

Ephesus & Pergamum: Rev. 2:1-7, 12-17

Intro: I do not think they represent 7 ages of church history, but 7 is symbolic, so it could represent all of church history. They were real churches in the first century, but they also represent any church that has ever existed. Therefore, the letters to the 7 churches can be used to evaluate any church in the present. How do you evaluate a specific church? Its good and bad will most likely be found in one of the 7.

Ephesus was the largest and most important city in the Roman province of Asia with a population 250,000. It was the "New York City" of Asia. Its temple to the goddess Artemis was regarded as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

2:1: Jesus is intimate with his churches as he walks among the golden lampstands, and he is Lord over his churches and their overseers or elders as he holds the 7 stars in his right hand.

2:2-3, 6: Compliment: patient endurance maintaining a pure church in the face of persecution. Jesus hated the evil works of the Nicolaitans. We need to know what Jesus hates! Ephesus did not tolerate evil men and tested false apostles. These were the Nicolaitans who were being excommunicated from the church as apostates. The Ephesian Christians had not compromised with the pagan culture.

2:4-5: The church of Ephesus was established by Paul who stayed there for 3 years. Paul had warned the elders that "fierce wolves" would attack the flock and false teachers would arise within the church and lead people astray. Acts 20:28-31: *Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.*

Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.

So, the Ephesian elders took Paul's warning seriously and were vigilant to root out false doctrine. Their quest for doctrinal purity created a climate of suspicion in which brotherly love could no longer exist.

Call to repentance and warning: Repent and restore LOVE and the "works of love" it did at first. I think this love refers to Jesus' command to his disciples: John 13:34-35: *"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."* Christian *agape* love is important because it is how all people will know we are Christ's disciples. Love is expressed in "works of love." A church that fails to persevere in truth and love can have its lampstand removed.

2:7: Discern what the Spirit says to the churches! Believers who conquer or overcome (GR nikao) will eat from the tree of life in the paradise of God. This is a promise of eternal life.

Fighting for truth can make a person angry, condemning, and judgmental, and then his/her love grows cold. We must be a church that preserves biblical truth and love for one another and people who do not know Christ.

There may have been weak believers who loved Jesus but yielded to the pressure to conform to the culture and the cult of Emperor Domitian. In a moment of weakness and fear they worshiped the Emperor. They should be loved back into fellowship, forgiven, and restored, not condemned and excommunicated.

There may have been new and immature Christians who had some unbiblical ideas. They did not need to be condemned; they needed to be lovingly disciplined into the truth. They needed to be taught in Sunday school.

There may have been new and immature believers who were saved out of ungodly lifestyles (e.g., like homosexuality or gender confusion). They

needed to be held accountable by mature believers and loved into the truth of God's word and not condemned for "backsliding." (Today it would be beneficial for that person to hear Anne Paulk's testimony and learn from her website *Restored Hope Network*.)

We are all in a process of sanctification!

Ephesus Lesson: Strive to maintain the purity of God's word and the purity of Christ's church without losing love for one another. Every church must have doctrinal truth and love for one another.

Application: This application from my devotional February 3 describes what Jesus said to Ephesus and is a warning to every church: *"We can distinguish loving action from sound doctrine, but we must never separate them. Both are necessary to the health and welfare of the church. Some of us tend to exalt doctrine over love, allowing a commendable zeal for truth to devolve into a critical spirit. Some of us tend to exalt love over doctrine, ignoring grave error in the name of compassion. So, let us work to prize both sound teaching and loving action in our churches."*

Pergamum, 2:12-17:

2:12: Jesus holds the sharp two-edged sword; it comes out of his mouth (1:16). Jesus wages war with this sword (2:16). The words of Jesus speak life and judgement.

2:13: Complement: Pergamum church existed in the same city where Satan's throne was located. Pergamos was the "Washington DC" of Asia. Jesus referred to it as "Satan's throne" because it was the provincial capital and official center of Emperor Domitian worship in Asia. This created severe persecution. The church remained faithful to proclaim Christ's name. A faithful witness of Christ, Antipas, was martyred. The reference to Satan's throne could be literal. Satan is a fallen angel and he can only be in one place at one time; he is not an omnipresent spirit. So, Pergamum could have been his base of operations in Asia Minor.

2:14-16: Call to repentance and warning: Pergamum tolerated the false doctrine and practice of the Nicolaitans. The church needed to repent and remove the heretical cult. It had become a “stumbling block” for new, weak, and immature believers. If the church failed to remove the false teachers, then Jesus said he would do it with the sword of his word. This could mean Jesus would strike them with a terminal illness (1 Cor. 11:30-31).

2:17: Pay attention to what the Spirit says to the churches! Jesus promised “hidden manna” and a white stone with a secret name to those who conquer; those who remain faithful despite severe persecution. The “white stone” with the new name written on it has two possibilities. First, a white stone was a token of vindication or acquittal in court. A black stone meant condemnation. A Roman judge may give a Christian a black stone of condemnation, but Jesus will give a white stone of justification in heaven’s courtroom. Second, a white stone with a person’s name on it was a ticket of admission to feasts in pagan temples. Jesus will give a white stone with a faithful believer’s “new name” as a ticket of admission to the messianic feast of His kingdom.

Pergamum Lesson: Remain faithful despite severe persecution, but do not tolerate false doctrine which leads to sinful compromise and practice because this is not acceptable to the LORD of the church.

Nicolaitans in Ephesus and Pergamum

Now, I will explain who the Nicolaitans were and attempt to provide a contemporary application.

Both churches dealt with the same heretical sect called Nicolaitans. They were the followers of Nicolaus, a false apostle.

Ephesus hated (detested, abhorred) them. Pergamum tolerated them.

Ephesus, 2:6: ⁶ *Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.*

Pergamum, 2:14-16: ¹⁴ *But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling*

block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. ¹⁵ *So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.* ¹⁶ *Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.*

The sin of the Nicolaitans is related to Balaam's sin against Israel in the OT. Read Numbers 22-25. Balaam got paid by Balak the king of Moab to curse Israel, but he could only bless Israel. He failed to curse Israel, but he got paid to recommend a "stumbling block." Moabite women enticed Israelite men to participate in sexual idolatry (i.e. sexual immorality offered as worship to their false gods). The stumbling block would cause God to punish the Israelites.

Balaam's two sins:

First sin, GREED, 2 Peter 2:15-16: *Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray. They have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved gain from wrongdoing, but was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet's madness.*

Second sin, STUMBLING BLOCK, Rev. 2:14. A "stumbling block" (GR *skandalon*) is providing a temptation to sin. The "stumbling block" mentioned in Ephesus and Pergamum was a serious temptation to idolatry and immorality.

The Jerusalem Council decreed that Gentile converts should not eat meat sacrificed to idols or strangled with blood and abstain from sexual immorality (Acts 15:19-21). This decree was made for the purpose of fellowship between Jews and Gentiles and sanctification. The Nicolaitan sect rejected this decree and even advocated active participation in idolatry and immorality in trade guilds and festivals at pagan temples; for example, the big birthday party of Artemis in Ephesus. Participation in an event like this would create a stumbling block for new or weak believers. 1 Corinthians 8 deals with eating meat offered to an idol in a temple as a *skandalon*. It would be a divisive scandal at a fellowship meal with Jews and Gentiles.

A contemporary equivalent would be wearing a mask at church. I wear a mask at church, not because I fear coronavirus. Yes, COVID is real, but it is being abused for political gain. I have read the statistics and science. Most masks are merely placebos like this cloth mask. I wear a mask so I will not offend someone and cause a scandal. I do not want to be a stumbling block for someone.

The main sin of Nicolaitans was abusing the grace of God:

Jude has a graphic description of the Nicolaitan sect: Jude 1:4: *For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness (outrageous behavior) and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.*

They infiltrated "agape/love-feasts" and treated it like pagan temple feasts with meat sacrificed to idols and an opportunity for sexual immorality. They turned *agape* (pure spiritual selfless love) into *eros* and *porneia* (physical love and sexual immorality). They came to the "love feasts" looking for any deviant form of sexual immorality (homosexuality and pedophilia). Jude 1:11-13: ¹¹ *Woe to them! For they have gone the way of Cain, and for pay they have rushed headlong into the error of Balaam and perished in the rebellion of Korah.* ¹² *These are the men who are hidden reefs in your love feasts when they feast with you without fear, caring for themselves; clouds without water, carried along by winds; autumn trees without fruit, doubly dead, uprooted;* ¹³ *wild waves of the sea, casting up their own shame like foam; wandering stars, for whom the black darkness has been reserved forever.*

Any Christian can abuse the grace of God with sinful reasoning: "I can sin now and ask for forgiveness later" or "It's just a little cheating, a little lie; it's not theft, adultery, or murder."

The Nicolaitans created “stumbling blocks” for weaker or immature Christians by compromising with idolatry and immorality. The culture always offers the stumbling blocks of idolatry and immorality to Christians.

What do these stumbling blocks look like today?

There were scandalous stumbling blocks in some famous evangelical churches and ministries (RZIM) during 2020. The scandals involved love of money, fraud and financial misconduct, sexual immorality (Ravi Zacharias), sexual abuse - even minors, spiritual abuse, bullying, and intimidation of church staff by senior pastors.

A big scandal is prosperity gospel preaching and cultural accommodation to attract a crowd. This includes subtle forms of idolatry like “celebrity worship” of a pastor and materialism. The dangers of becoming a “celebrity pastor” are the stumbling blocks of fame and money. The fame and money can become a stumbling block for the pastor, the church members, and the “unsaved” who see it all.

Jesus Christ walks among the 7 lampstands, his churches, and he sees their obedience and their sinful disobedience. Jesus commends their obedience and warns of their lampstand being extinguished if they do not repent.

Ephesus Lesson: Strive to maintain the purity of God’s word and the purity of Christ’s church without losing love for one another. Every church must have doctrinal truth and love for one another.

Pergamum Lesson: Remain faithful despite severe persecution, but do not tolerate false doctrine which leads to sinful compromise and practice because this is not acceptable to the LORD of the church.

Supplemental Section on Scandalous Prosperity Preachers

Jude verse 4: They also turn the grace of our God into *materialism* like “prosperity preachers.” Consider the largest church in America in Houston with 43,500 in attendance (Joel Osteen at Lakewood Church). His net worth \$100 million; 17,000 sq ft house worth 10 million and a

large garage filled with expensive cars like his Ferrari. And don't forget his private jet - \$86 million Airbus!

Consider a church in North Carolina famous for its music (Stephen Furtik at Elevation Church). This celebrity pastor owns a 1.7 million mansion (8400 sq ft, 7.5 bathrooms, 5 bedrooms, gymnasium). He calls it a "gift from God." He has a \$55 million net worth. He wears a new outfit every Sunday that probably costs \$300-400.

Prosperity preaching will make you rich and famous. It's a skandalon.

Even a "celebrity pastor" (John MacArthur) who criticizes prosperity gospel preachers has a net worth of \$14 million and owns three luxury houses. (He owns a 5 bedroom, 4.5 bathroom house in LA worth \$1.5 million with a pool and tennis court and 5-acre ranch with a 7 bedroom, 7.5 bathroom house worth \$800,000 in Colorado Springs.) He and his family preside over a religious media and educational empire that has over \$130 million in assets and generates more than \$70 million a year in tax-free revenue. (Roys Report, 2/3/21, titled *The Prosperous Lifestyle of America's Anti-Prosperity Gospel Preacher*)

Contrast all this excess with how Jesus described his ministry, Matthew 8:20: *"The foxes have holes and the birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."*

Contrast all this excess with how Paul described his ministry, 1 Corinthians 4:11: *Up to this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed and roughly treated and homeless...*

Contrast all this excess with poor Christians in Nepal. A family received Christ and got kicked off the land they were leasing to grow crops and denied access to the village drinking well. They live in a mud shack.

The more devastating scandal is false theology. The celebrity pastor from N. Carolina makes statements that sound like modalism and pantheism (i.e., God is energy and a molecular structure? Jesus returned to the disciples in the form of the Holy Spirit?). He does no exposition of scripture in his sermons; he simply uses scripture as a pretext for "feel good" motivational messages. Exegesis is explaining God's word according to the Holy Spirit's and human author's intention. What he does with the word of God has been called *narcigesis* not exegesis.

So, the doctrine of the Nicolaitans that Jesus hates is a "stumbling block" of lifestyle and teaching that leads to either idolatry or immorality or both.