

Pr Mark Turner: An Introduction to the Seven Churches (13/7/19)

Introduction:

This is the first of an eight part series on the Seven Churches of Revelation. The goal of this particular presentation is to introduce the passage, give it some context and, perhaps the most ambitious goal, hopefully inspire you to come to the rest of the series.

The Seven Churches is perhaps the most overlooked and underrated part of the book of Revelation. We often see this particular part of Revelation as introductory and largely irrelevant before we go on to learn about the prophetic time periods and beasts.

What are the Seven Churches?

Letters written in the first century were written in a different format to what we use today. The style of that time was to introduce yourself and your audience at the beginning of the letter.

Revelation 1:4 - This is John's introduction. It is in this introduction that we learn that this letter is written to the seven churches in the province of Asia Minor. This area was situated on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

Revelation 1:9 - In this verse John introduces the fact that, at the writing of this letter, he was located in Patmos - a penal colony. It is believed that the letter was written around 96A.D. He was there, he tells us, because of the testimony He bore in favour of the gospel. Essentially, he was imprisoned for his faith.

Revelation 1:10,11 - John's cinematic vision was given for the purpose of being delivered to the seven churches of Asia Minor. The list was written down by John in their postal order. These were literal churches. They were centres where people would gather to worship on a regular basis. Ephesus was the Mother Church from which the other six churches were planted. Paul was the first Pastor of the church of Ephesus, followed by Timothy, and then later the Apostle John. This was the place where John, the now elderly Disciple of Jesus, finished his ministry before being exiled on the Island of Patmos.

What are the Angels of the Seven Churches?

As we continue reading the Bible introduces some of the first elements of the vision.

Revelation 1:12-16 - This description of Jesus is amazing. If we could truly picture it I am sure we would all be completely overwhelmed by its glory - and that was kind of the point.

Revelation 1:17 - When John saw this vision of Jesus, the passage tells us that John fell at His feet 'as dead.'

Who was John to Jesus? John was "the disciple whom Jesus loved." In other words, John and Jesus were best friends. Jesus entrusted the care of His mother to John when He was to be crucified. But upon returning to John, Jesus comes in all His glory and radiance and John, like a dead man, falls flat on his face in overwhelmedness. Though the best of friends, John still has to recognise his utter unworthiness to be in the presence of someone so holy.

Revelation 1:17-18 - Then Jesus invites John to stand up, encouraging him that there is no reason to fear because Jesus is back and has conquered death. Their friendship can resume!

Revelation 1:19,20 - In the next verse Jesus tells John that what he is about to see he needs to make a record of because they are things that will surely come to pass.

Revelation 2:1,8,12,18; 3:1,7,14 - Write these things 'to the angel of the church of...'

In the Greek, the word for Angel is 'angelos' which simply means messenger. It has often been interpreted this way throughout history. Even our own SDA pioneers interpreted the passage this way. the challenge with that interpretation is that nowhere else in the book of Revelation is the word 'angelos' commonly interpreted as human messengers.

However, without losing sleep over the exact identity of the angels of the churches, they are certainly representatives of the churches (whether angelic or human).

How should we understand the messages to the seven churches?

Before we dig into the messages to each church for the next seven weeks, it would be wise for us to lay down some interpretive principles to provide us a foundation.

Typical features of each message:

- The City - the prominent features that made that city what it was. These features were often applied to the message of Jesus to that individual church.
- The Church - Each church was unique in its role in the wider region of Asia Minor. By understanding something about them, it will become more apparent why Jesus says what He does to them personally.
- The Correspondent - Jesus introduces Himself differently to each church. This is because He is making Himself relatable to the individual church to which He is speaking. By doing so, He is setting Himself as the answer to their individual problems.
- The Commendation - Most of the churches receive some kind of encouragement specific to their own needs.
- The Concern - Again, most of the churches receive some kind of constructive feedback or rebuke.
- The Command - Then Jesus gave them each a command that would help get them through what was coming down the pike.
- The Counsel - The counsel is then applicable to their individual situation.

The Seven Churches:

1. Messages to the original seven Churches in the province of Asia
 - "To the seven churches that are in Asia" (1:4, 11)
 - The primary application for the messages was to the specific church to which it was given.
2. Timeless truths to all Churches/Christians
 - "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22)
 - The secondary application for the messages was that the principles were
3. Seven periods of Church history
 - This is only applicable as a third interpretive application because the text of scripture doesn't specifically indicate that as an interpretive option.

"The names of the seven churches are symbolic of the church in different periods of the Christian Era. The number 7 indicates completeness, and is symbolic of the fact that the messages extend to the end of time, while the symbols used reveal the condition of the church at different periods in the history of the world." Ellen G White, The Acts of the Apostles, p. 585.

Schaff's seven periods of church history:

1. The apostolic period
2. The period of persecution
3. Union with the State and compromise of principles
4. The Medieval period – Dark Ages
5. Reformation
6. Protestant orthodoxy
7. Worldwide mission and general falling away

Conclusion:

In this series of sermons, we will largely be focussing on the secondary application. This will then guide us as a church by seeing how these timeless principles speak into our individual lives.

So, let us have ears to hear what the Spirit of God wants to say to us individually through these timeless principles!