

SEVEN: Pursuit of the Perfect Church

"EPHESUS: LESSONS IN LOVE" REVELATION 2:1-7

This Week's Core Competency

Church – I believe the church is God's primary way to accomplish his purposes on earth today. Ephesians 4:15, 16 *Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. 16From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*

Being a Christian at the end of the first century when John wrote to the church in Ephesus (Re 2:1-7) was no walk in the park. Once Rome's emperors claimed to be gods, Christians found themselves between a rock and a hard place. It all started in earnest with Domitian. "Although Nero (54-68) seems to have made some effort to promote his own status as divine, it was not until Domitian (81-96) that an emperor announced that he was to be addressed as *Dominus et Deus* ('Lord and God'). That policy continued to develop until the time of Diocletian (284-305) when it reached its climax" (Howard Clark Kee, "The Context, Birth, and Early Growth of Christianity," in *Christianity: a Social and Cultural History* by Howard Clark Kee, et al., 59). Grand structures were built throughout the empire so people could express their devotion to the emperor and gratitude to Rome's traditional gods for the peace and prosperity they enjoyed. Too bad Christian churches were springing up all across the

***Orthodoxy without orthopraxy
is a false religion.***

-Grant R. Osborne

provinces in sufficient numbers to diminish participation in the prescribed ceremonies and sacrifices that were part of the imperial religion or "emperor cult." Something had to be done, but what? Were Christians to be sought out, apprehended, and executed?

That's the question Pliny, the Roman governor of Bithynia and Pontus asked Trajan (98-117) when those who prepared the appropriate animal sacrifices to be offered at the Temple of Rome and Augustus in Nicomedia ran out of customers. "The governor had found nothing evil or subversive about the practices, worship, or food of the Christians, or even that they were engaged in illegal political activities. The crucial test came when members of the group refused to repeat an invocation to the Roman gods, to offer 'adoration, with wine and frankincense' to the image of the emperor, and to curse Christ. Those who refused to perform these religious acts were executed. Trajan confirmed Pliny's policy, adding that the Christians were not to be sought out or seized without proper evidence, but when they were exposed and persisted in what Pliny called 'a depraved and excessive superstition,' they were to be put to death" (59). By refusing to worship the emperor and honor the gods who had blessed the Roman state, Christians made themselves its enemies.

Jews had resolved their version of this problem by paying a tax to restore the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus Capitolinus ("the Temple of Jupiter Best and Greatest on the Capitoline"). The temple had burned in A.D. 69 when Vespasian battled to enter the city as emperor, and he was

con't pg. 2

looking to replenish a treasury depleted by reconstruction costs. His tax measure offered "every Jew implicitly a license to practice his religion and an exemption from the requirements of the imperial cult on condition of payment and the implied recognition of the Roman national deity" (Colin J. Memer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in their Local Setting*, 8; see also Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT, 11). At the same time it complicated things for Christians in that it tempted Jewish Christians to return to the synagogue to escape persecution and Gentile Christians to become Jewish proselytes for the same reason. Memer summarizes it this way, "The Christian was faced with a cruel dilemma. His safety was assured only by preparedness, in time of need, to identify himself with pagan society, by sacrifice to the emperor and the expected participation in the religious aspect of guilds and social life (the 'Nicolaitan' answer), or with Judaism on whatever terms would gain him acceptance in the synagogue, that is, probably, at least an implicit denial of his Lord. The first inducement was naturally strongest in those places where the pressures of authority and pagan society were most direct (Pergamum and Thyatira, and also Ephesus where it was steadfastly rejected): the 'synagogues of Satan' brought the opposite threat against those who scorned the pagan compromise (Smyrna and Philadelphia, and perhaps the commended minority in Sardis)" (10). Faithful Christians refused both compromises.

Situation for Discussion

Your family has moved to a new town, and in addition to a new doctor and new dentist, you have to find a new church. You don't want to drive across town every Sunday so your choices are limited. In fact, you must choose between two very different evangelical churches. One is reputed to have a strong preaching and teaching ministry to its parishioners. The pastor is seminary trained able to parse a Greek verb when he has to-if you know what I mean. His flock knows the Bible and can discern between truth and error. You know if you go there you'll be fed. The other is reputed to have a strong evangelistic and outreach ministry to the community. The pastor has a shepherd's heart and obvious love for his sheep. Like him they don't seem to be as concerned about what they believe as about how they behave. They say they want to be "red-letter Christians." In other words, they want to live and love like Jesus commanded. You know if you go there you'll be inspired. So which will it be?

day 1 ENCOUNTER – read God's word to put yourself in touch with him.

Revelation 2:1-7

1 "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: 2I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. 3You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. 4Yet I hold this

against you: You have forsaken your first love.

5Remember 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 lampstand from its place. 6But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7He who has an ear, 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.

EXAMINE – what the passage says before you decide what it means.

- * Circle "angel" in v. 1.
- * Underline "seven stars" and "seven golden lampstands" in v. 1.
- * In the margin next to v. 1 write "Cf., 1:20."
- * Highlight "hard work" in v. 2a, and v. 2b in one color.
- * Highlight "perseverance" in v. 2a and v. 3 in another.
- * Box "yet" indicating contrast in v. 4.
- * Circle "love" in v. 4.
- * Number "remember," "repent," and "do" 1, 2, 3.
- * Circle "Nicolaitans" in v. 6.
- * Circle "overcomes" in v. 7.

day 2

EXPLORE – the answer to these questions to better understand what the passage means.

Consult the explanation of the message and the notes to follow if you need help.

1. The son of man (1:13) "holds the "seven stars" (1:20) tightly "in his right hand." What do you infer from that image?
2. What's more, he "walks among the seven golden lampstands." What do you infer from that image?
3. Describe the "hard work" done by the Ephesian church.
4. Describe the "perseverance" of the Ephesian church based on your knowledge of what it was like to be a Christian at the end of the first century. (See discussion on the Core Competency Church.)
5. Explain the *contrast* in verse 4.
6. What was the Ephesian church's fatal flaw? Explain.
7. Describe Christ's remedy for the church's malady.
8. Got any idea what modern day Nicolaitans might look like?
9. **Discussion:** Verse 7 sounds like a warning. So what do believers stand to gain by heeding it?

Finding a good church isn't easy. If you've ever moved to a new community and had to look for a new church home, you know how difficult it is. cursory examinations and evaluations of churches and their ministries can be misleading. Imposing buildings may house dead congregations while more modest ones may be home to vibrant assemblies. Rich churches in our sight may turn out to be poor in God's while the ones that look poor to us, may turn out to be rich in his eyes. Only the head of the church, Jesus Christ, knows for sure the condition of his churches because he sees what may not be readily apparent to us. In seven messages to seven churches in Asia Minor, the Lord gives us a glimpse into what makes a church truly rich or truly poor. These letters while written to individual congregations at the end of the first century were intended to benefit all the churches. What's more they were intended to benefit the individuals that made up those churches and us too.

If you moved to Ephesus, the church there was one you might carefully consider joining. After all, its parishioners took their religion seriously. They worked hard to keep the faith and to persevere in the face of hardship. False teachers couldn't get away with much under their watchful eye. Gullible they were not; they investigated the assertion of every itinerant minister who claimed to be an apostle and found many to be frauds. What's more, they refused to cave in to Roman religion regardless of the cost. Their emperors called themselves gods and demanded adoration and sacrifice, and their peers in trade unions and other social groups held Rome's traditional deities in high regard and expected them to do the same. But they would do

neither for which they paid a high price in the marketplace.

But things were not exactly as they appeared in the Ephesian church. So before you sign up for its membership class, you might want to know about its one fatal flaw. Its parishioners had forsaken the love they had at first. Both their love for God and their love for one another. "The Lord had taught that mutual love was to be the hallmark of Christian fellowship (John 13:35). The Ephesian converts had known such a love in their early years; but their struggle with false teachers and their hatred of heretical teaching had apparently engendered hard feelings and harsh attitudes toward one another to such an extent that it amounted to a forsaking of the supreme Christian virtue of love. Doctrinal purity and loyalty can never be a substitute for love" (George Eldon Ladd, *The Revelation of John*, 39). And once they lost their love for one another, they lost their love for God as well.

Fortunately, the situation wasn't hopeless. The church could be great again if its members would just do two simple things: remember and repent—remember the love they had at first and repent of their indifference to one another. They had to do once more the things love had at first prompted them to do. This was their church's only hope; its very existence depended upon it. Surely those who had faced down the Nicolaitans were up to the challenge. And if hope weren't motivation enough, the prospect of abundant life in the eschaton had to be. Finding a good church may be hard, but being a good church—now that's even harder!

The Message of the Passage

Truth and love, belief and behavior, both matter to Jesus, so be careful you don't sacrifice either for the sake of the other.

day **4** **EMBRACE** – how God spoke to you through his word.

Our desire is to not be merely hearers of the word, but doers of the word as James suggests in James 1:22. Try some of the challenges below to apply what you have learned this week.

- **Give Yourself Some Good Advice Based on the Message of this Passage.**

- **Pick a verse or verses from the passage to memorize or think about this week.**

- **Relate the message of this passage to any of the following:**
 - **Belonging**
 - **Becoming**
 - *going Beyond*

- **Journal your thoughts on the passage.**

- **Home Group Discussion** (for those involved in the deeper connections of a home group)

* Home Group Discussion (for those involved in the deeper connections of a home group).

Discuss the extent to which your home group fits the description of the church in Ephesus and whether you should do anything about it.

“Ephesus: Lessons in Love”
(Use the space below for Sunday’s message notes)

notes **N** STUDY – the commentaries to answer the questions.

v. 1 **angel**

Commentators are divided with regard to the identity of the "angels" of the churches to whom John addresses his seven letters (see Hemer, 32-34). The following identification seems best. "As stated in 1:20, the 'angel' is both the guardian over the city and corporately identified with the city, so the letter is sent to the Ephesian church as a whole via the angel. This is in keeping with 1:1-2, in which the Apocalypse is sent from God through Christ to an angel and then to John to give to the churches. Thus the angel has the basic biblical function of 'messenger' to the church" (Osborne, 110, 11).

v. 1 **Ephesus**

"It was the most important city of proconsular Asia. Situated at the mouth of the Cayster River on a gulf of the Aegean Sea, it flourished as an important commercial and export enter for Asia. The traveler from Rome landing at Ephesus would proceed up a magnificent avenue thirty-five feet wide and lined with columns which led from the harbor to the center of the city. Ephesus was part of the kingdom of Pergamum which Attalus III bequeathed to Rome in 133 BC. By NT times it had grown to better than a quarter of a million in population. Its commercial importance was heightened by the fact that three great trade routes converged at the city (from the Euphrates by way of Colossae, from Galatia through Sardis, and from Maeander valley to the south and east) . . . It boasted a major stadium, marketplace, and theater [seating 25,000] . . . The imperial cult was not neglected in Ephesus. Temples were built to Claudius, Hadrian, and Severus. The major religious attraction, however, was the Temple of Artemis (Diana in Latin), one of the seven wonders of the ancient world . . . The Christian faith came to Ephesus perhaps with Aquila and Priscilla about AD 52 when Paul left them there en route from Corinth to Antioch (Acts 18:18-22). On his next missionary journey the apostle remained in Ephesus more than two years (Acts 18:8, 10), and some time later Timothy ministered there (1 Tim 1:3). It was the apostle John, however, who is most closely associated with the city" (Mounce, 85, 86; see also Osborne, 108, 109). "Augustus had allowed Ephesus to build two temples in his honor, and Domitian had named Ephesus 'guardian' of the imperial cult, making it the foremost center of the imperial cult in Roman Asia. Ephesus, in fact, hosted a new cult of the emperors that had opened only about half a decade before Revelation was written. Ephesus honored Domitian at Olympic games just shortly before this book was written" (Craig S. Keener, *The NIV Application Commentary: Revelation*, 106).

v. 1 **seven stars, angels**

See 1:20.

v. 2 **deeds**

Or "works" (the NET Bible, ESV, NRSV, NKJV). "Works is a broad term indicating not only good deeds but the entire course of life and conduct. Two nouns, toil and patient endurance, stand in apposition to 'works.' The good works of the Ephesians consisted in their firm opposition to false teachers who had arisen in Ephesus (see Acts 20:29-30), and in their steadfast refusal to be led away by their teachings" (Ladd, 38).

v. 2 **apostles**

"The term is used here in a sense wider than in its application to the original apostles, denoting a class of itinerant missionaries bearing this name, whose existence in the Church is attested by Didache 11, also 2 Co. 11:5, 13; 12:11. According to Ac. 20:29 Paul had foretold the entrance of 'grievous wolves' among the Ephesians; false teachers appear everywhere in the apostolic Church almost simultaneously with the true" (Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John*, 449).

v. 4 **love**

"It is not clear whether this is love for Christ ('you do not love me now as you did at first', GNB), or for one another [with most recent commentators] ('you have given up loving one another', Moffatt), or for mankind at large. It may be that a general attitude is meant which included all three ('you do not love as you did at first', Phillips)" (Leon Morris, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed., TNTC, 60). "Indeed, the one demands the other, for one cannot love God without loving his children and vice versa . . . It is clear that the Ephesians loved truth more than they loved God or one another. This does not mean that they were not believers or that they had no love at all, for the commendations of verses 2-3 would be impossible in that case. Rather, their early love had grown cold and been replaced with a hash zeal for orthodoxy" (Osborne, 116).

v. 5 **remove**

"Some interpreters see here a reference to the judgment to be inflicted by Christ at his second coming, but it is more likely that these words refer to some kind of visitation which will bring a historical judgment upon the church so that destruction will befall it and it will cease to exist as a church" (Ladd, 39, 40).

v. 6 **Nicolaitans**

Little is known about this group apart from what is inferred from Revelation. Their association with Balaam (2:14, 15) and with Jezebel (2:20-23) suggests a link to idolatry and immorality. "Therefore it is likely that the twin problems were syncretism (trying to accommodate the pagans by participating in practices like emperor worship; see Coutsoumpos 1997:23-27) and an antinomian type of libertinism (showing freedom from the law by doing what one wishes; see Schussoler Fiorenza 1973:568-69). Under Domitian the pressure from the imperial cult greatly increased, and it is probable that some Christians (indeed this entire cult movement) capitulated under this pressure" (Osborne, 120, 21; see also Hemer, 87-94).

Connect the **FAMILY**. During this series, Bible stories appropriate for children will be used that complement the adult teaching.

Experience it!

Experience scripture through the activity-based learning exercise. Dinner is a perfect time to engage the family.

If you had only two minutes to show God how much you love him, what would you do? Read Acts 3 to find out what Peter would do. Peter knew the best way to show his love for God was to love the people around him. Find all the ways Peter loved the different people in the story. You can show God how much you love him by loving others.



Pray it!

Pray God's will for your child by praying scriptures. Insert your child's name in the blanks as you pray.

Father, being confident of this, I pray that you who began a good work in _____ will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. Php 1:6

Post it!

Post the kid-friendly Core Competency and the memory verse throughout the house. Lead your children to interact with them as they memorize.

Church – I believe God uses the people in the church to do His work.

Memory verse – "Now you are the body of Christ (the church), and each one of you is a part of it." 1Co 12:27

Discuss it!

Discover biblical truth by discussing the scripture. Reflective questions are great with older kids.

- *What did the man ask from Peter and John?
- *Why was healing the man a better gift than money?
- *Why did Peter give an explanation of the healing to the crowd?
- *What was God's ultimate purpose for raising Jesus from the grave?

Live it!

Live out the Core Competency and build deeper relationships by doing this activity.

Over the next seven weeks your family will be discovering lots of things about the church. God uses the church to do his work. As a family, choose something you can do together for him throughout the series. It might be something such as "adopting" a widow, befriending a new neighbor or volunteering at one of Pantego's compassion agencies. Email Mr. Keith and tell him what you will be doing.



Challenge

Kids preschool through sixth grade receive Kid Pix Tokens for each discipleship activity completed.

Family completes **Experience It** _____ Child memorizes kid-friendly **Core Competency** _____

Family participates in **Live It** _____ Child memorizes **Memory Verse** _____

Kids can earn extra tokens on Sunday morning by:

Bringing a friend to **The Kid Connection** _____ Completing **KIDZ Bulletin** _____

Child's name _____ Parent's signature _____

30 CORE COMPETENCIES

10 CORE BELIEFS

Trinity *2 Corinthians 13:14*

I believe the God of the Bible is the only true God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Salvation By Grace *Ephesians 2:8-9*

I believe a person comes into a right relationship with God by His grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.

Authority of the Bible *2 Timothy 3:16-17*

I believe the Bible is the Word of God and has the right to command my belief and action.

Personal God *Psalms 121:1-2*

I believe God is involved in and cares about my daily life.

Identity in Christ *John 1:12*

I believe I am significant because of my position as a child of God.

Church *Ephesians 4:15-16*

I believe the church is God's primary way to accomplish His purposes on earth today.

Humanity *John 3:16*

I believe all people are loved by God and need Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Compassion *Psalms 82:3-4*

I believe God calls all Christians to show compassion to those in need.

Eternity *John 14:1-4*

I believe there is a heaven and a hell and that Jesus Christ is returning to judge the earth and to establish His eternal kingdom.

Stewardship *1 Timothy 6:17-19*

I believe that everything I am or own belongs to God.

10 CORE PRACTICES

Worship *Psalms 95:1-7*

I worship God for who He is and what He has done for me.

Prayer *Psalms 66:16-20*

I pray to God to know Him, to lay my request before Him and to find direction for my daily life.

Bible Study *Hebrews 4:12*

I read the Bible to know God, the truth, and to find direction for my daily life.

Single-mindedness *Matthew 6:33*

I focus on God and His priorities for my life.

Spiritual Gifts *Romans 12:4-6*

I know and use my spiritual gifts to accomplish God's purposes.

Biblical Community *Acts 2:44-47*

I fellowship with other Christians to accomplish God's purposes in my life, others' lives, and in the world.

Giving Away My Time *Colossians 3:17*

I give away my time to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Money

2 Corinthians 8:7

I give away my money to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Faith *Ephesians*

6:19-20

I give away my faith to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Life *Romans 12:1*

I give away my life to fulfill God's purposes.

10 CORE VIRTUES

Joy *John 15:11*

I have inner contentment and purpose in spite of my circumstances.

Peace *Philippians 4:6-7*

I am free from anxiety because things are right between God, myself, and others.

Faithfulness *Proverbs 3:3-4*

I have established a good name with God and with others based on my long-term loyalty to those relationships.

Self-Control *Titus 2:11-13*

I have the power, through Christ, to control myself.

Humility *Philippians 2:3, 4*

I choose to esteem others above myself.

Love *1 John 4:10-12*

I sacrificially and unconditionally love and forgive others.

Patience *Proverbs 14:29*

I take a long time to overheat and endure patiently under the unavoidable pressures of life.

Kindness/Goodness *1 Thess. 5:15*

I choose to do the right things in my relationships with others.

Gentleness *Philippians 4:5*

I am thoughtful, considerate and calm in dealing with others.

Hope *Hebrews 6:19-20*

I can cope with the hardships of life and with death because of the hope I have in Jesus Christ.

About the Authors

Tom Bulick (M.A. in Educational Leadership, Eastern Michigan University, Th.M. in Old Testament, and Ph.D. in Bible Exposition, Dallas Theological Seminary). For more than thirty-five years, Tom has served as pastor, faculty member, and administrator. Tom was Vice President for Student Life and Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Trinity Western University (Vancouver, B.C.) for twelve years before accepting the position of Spiritual Formation Pastor at Pantego Bible Church. He and his wife Ruth have been married forty years and have one son, Zach.

Keith Smith (B.A. in Speech Communication, Texas Tech University and M.A. in Religious Education, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary) is the Family and Children's Pastor at Pantego Bible Church. Keith is a featured communicator for Song of Solomon for Students and speaks at children/student camps across the country. He has developed a number of relational parenting seminars designed to motivate parents to empower their parenting by emotionally connecting with their kids. Keith lives with his wife, Denise, and their two children, Jordan and Alex.



8001 Anderson Blvd.
Ft. Worth, TX 76120
1-866-PANTEGO
Fax 817-275-6403
www.pantego.org

The mission of THE SCROLLS is to help you develop the beliefs, practices, and virtues of a follower of Jesus Christ called The 30 Core Competencies through your own active reading of the Bible. Send any questions or comments you may have about this lesson to Tom Bulick. His e-mail address is tbulick@pantego.org.