

Orthodox **AND** Loving  
Rev 2:1-7  
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Have you ever had an annual review?

One of those written or oral reports from the boss wherein your work is evaluated?

Do you remember your report cards from grade school - not just the letter grades but the comments the teacher would make about your performance?

How about a reference letter - have you ever asked someone to write one for you? One of those letters that summarizes your character and competencies?

What did the reviews, the report cards and the references say about you? What is the most accurate description of you?

Now suppose you were reading a description not of you only but of your organization as a whole. How would it read?

Now imagine that review was being written about our church and Jesus was writing it - what would he say about us?

Our church is strong in love and care for people but weak in doctrine.

Our church is strong in doctrine but lax in godly lifestyle.

Our church is strong in sending and supporting missionaries to other places but it neglects people in its own neighborhoods.

Our church has done a good job in teaching the Bible but is weak in caring about and for the poor.

What would he write? How would he characterize us?

What would he affirm or correct?

What if in the letter about our church he mentioned you in particular - what would he say about how you contribute to his assessment of the church?

“Now in regards to Jerry Nelson as a part of the church, I know him to be...”

The 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> chapters of the book of Revelation are letters to seven churches. And they are letters of evaluation. Jesus writes to each church and expresses his assessment of their character and conduct.

Now having said it that way it might sound ominous.

I suspect that you, like me, have a certain dread in mind when we think of annual reviews and report cards.

What if we don't measure up?

Maybe these letters to the 7 churches are better described as letters from a loving and concerned friend - someone who cares deeply for you - who is definitely concerned most of all for your welfare.

And if they write something hard it is not out of meanness but out of a genuine desire to help.

I've had letters come to me that were virtually identical in content but worlds apart in tone and intent.

Often knowing the source will make that difference - one is harsh and vindictive even angry while the other letter, equally confrontational, is loving, healing and corrective.

These letters are the latter.

They are written by Jesus to people he loves.

I would like you, for a minute, to look at the bulletin center which shows these letters in order and demonstrates the similarities of construction.

If you will hold these pages side by side with Ephesus at the far left and Laodicea at the far right you will see how the pages fit.

On the far right side of the first page you will find down that last column are printed seven words corresponding to each row on both pages:

To, From, Affirm, Correction, Command, Call, and Motive

Each of the seven letters is constructed in the same fashion.

Who the letter is to, who it is from, affirmation of their qualities, correction of their sin, a command to respond, a call to listen and a motive for doing so.

Who are these churches, why these churches and why are the letters written in this order.

An accurate representation of western Turkey shows the seven cities to whom John is writing.

Why these cities?

1. Because of John's relationship to them.

Prior to his imprisonment on the island of Patmos, John was likely an itinerant pastor/preacher, maybe even a bishop to the churches in this area.

2. Each of these cities, in that day, was a postal center for the surrounding villages and towns.

You get a letter to each of those cities and it will be spread to all the other churches in that area.

Why this order? Why Ephesus first and Laodicea last?

Probably because of the highway on which they were situated.

The highway ran in a somewhat circular route and each city is named in succession as it appears on the map.

And why start with Ephesus? Because that was the commercial and social center of the region and the city in which John had spend most of his time.

Now before we look at the first letter let me show you another feature of this book that helps us understand the significance of the letters.

Some have wondered how these letters in chapters 2 and 3 fit with the rest of the book.

When we think of the book of Revelation we most often think of the mysterious and sometimes bizarre images depicting the end of the world.

How then do these letters fit with that?

Last week we looked at chapter one with its description of Jesus in all his glory and power.

We saw a Jesus who is more than sufficient to cause history to turn out exactly as he wishes.

We saw also a Jesus who loves his people to the extent that he will certainly cause their histories to turn out exactly as he desires.

That Jesus is the Jesus who is writing to these churches and if you will look at the “from” section of each letter you will notice that Jesus each time refers to himself by mentioning what he has already told them in chapter one.

For example in 2:1 “These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands”

Where did you see that before?

In chapter one’s description of Jesus: 1:13,16 “and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man...and in his right hand he held seven stars...”

At the beginning of each of the seven letters, words are used to tie the reader back to the powerful Jesus who was depicted in chapter one.

Notice something else: If you go to the last section of each letter you will notice that Jesus ties his words in each case to the last part of the book.

For example: in 2:7b “To him who overcomes I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”

Where will we see that again?

In chapter 22:2b “On each side of the river (on the new earth) stood the tree of life...”

At the end of each letter there is a tie-in to what will happen at the end of this world and the establishment of the new heavens and the new earth described in the last chapters of the book.

What’s the point?

In every letter Jesus reminds them of who he is and of his control over all history to the very end - including their histories.

These letters, like the entire book, were written to encourage these people to persevere, to “hang in there” even through the worst of times, even through the times described in the middle of this book, knowing that Jesus was in control and would bring history to its proper conclusion.

These letters are written to encourage the individual churches - the people in those churches, and us.

With that background in mind, let’s go back to the first question asked: How would Jesus describe our church and you as part of it?

When he writes to the church in Ephesus, how accurately is he describing us?

The letter begins in 2:1 with these words:

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus...”

The word translated “angel” can just as accurately be translated “messenger”.

So is the “messenger”, the “angel” one of God’s heavenly created beings that is sent to that church?

It is not crucial to an understanding of the text but most scholars think instead that the “angel” or “messenger” is a reference to the leader of the church as representing each church.

So the letter from Jesus through John is to each church via its pastor.

I have an affection for that interpretation because it is the only way I’ll ever be called an “angel”. (“To Jerry Nelson, the angel of the church in Littleton.”)

Well how does Jesus describe this church and with what are we to compare ourselves as a church?

In the last half of verse 1 Jesus describes himself in a particular way as the one who is writing to them - we'll come back to that in a minute.

But what description does Jesus give of this church?

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: V2 "I know your deeds..."  
When you imagine Jesus looking at our church or even at us individually and saying "I know your deeds", what emotion comes to mind?

Is it an uneasiness, apprehension, even fear?

Too often I have heard sermons or lessons from these letters focusing on how everybody is doing something wrong - how we are messing up.

When I hear, "I know your deeds" I can only imagine what negative words will get said next.

But Jesus' intent is not to demean them or defeat them, but to encourage them.

Notice that when he says, "I know your deeds" he quickly says what he knows: "I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance."

You can almost hear of sigh of relief when the first words out of his mouth aren't condemnation but affirmation.

"I know about your hard work."

These people had a heart for the kingdom of God.

The "hard work" here is a word describing toil which exhausts the person.

This "work" is the work that someone else assigns.

God had assigned them the task of serving faithfully and energetically - and they were.

Many people serve the kingdom with left-over time.

They serve the kingdom of God when it won't overburden them, when they decide to and in the way they decide to.

Imagine an army wherein the soldiers decided when and how far to march and fight!

One of our pastors sent me a note two weeks ago in which he described having called a man and woman in our church asking them if they could help with something.

Their response was (listen carefully): “Yes, what can we do?”

The pastor asked if it would be ethical to clone such people.

By the way these happen to be very busy people.

No, I’m not making a case for always saying “yes” but I am making the point that these Ephesian Christians had the kingdom of God as their highest priority and they worked like it.

That is a fine commendation by Jesus

### **Not only did they work hard but they persevered.**

Jesus said, “I know your hard work and your perseverance”

This word “perseverance” does not describe just coping with things, or just waiting them out or even just bearing up under circumstances.

It describes a person who grabs the situation and by God’s grace makes good come out of it.

It is best described as “Triumphant fortitude” (Barclay p22)

Someone once said, “suffering colors life doesn’t it?” And the response was, “Yes and I intend to change the color”.

Beethoven is reported to have said when deafness descended on him, “I will take life by the throat.”

This is a “triumphant fortitude which transmutes suffering into glory.” (Barclay 23)

Look at verse 3 “You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.”

These people lived in a city where being a Christian who lived by biblical standards and values was not popular.

This city of 250,000 had one of the seven wonders of the ancient world - the temple to Diana which covered more area than two football fields and had 127 impressive 50-60 foot columns all along one side of it all in marble each overlaid with jewels, carvings and gold.

The temple practices were immoral and in those Christians' faces at all times.

Diana (Atemis) was the ancient goddess of fertility - she was a dark squat repulsive figure covered with breasts with a club in one hand and trident in the other.

Worship of her included weird, hysterical, ecstatic happenings.

To shouts and wailing and incense the worshippers would work themselves into a frenzy and then in the darkness, practice the most despicable and shameful things.

There is a letter from that time that describes a darkness as one approached the altar in the temple and stating that the morals of the temple worshippers were worse than dogs - for even promiscuous dogs do not mutilate each other. The letter writer said that he was perpetually sad because he lived among such wretched immorality. (Barclay p 17-19)

Those believers had to walk and live among that temptation at all times just like you have to walk past newsstands or checkout counters, or flip through the TV channels or select movies very carefully so that you don't get desensitized to immorality and succumb to forms of it yourselves.

Whether it is immorality, or unethical behavior, or degrading humor, or greed - whatever it is, it is always in your face - it is not always easy.

Jesus doesn't say they're perfect but these Christians apparently have matured in their faith to the point they largely resisted those temptations, they withstood the subtle and not-so-subtle attacks from colleagues or neighbors or even family.

And so focused on the kingdom of God and so committed were they to Jesus' Word and will that they didn't even complain about how hard it was.

Apparently many of them had been in situations where their commitment to Christ put them in a real bind with their families, their employers, some of their friends, their instructors, or whoever AND they had to make a choice and they chose to be faithful to Jesus.

How many times in the high school or university classroom does it happen?

How many times in social settings?

How many times in work situations are we asked to compromise?

They were under those kinds of pressures much and they remained faithful.

And they didn't give up or develop martyr complexes or whine - They just believed and pressed on.

Not only that, look at the last half of verse 2: "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."

Many years earlier the apostle Paul had written to this same church and had warned them to beware of teachers who would come among them and lead them into false doctrine which would result in sinful living.

These people responded to that warning and they were theologically astute and doctrinally sound.

They had a commitment to the scriptures - they would test every thing that is said and suggested to see whether it complied with God's word.

They were sensitive to false teaching in its slightest forms and they were quick to point it out and correct it.

And if those who didn't hold correct doctrine wouldn't repent of it then this church was quick to put such people out - discipline was swift and certain.

So committed to the Word of God and so opposed were they to false teaching or living that they V6 "(hated) the practices of the Nicolaitans which Jesus also hates"

As best we can tell from ancient history, the Nicolaitans were followers of a man by that name - just as in our day there are Lutherans or Wesleyans.

But the founder of this group who purported to be a Christian twisted the idea of Christian liberty to allow for anything - They actually made idol worship and immorality part of their "Christian" practice.

But these believers in Ephesus would have nothing to do with it.

I want that kind of commitment to God's Word and to truth to be ours at SGC.

To have it said of us that **we are people who know, teach, and live** life according to the Word of God, would be a high tribute indeed.

We dare not be sloppy about what truth is.

Yes, we can differ on minor theological issues but we can not, we must not give an inch on the fundamental truths of the gospel:

Jesus is fully God who became fully a human being to die in our place.

There is no other name given among men whereby we may be saved than the name of Jesus.

Faith in Jesus is the only condition for salvation - not faith plus anything.

Only the death of Jesus (nothing else) could cover our sins

It could be said of the Ephesian church and I want it to be said of us by Jesus, "they are people of the Book".

But Jesus has some correction for the Ephesians.

2:4 "Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love."

Now I know this is a serious charge and I don't want to underestimate how important it is to respond to what Jesus is saying here but neither do I believe Jesus is here beating these people up the way I have sometimes heard this passage preached.

When I consider the intention of the book and when I see the Jesus depicted in Revelation 1 - I do not here see a Jesus carrying a big stick and wandering through his church seeking out whoever doesn't have the right attitude so He can punish them.

The Jesus who says "you have forsaken your first love" is the same Jesus who we are reminded in 2:1 holds the seven stars in his right hand.

It is that right hand that Jesus used in 1:17 when John was scared to death and Jesus said, as he touched him, "Do not be afraid..."

It is in that tender right hand that Jesus holds those churches - and that word "holds" is not the one used of someone holding a large book where you have hold of just a piece of it but like someone holding a small coin - the coin is fully protected in the hand.

It is that Jesus who affirms them for their doctrinal integrity - their commitment to the Bible but now lovingly corrects them for a loss of love.

When Paul wrote to these Ephesians years earlier, he commended them for their love. What happened?

A new generation had grown up (older ones were still there but younger ones were in the majority).

These did not know Jesus in the same way - was it a whole class of second generation Christians?

On the surface the church looked the same - the same institutions, services, same by-laws, same practices, same commitment to truth, but something was lacking - love

Centuries ago someone wrote: "The first generation will be holy, the second will be learned (knowledge without love) and the third worldly."

Were these Christians too quick to quarrel about theology?

It was said of some 17th Century French Protestants: (paraphrased) "I was amazed at their labor and learning. They understood the Scriptures well. They were ready always to argue their case well. They were engaged in much good religious activity - teaching and helping others.

But something was missing - their prayers were hollow, their lessons accurate but dead, and always too ready to pounce on anyone who didn't agree with their point of view." (Trench p87 footnote)

Their attention to rooting out false doctrine made them susceptible to being critical, a sharp eye and tongue that was not tempered by grace and love for each other.

Discipline became punitive rather than reconciling.

Discussion of Doctrine became a basis of separation rather than enlarging their understanding in humility and love.

This group might even have read this book and fought over when the rapture would take place and whether there would be a literal millennium or not.

Their religion had lost its heart, its tenderness, its affection, its openness to others in the church.

They had so satisfactorily dotted all your theological "i"s and crossed their doctrinal "t"s that anyone who didn't agree with them on nearly every point was odd-man out.

This is not a plea for doctrinal sloppiness or an inclusivism that disregards heresy but it is a plea for battling for the faith with gentleness and humility.

Has someone sinned in our midst? How do we treat them?

Do we rise up to expel them, to ostracize them, to make an example of them?

Are we more concerned with being right about our understanding of doctrine and morality than we are about the brother or sister in the Lord who has sinned?

And what about our love for Jesus - has it grown cold, academic.

We know who he is.

We believe who he is.

We trust who he is.

We even pray telling God what we need.

But we don't spend time with him.

We don't enjoy him we just use him.

Jesus says remember what it used to be like - how tender our relationship was when you first knew the freedom of sins forgiven? ("Remember the height from which you have fallen")

Remember how you couldn't get enough of my Word?

Remember when you longed to tell people about Me?

You are orthodox but your love toward Me and each other has grown cold.

Then in Verse 5 we also see the remedy:

Jesus says, Remember, repent and return (or do the things you did at first).

When Daniel Webster was a young lawyer in New Hampshire he met a lovely young woman named Grace Fletcher.

She was his first love and he couldn't seem to spend too much time in her presence.

With her parents as the chaperones he would spend hour after hour in her home holding skeins of silk as she unknotted the thread - anything to be near her.

After months on one visit her parents stepped out of the room for a minute and Webster found the courage to ask her, "Grace, we have been untying these silken knots for weeks together. I think it is time we tie a knot which will not be untied for a lifetime."

Speechless, wide eyed and with a heart that was pounding Grace watched Daniel take a piece of red ribbon and tie an elaborate knot in it - he handed it to her and she with trembling hands and heart she added a knot of her own to his - "this silent act was the ceremony of their engagement".

They were married for 21 years before her death.

And although he lived for many more years - he never forgot his first love.

After his death a box was found marked "Precious Documents". In it were the letters between him and Grace exchanged during their engagement and marriage.

They were well worn - having been read and re-read many times through

the years.

And in the box was one other item - a length of red ribbon with that intricate knot. (from Stedman p23)

Apparently, time and time again he went back to the beginning.

I'm not arguing for sentimentalism - I'm urging a return to first things:

Pouring over his Word, reflecting on his love, engaging him in prayer, spending time in his presence.

Repent - turn away from the busyness that keeps you from him.  
Today find the time to get into his presence.

Let your love be rekindled.

Let him say of you and of us – this church is orthodox AND loving.