire has two values in the Bible. It burns in judgment or it burns in purification. When we see that Jesus has eyes like blazing fire, it means that He sees. For some He sees and will judge, and for others He sees and will purify. That theme will be played out repeatedly throughout the letters to the seven churches. He sees with His fiery eyes the sin that is in five of the seven churches and warns them He will remove their lamp stands. He will fight against them with His sword, and search their hearts. He tells them He will spit them out of His mouth because He sees the sin of the seven churches.

He also has feet glowing like bronze. What do feet generally do in the Bible? We read things like "I will put my enemies as a footstool under your feet." Feet rest on conquered or vanquished enemies. The only times you really see this today is in pictures of people on safari when they shoot a lion or wildebeest.

What does the gunman do? He puts his foot on the beast to show he conquered it. These glowing bronze feet make us think of other feet that glow or other feet of symbolic images in the Bible. In fact, in Daniel 2, 7 and 10, you have images of great figures that have feet. If you think about the main image of the statue in the book of Daniel, the head is made of gold and next comes silver and next comes bronze and next comes clay and iron. How is a statue going to hold up that has gold at the top, one of the densest metals, and then silver, another very dense metal, and then a foundation of clay and iron. How is that going to work? It is not going to work well at all and that is a main point of the imagery of Daniel. These grand kingdoms are resting on an unstable foundation and they have no strength; they will crumble and fall. But Jesus has a foundation of bronze, which is malleable and strong. It is a very strong foundation.

He has a voice like many waters. We can think of the pounding surf, and how it indicates a grand and strong voice. In His right hand, He holds the seven stars. What are the seven stars? They are seven angels. What does that mean? Does each church have its own angel? Could that be true? I am reluctant to say that each church has its angel, because if there is such a thing, this is the only passage that mentions it. I am reluctant to make a doctrine out of a vision in which things are not fully explained. It says seven angels, but the word 'angel' is taken from *angelos*, a Greek word. But *angelos* ordinarily in the Greek language does not mean 'angel.' It ordinarily means 'a messenger.' It has an ordinary secular use. It is a very commonly used word. If you send a message by a messenger, then you send it by an *angelos*. Do churches have messengers that we know of from elsewhere in the Scriptures? The answer is 'yes.' The messengers are the preachers, teachers, and pastors of the church who carry the message of God to the church. So I take it this way: the seven stars that Jesus holds mean that Jesus is especially guarding the leaders of the church. He walks around, among the churches, and guards the churches. Now as He does this, His eyes are like blazing fire. So He sees in order to judge. That is the opening vision of the book of Revelation. He is the royal divine judge, who is attractive yet not to be trifled with. We love Him and want to get close to Him, but He is also a frightening image. On the other hand, He does say in Revelation 1:17-18, "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades."

This vision of Christ is going to define the churches. The elements of the vision that are found here are going to keep coming up again, which I will show you in a moment. Even this little one we just talked about, "I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive," comes up again in the letter to the church at Smyrna, in Revelation 2:8-10. The church at Smyrna is one that is about to suffer for 10 days. It may suffer even to the point of death. To the church that may suffer death, Jesus says, "I am the first and last, the One who died and came to life." Do you see the connection with what is going to happen? With all seven churches, one element of this vision is going to be applied to each church and it is going to be what each church needs to hear from Christ. How about the church of Thyatira, in Revelation 2:18? That church is too tolerant. It tolerates Jezebel, who misleads the people of God into sexual immorality, and they eat food sacrificed to idols at her urging. What does Jesus say? What aspect of the vision would a church that tolerates sin need? It needs to hear that His eyes are like blazing fire and He sees. Or we could think of a church like Ephesus, which is a church that has lost its first love. It is dutiful and it is hard working and that church is going to hear that Jesus is the one who holds it in His hands. Their duty and their doctrinal correctness is not their salvation, but Jesus holds them. So each letter is going to be exactly what each church needs. It will show us that the vision of Christ defines the church or establishes the church. This is not just teaching. We do not have Jesus standing up there and teaching. Jesus does not just teach the church. If you see Him as He is, that will constitute the church. The church does not rest primarily on the teaching of Christ. It rests on the person of Christ and knowing Christ in His glory. That is what the church rests on. Liberals say the church rests on the teachings of Jesus. We say it rests on the person of Jesus.

Shall we look at the churches and see what the Spirit has to say? I am going to give you an overview of the seven churches on how to read them. At one level, you could look at the seven churches and see a threefold structure in the letters. There is first a reminder of what they are through God, through God's grace in Christ. Secondly, there is recognition that every church has its problems. Every church has its sin or its persecution and they need to hear what the Lord has to say to them about their problems. And third, there is a realization that hope in God and the promises of Christ will motivate them. So you will get that triad in each letter. There is a more ambitious outline I could give you of the letters to the churches which would have seven aspects. Every church has those three I just mentioned, but in more detail. Yet not all of them have all seven that are going to follow in this more detailed outline. First, there is an address to the angel of the church. Then there is Christ's self-designation, which is fitted to the need of the church. Then there is an accommodation that they are faithful at some point. There is a condemnation, some rebuke or point of infidelity. Two churches do not get that. That condemnation does not appear in two letters. Of course, if that does not appear, then two churches also do not have the next thing, which is a warning of possible punishment. Finally, there is an exhortation and a promise of reward to the faithful church. That pattern holds for almost all the churches. Two do not have a sin, but they are warned about it. Overall, all seven churches are exhorted to remain faithful, to shun compromise, and to avoid misbegotten tolerance and mistaken indifference and lukewarmness. They are urged to be strong, to make no compromise, and to give themselves without reserve to Christ. If they fail that, then the Lord is going to threaten judgment. That is an overview.

Let us look at one church in the most detail and see how it actually works. We will look at the church in Ephesus in chapter 2. "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write..." That is the address to the angel, in Revelation 2:1. "These are the words of Him who holds the seven stars in His right hand and walks among the seven gold lamp stands." That is Christ's self-designation. Then it goes on.

I know your deeds. I know your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men. You have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not and have found them to be false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name and have not grown weary, yet I hold this against you. You have forsaken your first love. Remember 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 lamp stands from your place. This you have in your favor. You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has ears to hear, 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.

What is good about this church? What is commendable about this church? Do you see how long the commendation was? There is perseverance. They persevere. What else is good about this church? They test doctrine and they are not going to be fooled. They test it well. They do not tolerate evil. They are intolerant where one should be intolerant. They expose false teachers. They endure hardship, and persevere despite hardship. They are patient. They are hard working. It sounds like a pretty good church.

What is their problem? If that is their commendation, what is their condemnation? They fell away from their first love. What does that mean? They stopped making Christ the Lord of their lives. Let us take a look at this. Can you see that the self-designation of Christ is just what this church needs? What does the self-designation say? Who is Christ for this church, to this church? It says He holds the seven stars in His right hand and walks among the churches. So He holds the messenger of that church and He walks around, among, or within the church. For that church, His presence is exactly what it needs. Jesus knows the hard work and the toil at Ephesus and that they endure and do not tolerate evil. They test those who

call themselves apostles. But their virtues are more hard work than the outworking of love. That is their problem. It is more hard work than love at work. They hang on. They hold out with a tough sinewy rectitude and stoicism and dutifulness, all of which supplant love. So Jesus reminds them that their life does not consist of their hard work, their dutifulness, or their hatred of evil. Those are not bad things, but they are not the source of life. The source of life for a church is that Christ holds the church in His hands. They exist and they endure through Him, not through their ecclesiastical rigor. That is the point. It is not speaking against ecclesiastical rigor, mind you, but that is not the source of life.

If you look at the commendation Jesus gives, He says “I know your work. I know your toil. I know your endurance.” Do you hear how hard they are working? They are toiling, enduring, and they cannot tolerate evil. The Greek word there is *bastazo* meaning they cannot bear it. They cannot carry it. They cannot stand it. They test those false apostles. Then He goes on to say “you have endurance and you carry” and it is the same word; the word *bastazo* means ‘to bear or carry.’ He says, “You cannot bear evil, but you do bear or carry on My name and you work and you toil.” The word for ‘toil’ is played with here too. The word is *kopos*. Later it says, “But you are not toiled out,” which is a verbal form *kopiaō*. So He is using a little play on words to show how hard working they are, how they bear Christ. They can bear Christ’s name, but they cannot bear evil.

He then praises them for their hatred for the Nicolaitans. What does that mean? Hatred of the Nicolaitans in Revelation 2:6 is not really quite specified, but the Nicolaitans come up in Revelation 2:15 in the context of Balaam teaching Balak to entice the Israelites to sin and commit sexual immorality. Do you remember Balaam? Do you remember what he was hired to do? He was hired to speak against or curse Israel. He took the money, but when he got there, he could not do it. The Lord did not let him, but he had received his advance money so he had to do something for Balak. He said, “I cannot curse them, but I can give you a little advice. If you entice them into idolatry,” which often had sacred prostitution, “You might be able to get them that way.” He did so and it worked. This church could not stand the Nicolaitans. It could not stand sexual immorality. That is another thing in favor of this church. There is the commendation, that they test doctrine, are intolerant of evil, and are intolerant of the Nicolaitans.

The book of Revelation has a theme that the time of judgment has come. The day of punishing evildoers is here. Revelation 19:3 says, “Hallelujah, for her smoke goes up forever.” That indicates rejoicing in the death of the wicked. What are we supposed to make of that? Consider when you rejoice in a victory. Let me give you an illustration from my life. I was on a church basketball team once. We only had four good players and one day we were playing a team that had many good and experienced players and we beat them. Three of us had the best game of our lives in order to win. When we won that game, we were bouncing up and down. Earlier in the season they had beaten us by a huge margin. In the game we won, we won by one point. And when we beat them, we gloated. But that is not what we were supposed to do. Gloating was not the proper way to celebrate victory. You also see gloating over victories in action movies. When the good guy is beaten up, shot, stabbed, betrayed, and lied about, and his house is robbed and his children are taken away from him, only then does he go on a rampage to kill the bad guy. Then he says, “Great! I killed him!” But that is gloating too. That is not the way in which a Christian celebrates the overthrow of the evil.

But there is a place in which the book of Revelation does say, “Hallelujah, for her smoke goes up forever.” It does say it. It is in the first blast of the coming out of the Gospel age. The age of the Gospel is that of God’s love toward sinners. It is the time of God’s infinite mercy. God loves us while we are yet sinners. Everyone can come. It is the age of the tax collector and the Pharisee when the tax collector goes home justified. It is the age of Paul who persecuted the church and became a leader of the church.

That is the age we are in. But that age does come to an end. On the last day, to purge the universe, evil has to be destroyed and we are not sad when that happens. We do not gloat when the bad guy gets killed in the Gospel age. We do not gloat when the team that always stomped us in the mud finally loses to us. But we do not cry when the time of God's judgment comes. For, there is such a thing as a blessed intolerance. Why? It is not because we delight in the death of the wicked. God does not do so, nor should we, Ezekiel says. But there is a sense in which God's perfect reign cannot be manifest as long as evil has free reign. That has to stop and when it does, we give thanks that evil has been punished at last and the earth is purged.

That is the first glimpse of that idea that we have here, though it is glimpsed earlier in Scripture. There are Psalms 5 and 11 that say that God hates evildoers. Psalm 39:21 says, "I hate those who hate you." We do not talk about those verses in those psalms very much. They are sometimes called imprecatory psalms, or psalms that call for judgment. One thing the psalmist understands is that in the final analysis some people become so identified with their sin that they are their sin. It is one thing to lie, but it is another thing to be a liar. The book of Revelation says there will be no liars in the kingdom, and there will be no murderers. There are people who murder and then there are murderers. Not everyone who murders is a murderer. A murderer is someone who has no compunctions about murder. It is someone who murders over and over and does not care. The liar, the fornicator, or the thief is not someone who steals once, but does it as a way of life, and those will not enter the kingdom. They will be judged, and that judgment is right. The Lord says "I hate them" because they themselves and their sin are one and the same. There is no gap between them. They are their sin when the judgment comes. The letter to the church at Ephesus is the first glimpse of that in Revelation.

Let us move on to the correction toward this church. The problem they have is that they have left their first love. One way of putting this would be to watch the way in which the language of Revelation 2 operates. It says things like "you persevere, test your doctrine, are intolerant of evil, are hard working" and so forth. But what we miss is a passage like 1 Thessalonians 1:3, which says, "We remember your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, your endurance inspired by hope in Christ Jesus." Faith, love, and hope are the origin of good works, but they are not really mentioned here. We could think also of Galatians 5:6 where Paul says that what counts is not works, but faith working in love. There is a place for work, but faith working in love is what he wants to see in them. Or we could think of 1 Corinthians 13 which says, "Without love I am nothing, no matter what I do, even if I give my body to be burned."

That text reminds us that there is more than one way for love to grow cold. Jesus predicted at the end of Matthew 24 that the love of many will grow cold. There are two ways for love to grow cold. One is by drowning it yourself—your love, your passion, your heat for the Lord—in a sea of iniquity. Overt sin will make your love grow cold. But it is also possible for love to grow cold through dutifulness. What He is saying is we must not operate out of a deficit motivation. Do not do your good deeds out of deficit motivation. That is to say, do not do your good deeds as if to obtain God's favor. Think of a child that has never been approved by his parents and really has been harshly disapproved by his parents for years. It could be one parent or the other. He could never please Mom, or never could please Dad. Many such children will spend the rest of their lives trying to prove to their mom or dad that they are okay, even after Mom and Dad are dead. They still want to prove that it is true that they are worth something. That is an example of deficit motivation. Some Christians can tend to operate that way—"I have got to prove to God that I am worthy. I have got to prove that He should love me." But that is not Christian thinking. That does not lead to peace and it does not lead to love with God. Good deeds do not win God's approval. God gives us His love when we repent and believe. We produce our good deeds because we

are approved. Because we belong to the family we produce good deeds, not in order to gain entry to the family.

How did this church get cold? Who started the church at Ephesus? The Apostle Paul did. What other notable people spent time in Ephesus? Timothy was there, according to the First Letter to Timothy. Apollos was there. Priscilla and Aquila were there in 60 AD. The church probably started in the mid 50's and Timothy would have been there in the late 60's and Apollos and Priscilla and Aquila throughout the 60's. What year are we in now as Revelation is written? It is being written and read in about 95 AD. From our perspective, looking back more than 1900 years, it seems that the gap between 95 AD and 60 AD is not very much. But look back 35 years from today and it will seem quite long. That is more than a whole generation. What this church teaches us is that it is possible for a church to have a great start and even hold on to morality and doctrinal purity and dutifulness, and yet take a wrong turn. You cannot survive on the love of a previous generation. If you have a church that talks about great things that were 30 years ago, you have a dying church. It cannot rest on the faith of a previous generation. Maybe their doctrines and their deeds can continue but not the love of a church. That cannot happen. That is their problem.

The exhortation is, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." And even the little promise also fits their needs. He speaks "to the one who conquers," and that may be an appeal to their activism. But He then says to the one who conquers, "I will give to eat." He does not say, "You will earn the right to eat." But rather, "I will give it to you." That is the perspective.

Let us do a quick survey of the rest of the churches. I am going to hit some highlights. The church of Smyrna, I already commented on. The self-designation in Revelation 2:7-11 says that Jesus is "the Alpha, the Omega, the One who died and came to life again." If they face death, which they shall according to verse 10, they should remember that they serve a Lord who died and came back to life. Jesus tells them that He knows their poverty. The church is poor. They are persecuted. And He knows they must endure slander and persecution even to the point of death. Yet they are not rebuked. It is an unrebuked church. It is a church that hears a promise. If they are faithful, they will receive the crown of life and will not be hurt by the second death. Everybody is going to die once, but you do not want to die twice. Dying once is the death of the body. The second death is eternal death. So if you die once but not twice then you are united to Christ.

Moving to the churches that are rebuked, we will take them all at once. These are the churches at Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, and Laodicea. Their sins are that they have all compromised. Pergamum tolerated a compromise regarding sex, sexual morality, and emperor worship. Revelation 2:14-16 alludes to that. Thyatira has tolerated Jezebel, which also seems to be immorality. Sardis has fallen asleep and soiled its clothes, according to Revelation 3:2-3. And Laodicea has lost its zeal and its awareness of its need of saving grace. They think they are rich and that they do not need any help. Those are all churches that have fallen or failed.

Let us take a look how Christ's nature defines the churches. For Pergamum, in Revelation 2:12, the self-designation is from the words of "Him who has the sharp, two-edged sword." That sharp, two-edged sword is a sword that cuts. It cuts both ways and it judges. Later on in Revelation we are going to have Jesus appearing in chapter 19 with a two-edged sword coming out of His mouth to slay His adversaries. What He is saying to this church is that they may be treated like one of His adversaries. They may be judged by Him.

What is their problem? It is found in this puzzling reference to Balaam and the Nicolaitans. We have already talked about Balaam leading the people to sin and the Nicolaitans' immorality and sensuality. The church also seems to be compromising with regard to emperor worship. At the end of verse 14, you have people holding 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. Is a reference to food sacrificed to idols found anywhere else in the Bible? It is in 1 Corinthians 8 and Romans 14. What does Paul say about eating food sacrificed to idols in those passages? He says it is okay if it does not cause your weaker brother to sin. One of the bits of advice he gives is, if you are ready to eat some meat, and just before you bite somebody says, "By the way, I got this in the offered-to-idols section of the meat freezer." Then you should probably say, "I think I am a vegetarian today and I will just eat those red tomatoes and pineapple and onion rings and make a meal out of them." Why is that the advice? If it is enough of a problem in your Christian brother's mind that he mentions it to you, then that proves that he is not quite sure. And if he is not sure, he may think that we are trying to deceive God. Then it would be a sin. The principle is: even if something is not a sin, if you think it is a sin, or if you think you are deceiving God, then it is a sin.

By the time Revelation is written, things have changed from the time Paul was writing. The situation is much more tense. When 1 Corinthians and Romans were written it was in the 50's, which was before systematic persecution of Christians had started. It was before you could be persecuted just for being Christian. It was before the emperor said, "Bow to me or die." When John is writing Revelation, the day has come when even the tiniest hint that you are willing to participate in the system of emperor worship is intolerable. And even the tiniest hint of buying food that was offered to an idol is intolerable, even though it is really nothing. But even that much participation was intolerable because it was viewed as joining in the false religion of the culture, which should not be allowed. There is a time for extreme measures and for no compromises. So Jesus says, "Repent, lest I come and fight against you." And what He says is, "If you want to avoid war with Rome by compromise you will avoid war with Rome. But you will not avoid war. You will get it from Me. If you do not fight with Rome, you will fight with Me." It is better to face the sword of Rome than to face the sword of God. And I want to tell you, that is something that I think our church needs today. I think there are far too many churches that are far too comfortable in our culture. They tolerate almost anything and they want to blend in and fit in and just be smooth and be a part of our culture. But there is a place for godly intolerance. The church at Ephesus was blessed. It was not a great church, but it was blessed for its intolerance of evil. Yet this church at Pergamum is in danger of being cursed for its refusal to be intolerant, for its refusal to draw a line.

I want to balance my remarks. We are a kingdom of priests. We should reign over all of life and that means that Christians should get involved in every sphere of life, whatever your occupation may be. Many of you are training for ministry. But many of you are not and instead you are out there teaching in the schools or you are politicians or you are working for the utility companies or you are policemen. Whether you work for newspapers or you manage a company or you are a lawyer or whatever the case may be, you should do it for the Lord. Thus I am not advocating flight from the world, but I am advocating a refusal to fit in too much. I think that is what Christ is teaching.

The church at Thyatira, in Revelation 2:18-29, has similar sorts of problems. They tolerate a wicked woman. They are failing to test her teaching. Therefore Jesus says He is one who has eyes like blazing fire and feet of burnished bronze, as if ready to crush them under His feet. He says that they are marked by love and increasing deeds, but they are too tolerant. They are liable to seductions, and liable to compromises.

So we see that the vision of Christ defines a church. It gives the church its very nature. That is what Revelation chapters 1 and 2 and 3 are all about.