

Seven Letters to Seven Churches, Part I: Ephesus
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Scripture: Revelation 1:9-20; 2:1-7

I. Cracking the Code

The Book of Revelation, the final book of the Bible, is also the most controversial. Some Christians believe its placement at the end of the Bible signifies its importance as God's last word on life and faith. Others, however, find it the last book they'd ever want to read.

If you find Revelation challenging, you're not alone. Christians have wrestled with this book since its beginning. Early Christians in the East were wary of Revelation, while those in the West embraced it. Conversely, the Western Church was hesitant about the Book of Hebrews, which the Eastern Church accepted. Including both books in the New Testament shows the early Church's ability to compromise and welcome diverse views. Such flexibility is something we could benefit from today!

Even so, in the late 4th century, Cyril of Jerusalem excluded Revelation from his community's canon and banned its use. Twelve centuries later, the three leading figures of the Reformation – Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin – remained skeptical of Revelation. Luther placed it at the end of his Bible, considering it the least significant book. Calvin, who wrote commentaries on every other New Testament book, never wrote one on Revelation.

I, too, was once skeptical of Revelation – not from study, but because I was disheartened by how some televangelists and famous authors twisted it for their gain. There's money to be made when people believe the End Times are near and think someone has the "inside story" on Revelation's prophecies. More money is made when people are convinced that leaders or ideologies they already despise are Revelation's infamous Beast or the False Prophet, destined for the lake of fire.

Do you recall when people were convinced that Russia's Nikita Khrushchev was the Beast? Then it was Brezhnev. Still later, many were sure it was Gorbachev, given that he was not only a communist leader but had a prominent red birthmark on his forehead – which Christian leaders connected to the mark of the Beast, as described in Revelation!

Of course, when Gorbachev eventually became a friend rather than a foe of the United States, these Christian leaders had to find a new Beast. Curiously, I don't recall any of these leaders publicly apologizing for breaking the Ninth Commandment: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exod 20:16; Deut 5:20).

As enticing as it may be to think Revelation proves we are living in the End Times and that Jesus will return the day after tomorrow, I suggest Revelation offers us something far more reliable and helpful for navigating the tumultuous times we live in today.

You see, John of Patmos, the author of Revelation, was not writing prophecies in the 1st century that are only now coming to pass in the 21st century. He was addressing dynamics in his own time, which also happen to be dynamics that persist in every era. That's what makes Revelation so powerful: every age has its own Beast-like leaders whose intentions are self-serving rather than God-serving. Every era sees people abandoning truth to follow a "False Prophet."

To understand Revelation and its relevance for today, we must first recognize that John of Patmos wrote about the issues of his day using coded language. He intentionally obscured his message because he was writing from a Roman prison on the island of Patmos about the eventual downfall of the Roman government. Rather than directly stating, "Rome will be conquered by the hand of God," John described a seven-headed Beast cast into a lake of fire. The symbolism is significant because Rome was famously built on seven hills. Although Roman guards were undoubtedly aware that Rome was built on seven hills, they didn't recognize the connection John was making because John's book read more like a fantasy novel than a subversive manifesto.

Consider another example of John's coded writing: the number 666, often referred to as the "mark of the Beast." John writes that the Beast would prevent anyone from buying or selling without this mark, which would be inscribed on people's right hand or forehead. To this day, many people avoid having the number 666 on their license plates or credit cards.

To grasp the full significance of this number, we must understand the historical context. Christians were persecuted and denied citizenship, including the right to buy and sell goods, unless they made a yearly sacrifice to the Emperor. Upon completing the sacrifice, citizens received a certificate as proof. The sacrifice was likely made with the right hand, with the forehead bowed – precisely the two parts of the body associated with the mark of the Beast.

The first Roman leader to enforce this policy and persecute non-compliant Christians was Emperor Nero. It's hardly a coincidence that, according to the Jewish mystical numerology system known as Gematria (popular among early Christians), when you apply this system to "Nero Caesar," the resulting number is 666!

In coded language, John encouraged his community to remain subversive, refusing to honor the Roman Emperor as a god, even if it resulted in economic hardship. This is sound advice not only for John's time but for any era when political leaders attempt to co-opt religion for their purposes and people's morals are dependent on their pocketbooks.

So, knowing that John was writing in code to seven churches about issues in their time that are still relevant today, what should we make of this first letter to the church in Ephesus?

I suggest you'll gain a deeper understanding of John's message if, before moving on, you take a moment to recall when you first fell deeply in love with your spouse (or another significant partner if you're not married).

[In worship, Dr. Elnes used a compilation video of his daughter Arianna's wedding to evoke these feelings. The video can be viewed here: <https://tinyurl.com/3rhrakhs>.]

II. Losing the Love

Before connecting our reflection on falling in love with the church in Ephesus, let me first set the historical context.

Ephesus was one of the most prominent cities in all of Asia Minor, competing with Alexandria in Egypt, Corinth in Greece, and Antioch in Syria for the title of "First and Greatest Metropolis in Asia Minor." Situated at the mouth of the Cayster River, where it meets the Mediterranean, Ephesus served as a major port city, acting as a gateway to the Mediterranean Sea and Rome, as well as to one of the region's most significant inland trade routes. Consequently, Ephesus was a large and wealthy city with a population comparable to modern-day St. Petersburg (250,000-300,000). Unlike today's cities, however, its major streets were paved with marble and illuminated at night by giant oil cauldrons.

Ephesus was also home to one of the Seven Wonders of the World: the Temple of Artemis. The temple's roof, which was as large as two football fields, was supported by 127 marble columns. It was the Pagan equivalent of the Vatican in its day.

The centrality of Artemis worship had significant implications for the Apostle Paul and the early Ephesian church. In the Book of Acts, for instance, we read about the city's craftsmen dragging Paul before a magistrate and demanding his execution. His crime? Converting so many followers of Artemis to followers of Jesus that their statue-manufacturing business was collapsing!

The church in Ephesus was one of the most renowned Christian communities of the first century, founded by the Apostle Paul himself some 40-45 years before Revelation was written. Paul spent more time with the church in Ephesus than any other church. One of his most famous writings is his Epistle to the Ephesians. Paul's successors there – a married couple named Priscilla and Aquila – became well-known leaders in their own right, and their protégé Apollos gained even greater prominence.

Given this illustrious history, one might wonder why the letter to the Ephesian church in Revelation is so harsh. While the Spirit of Jesus, who is said to have dictated the letter to John, praises them for their hard work, patient endurance, and ability to discern false leaders, these accolades pale in comparison to the Spirit's complaint: "You have abandoned the love you had at first" (Rev. 2:4).

Ouch!

It turns out that, just like marriages, churches can grow stale – and Jesus is saying that unless things change, he's ready to walk away.

How does a church lose the love and passion that once made it so vibrant?

Marriages and churches are not so different, especially if a church is the “bride of Christ.” So, let’s ask: What turns burning-hot love into cold, dead coals in a marriage?

Sometimes, a marriage's success can lead to its downfall. When both partners are generally happy, they may avoid addressing issues that could disrupt their positive vibe. Minor annoyances are ignored or swept under the rug. If they persist without being addressed, they can grow into major problems.

Similarly, love in a marriage can cool if the partners become complacent. They stop investing in each other's happiness the way they once did – those little back rubs, “just because” gifts, goodnight kisses, or simple “I love you’s.” Like a bonfire that needs to be stoked with seasoned wood, love requires regular and appropriate fuel to keep burning.

In other cases, conflicts may arise in a marriage that are either irresolvable or neither partner has the skills to resolve. If counseling isn't sought or the will to resolve the issues isn't strong in both partners, the love can fade quickly.

I wouldn't be surprised if all these issues were present on some level in the Ephesian church. However, the Spirit of Jesus provides a significant clue to the heart of the problem when he pays them a backhanded compliment: “This is to your credit: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.”

Who were the Nicolaitans? We'll delve into that later in this series. For now, what matters is the Ephesians' hatred of them.

We've all been taught not to hate anyone, and few would argue that hatred is a Christian ideal. Yet hatred itself doesn't seem to be the core problem here. Jesus himself says He hates the Nicolaitans!

Here's the rub: What happens when your hatred for others becomes stronger than your love? Even well-founded and righteous hatred, such as hatred of evil, can suck the life out of a person – or a church – if it surpasses their capacity for love.

The problem with the church in Ephesus is that their self-righteous indignation toward others eventually overshadowed the love they once had for others and their Lord. As the renowned preacher William Sloane-Coffin once said: “True, we have to hate evil; else we're sentimental. But if we hate evil more than we love the good, we become damn good haters, and of those, the world already has too many. However deep, our anger, like that of Christ, must always and only measure our love.”¹

To this, I can hear the Spirit's voice echoing across the centuries, saying, “Amen!”

¹ William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2004), p. 20.