

The Seven City-Churches of Revelation 2 and 3

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for Dr. Brian Walsh
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The Book of Revelation bears significant importance for *a theology of the city*. It sets in juxtaposition the cities of Babylon and the New Jerusalem, and in chapters 2 and 3 seven messages are delivered to the city-churches of Asia Minor. These messages offer us a rare glimpse into the relation of the church to the city. In these messages, the exalted Jesus, through the apostle John, addresses seven churches¹ with reference to their respective cities. Through these letters and a comparison of the historical situations of the seven cities, we have the opportunity to explore Jesus' thoughts regarding how he wants his church to interact with the city. What do these churches get right? Where do they go wrong? What is Jesus' desire for them in their specific city contexts? It is my hope that a historical reading of Revelation 2 and 3 will yield fruitful insights to these questions.

The seven churches will be viewed in four groupings: (1) Ephesus will be treated on its own as its situation emerges as unique among the seven; (2) Sardis and Laodicea will be considered in tandem as churches that have given into the spirit of Rome and as a result, look no different than their respective cities; (3) Pergamum and Thyatira will be handled together as churches marked by a spirit of compromise and accommodation; and (4) Smyrna and Philadelphia will be treated together as faithful churches that receive unmitigated praise from Jesus. We will begin by exploring the context of these churches.

¹ Although these are seven real churches in Asia minor, John's choice to use the number "7", the symbolic number for completeness, means these are messages for the complete church, through time and space. Darrell W. Johnson, *Discipleship on the Edge: An Expository Journey through the Book of Revelation* (Vancouver: Regent College, 2004), 51.

The Context of the Seven City-Churches

We live in a society that is vastly different than the first century Greco-Roman context in which John was writing. Such a disparity between our contexts means that we tend to hear these messages with modern ears and miss what their significance for the ancient audience for whom they were written.

We live in a culture, for example, where traveling hundreds of kilometers to a ‘neighbouring’ city can happen as a spontaneous decision to “hop in the car and go”. Technology, for better or worse, has allowed for humans to travel at unprecedented speeds and intervals of time. Our mobility is such that to hear of people traveling hundreds of kilometers on a daily basis is commonplace. It is also common for people to live in several cities in their lifetime, let alone several countries or continents. In my relatively short amount of years, I have already lived in three cities, two of which are considered major Canadian metropolises. Our perspective on the city is shaped by modern phenomena, such as the internal combustion engine, which were unknown to our ancient counterparts.

What does this have to do with the letters to the seven cities and their churches? Absolutely nothing. And this is the point that must here be made. Our notions of travel, the notion of knowing the world outside of one’s city, the notion of living in a plurality of cities in one’s lifetime, have nothing to do with the ancient worldview. Such notions did not exist. For a middle class man to live in three cities by the age of 24 would be unheard for common citizens of ancient Greco-Roman cities. The notion of travel is but one of *many* differences between pre-industrial and post-industrial societies. We need

to acknowledge such disparities between our worldview the ancient worldview in order to the the letters to the seven churches faithfully.

When John writes the *Revelation of Jesus Christ* and sends it out as a circular letter throughout the churches of Asia minor, he is writing to people who, for the most part, have lived in the same place their whole life. They likely had a much stronger “sense of place”, or attachment to their city, than we tend to have in modern North American cities.

The city in Greco-Roman culture was a place of immense privilege, and citizenship in a city was viewed as a privilege, not as a right. The city was the place where order and peace were seen to preside under the auspices of human government, a place where the arts and literature could flourish to the enjoyment of the elite, and a place where the dangers of the countryside were kept out by fortified city-walls.² The dominant conviction in the Greco-Roman world was that in order to rise above the status of barbarism, one had to be a member of a city.

Man’s bodily and animal existence might be satisfied by the country; his spiritual needs could only be satisfied by the town; hence the town was at once the symptom and symbol of all that was highest and most precious in human life, all that raises man above the beasts of the field.³

The notion of *polis*, in Greco-Roman culture, carried with it salient undertones of elitism and privilege. The expectation placed on the citizenry was the dutiful

² Richard Warren Johnson, “Urban Persons, City and Identity in the Book of Revelation,” in *Essays on Revelation*, ed. Gerald L. Stevens (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 102.

³ Richard Warren Johnson, 100.

participation in the social, economic, political, and religious activities of the city. The expectation of conformity placed on a citizen was an altogether holistic affair, requiring full immersion into the values and ethos of the city.⁴ We must allow these Greco-Roman beliefs to shape our reading of the letters to the seven churches.

The principle reason citizenship in a Roman city was a holistic commitment is because in the Roman Empire the lines between religion, politics, economics, and social institutions did not exist.⁵ Trade guilds had patron gods that the members of the guild were expected to hallow.⁶ Roman cities would have temples built and dedicated to certain gods, like the temple to Artemis in Ephesus.⁷ The spirituality of Rome permeated every aspect of life in the Roman Empire.

A central part of the religious, and therefore political, economic, and social life of cities in the Roman Empire, was the imperial cult. The cities of the Roman empire, after Rome's lead, took to deifying Roman Emperors, adding them to their pantheon of gods.⁸ The imperial cult was part of Rome's attempt at representing and propagating its power. Rome used religion as a beachhead for the advancement of its domain. Political allegiance to such a kingdom was then naturally expressed in terms of religious worship.⁹

Two major images are used in the book of Revelation to speak about the power of Rome. The first is the *beast*. The beast first rears its head in chapter 13 as the “beast of

⁴ Richard Warren Johnson, 113.

⁵ Brian K. Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 9.

⁶ Blount, 9.

⁷ Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 35

⁸ Richard Baukham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 38.

⁹ *Ibid*, 34.

the sea” (13.1) to whom Satan (the dragon) gives his power and throne and authority. The people of the earth are said to worship Satan through his bestowal of power upon the beast, saying, “who is like the beast, and who is able to wage war with him?” (13.4). They praise the beast for his brute strength and power. The beast is representative of Roman imperial power which was founded upon the sheer military might of the Roman Empire, revered by many to be invincible.¹⁰

The second image used to speak of Rome is the city of *Babylon* (14.8), which is subsequently represented as the great *harlot* (17.5). Rome is imaged as *Babylon*, the ‘great’ city of the Old Testament which had gained its reputation as the archetypal enemy of God. Babylon was the imperial powerhouse that destroyed Jerusalem in 587 BCE and inaugurated Israel’s exile.¹¹ Rome is further imaged as the *harlot*. While lamenting the potential demonizing effect such imagery might have on the image of women, Brian Blount comments, “The evil that John fears is so manipulative and seductive that his only parallel for it is the seductive evil of the prostituting whore.”¹² The harlot’s raiment of purple and scarlet, and her adornment with gold, precious stones, and pearls are meant to seduce and entice the people’s of the earth into drinking of her cup—the blood of the saints (17.6), the wine of her passion (18.3). Indeed she does enticed the nations, and kings have “committed acts of immorality with her and the merchants of the earth have become rich by the wealth of her sensuality” (18.3).

¹⁰ Richard Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics*, 87.

¹¹ Blount, 274.

¹² *Ibid*, 10.

Injustice is a salient mark of the beast and the harlot. The list in Revelation 18.12–13 of the cargoes of the merchants of Babylon ends with “slaves, that is, human lives.” Richard Bauckham comments, “It [the mention of human lives] is a comment on the whole list of cargoes . It suggests the inhuman brutality, the contempt for human life, on which the whole of Rome’s prosperity and luxury rests.”¹³ The wealth of Rome was tainted by the human blood it had shed.

The churches that are addressed in Revelation 2 and 3 are city-churches that find themselves in the midst of a culture has been seduced by the wiles of the beast and the harlot. Although the Roman Empire was a system of tyranny and exploitation, most of its subjects had been cajoled by the propaganda of the Empire and could not see it for what it really was. The ideology of the so-called *pax Romana* had convinced Roman subjects that they had the benefit of the protection and security of Rome. The *pax Romana* included the promise of sharing in the wealth of Empire and the glory of Rome, the “self-proclaimed eternal city.”¹⁴

Richard Bauckham highlights that in Revelation 17 and 18, the primary meaning of the *harlot* image is economic. The harlot is used in the Old Testament in Isaiah’s prophecy against Tyre, which is called a harlot. Tyre’s commercial dealings are compared with prostitution because of its partnership with other nations for the sake of profit. The image of the harlot also denotes the practice of religious idolatry, and Israel’s

¹³ Richard Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 368. quote in Blount, 334.

¹⁴ Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 36.

unfaithfulness to God when it adopted the idolatrous pagan practices of its neighbours (eg. Jeremiah 3.8–9).¹⁵

We see then that the evil powers at work in the culture which the seven city-churches inhabit manifest themselves in *all* aspects of Roman society. At every turn, the church is confronted with the idolatrous and exploitative ideology of the Empire. In social circles, in trade guilds, and in public spaces, believers that lived in the cities of Rome were pressured to compromise their allegiance to Jesus Christ by immersing themselves in the spirit and ethos of Rome. As the privileged citizens of Roman cities, why should they not? Why should they not show gratitude for the prosperity procured by the military and economic might of Rome? They ought to resist because the fundamental conviction of the church, that “Jesus is *kyrios*,” is compromised when the people of Jesus participate in a system that has as its heartbeat the confession, “Caesar is *kyrios*.” “The nature of Roman power is such that, if Christians are faithful witnesses to God, then they must suffer the inevitable clash between Rome’s divine pretensions and their witness to the true God.”¹⁶ The prophetic perspective of Revelation acts as a corrective lens for the church by naming the courtesies of Rome for what they are: “the favours of a prostitute, bought at a high price.”¹⁷

The Seven Letters to the Seven City-Churches

Having probed the context of the Roman Empire, we are now primed and ready to delve into the messages themselves. Jesus delivers them to the churches while he

¹⁵ Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics*, 89–91.

¹⁶ Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 38.

¹⁷ Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics*, 89.

stands in the midst of seven lampstands, the churches themselves (1.13–20). He is concerned for his churches because he knows what they are up against, and he sends them these messages so that they might *overcome* the perils of the beast and the harlot (2.7; 2.11; 2.17; 2.26; 3.5; 3.12; 3.21).¹⁸

The letters come to the churches in the form a of a mixture of two genres; (1) the prophetic oracle, and (2) the imperial edict.¹⁹ The *tade legei* (thus says) formula used to introduce each message signals that the words that follow are words of prophecy, just as the LORD introduces his prophetic oracles in the Old Testament (eg. Exod 4.22; 5.1; Isaiah 1.24; Jer 2.5). Jesus is thus presents himself as God speaking to his redeemed people.

The *tade legei* formula also introduces the messages to their hearers as imperial edict. “Thus says,” was typically used to introduce imperial decrees in both the Persian and Roman Empires. These edicts would come to local municipalities and offer both praise, censure, and exhortations to do good and to avoid the bad.²⁰ Thus in addition to presenting himself as God, Jesus presents himself as Emperor, as the true *kyrios*, of whom the ‘lordship’ of Caesar is but a satanic mockery.²¹

Ephesus

¹⁸ Johnson, *Discipleship on the Edge*, 48.

¹⁹ David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5* (Dallas: Word, 1997), 128–129. so also Blount, 47–48 and Johnson, *Discipleship*, 50–51.

²⁰ Aune, 128.

²¹ Hemer, 87.

The city of Ephesus was plausibly the most illustrious cities of Asia Minor²² and held the title “first city of Asia.”²³ It was a great seaport and a center of travel and trade. It also housed the seat of Roman government for the province of Asia. Furthermore, Ephesus was a major center for the imperial cult, having six temples dedicated to various Caesars and to the goddess Roma.²⁴ It was a political, religious, and economic foundry for the machinations of the Roman Empire in Asia Minor.

The Ephesian church is lauded by Jesus for its toil and perseverance (2.2). These words emphasize the strenuous and exhausting labour that this church had to expend in its efforts to remain faithful to Jesus.²⁵ They are praised for their shrewdness in not putting up with evil men and in testing those who claimed to be apostles (2.2). Perseverance is credited to them and Jesus commends them for how they have endured and not grown weary (2.3). It has also despised the deeds of the Nicolaitans, most likely a group of antinomian Christians that justified their capitulation to the pressures of the imperial cult and thereby compromised their faith in Christ.²⁶ This church had painstakingly resisted the pressure to compromise their faith and take part in the idolatries of the Empire.

Praise, however, gives way to censure as Jesus informs this church that it is deeply flawed. It has lost its “first love” (2.4). Somewhere along the road on its quest for purity of doctrine and its resistance to the influence of Rome, it had lost its affection for,

²² Aune, 154.

²³ Johnson, *Discipleship*, 65.

²⁴ Aune, 154.

²⁵ Johnson, *Discipleship*, 55.

²⁶ Hemer, 94.

and intimacy with Christ. It has lost the tenderness of the bride/bridegroom relationship with its Lord.²⁷

The case of Ephesus shows us that it is not enough to be zealous for correct doctrine, and guarded against the infiltration of false teaching. For the church to be faithful in the city, it must maintain its affectionate first-love for Christ, without neglecting its vigilance for purity. Indeed, its desire for purity must stem from its covenant relation to Christ who

gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish (Ephesians 5.26–27).

I want to suggest that the problem with the church in Ephesus is that it lost its focus on Christ because it took to defining itself with respect to the evil at work in the city. It is likely that it had started out by deriving its identity positively in relation to Christ, but over time, it began to define itself in a relation of oppositional self-definition with the city. Rather than being the *church for* the cause of Christ, it became the *church against* the cause of Rome–beast and harlot. In so becoming, it had lost its “first love”. The church must not become overly preoccupied with the evils of the world to the point where it loses sight of the goodness and love that are in Christ.

Sardis and Laodicea

²⁷ Johnson, *Discipleship*, 57.

Sardis and Laodicea were both cities of significant economic prosperity that thrived through commerce. Sardis had been a rival of Ephesus and Smyrna as a leading city of Asia Minor. It was built on a hill and was thereby thought to be militarily unassailable. This perceived invulnerability proved to be a curse as the city fell prey to a chronic lack of vigilance, and was captured on a few occasions before the first century.

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The church of Sardis was *reputed* to be alive and active; it is said to be the largest and wealthiest of the seven churches.²⁹ They likely had full meetings and good doctrine, yet Jesus calls it for what it is: dead. So Jesus calls it to “wake up! And keep being watchful!”³⁰ The church of Sardis seemed to have fallen into the same lackadaisical vigilance as the city of Sardis.

The city of Laodicea was built on a prominent trade route. It had acquired its vast amount of wealth from its banking sector and its textile industry, trading of fine black cloth made from sheep’s wool. Laodicea’s location had been chosen for its road-junction, with the ramification that it had no local supply of water.³¹ Water had to be brought to the city by way of a six mile long aqueduct. By the time the water arrived in the city, any freshness it had once had was gone.³² Lukewarmness is a trait that was shared by this city and its church (3.16).

²⁸ Hemer, 133.

²⁹ Johnson, *Discipleship*, 96.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 100.

³¹ Hemer, 188–189.

³² Gerhard Krodel, *Revelation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 116.

Another commonality that the church of Laodicea had with its city was a spirit of self-sufficiency. This was a church that said about itself, “I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing” (3.17). In 60 BCE, Laodicea had been leveled by a severe earthquake. In cases of such disaster, cities would usually appeal to Rome for assistance in rebuilding the city. Laodicea did not send such an appeal and rebuilt itself using its own resources. Furthermore, the city demonstrated its pride in its ability to reconstruct itself by erecting great public buildings as a monument.³³ The spirit of self-sufficiency had seeped into the church, likely as a result its material wealth that it had acquired as a result of its participation in the economic activities of the city.

It is important to note that Jesus offers no praise offered to either of these churches, nor is mention made of any persecution or struggle they were undergoing. I think this tells us something about the relation of these churches to their cities. If being a *faithful* follower of Christ in the Roman Empire meant an inevitable clash with the pretensions of the imperial cult, then we might suggest that where no such clash occurred, the faithfulness of the church may have been in question. It is unlikely that these churches were able to fully abstain from the imperial cult and be as affluent as they were, since it was difficult for an uncompromising Christian to earn a living in a Roman city.³⁴

The problem in the cases of Sardis and Laodicea is that the relation between church and city is characterized by a sheer lack of distinction. In both cases, the church

³³ Hemer, 194, 208.

³⁴ G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 35.

looks no different that the city it inhabits. The city of Sardis is lazy and inattentive, the church of Sardis is dead and innocuous.³⁵ It needs to wake up. The city of Laodicea is self-sufficient and the church of Laodicea has need of nothing, or so it thinks (cf. 3.17b). They have taken part in the system of Rome – the economics and idolatry of the beast and the harlot, and have thereby forsaken their allegiance to Christ. The case of these two churches ought to cause an uneasiness to arise within us when we see churches that look too similar to their surroundings. In such cases it is likely that the church become drowsy and lukewarm, and has lost its prophetic edge.

Pergamum and Thyatira

Pergamum and Thyatira come to us as examples of churches that show an earnest desire to be faithful to Christ, yet who succumb to compromising with the imperial cult by allowing its influence into the church. Pergamum was an important centre for the imperial cult, with a temple dedicated to Augustus Caesar and the goddess Roma.³⁶ Pergamum is said to be the place where Satan's throne is (2.13), this is most likely a reference to a time of heated persecution for the Christians of this city. The martyrdom of Antipas is mentioned as Jesus offers significant praise the church of Pergamum for holding fast to his name while undergoing persecution (2.13). This church was feeling the “clash” with the imperial cult.

Pergamum also receives a reprimand for its tolerance of the “teaching of Balaam” to which some its members had ascribed (2.14). Through the teaching of Balaam, some

³⁵ Caird, 48.

³⁶ Aune, 182.

of the Pergamites had stumbled into eating food sacrificed to idols and committed acts of immorality, perhaps in the context of participating in a meal at a pagan temple, or perhaps during a public festival.³⁷ The Nicolaitans are also mentioned, but unlike the church in Ephesus, the church of Pergamum has not been careful enough to keep their teaching of accommodation with Rome out of the church. The warning comes to this church to repent of this compromise within her ranks (2.16).

There is scarce historical material on Thyatira, but a few comments can be made as to its identity as a city. It was a city that had a significant industry of metallurgy. The prominence of its metal industry made it a city of significant military importance with its capacity for the manufacture weapons for the armies of Rome.³⁸

As with Pergamum, Jesus has both praise and reproof for the church in Thyatira. The church seemed to have been growing and maturing through its perseverance. The mention of perseverance indicates that this church, unlike Sardis and Laodicea, was experiencing struggle and perhaps even opposition. Yet in the midst of its perseverance, this church had tolerated the presence of “the woman Jezebel.” Jezebel may or may not have been the real name of a false prophetess in the church. Regardless, she taught Christians that they should participate in the idolatrous activities of the trade guilds so that they could earn a living. The teaching of Jezebel was a serious threat to the integrity of this church, and may have been similar to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.³⁹

³⁷ Aune, 186.

³⁸ Hemer, 113, 127.

³⁹ Hemer, 128.

The salient problem with the churches of Pergamum and Thyatira lay in their indulgence of teaching that encouraged believers to compromise with the beast and the harlot. In Thyatira, the temptations seem to be particularly economic in nature – to take part in the cultic aspects of the trade guilds in order to maintain membership in them, and thereby be able to earn a living. The church in Pergamum had a similar problem of giving place to a teaching of accommodation with the beast and the harlot. The burden placed on each church is that of repentance – of rooting out the teachings of Balaam, Jezebel, and of the Nicolaitans, teachings which at their heart encouraged Christians to compromise with Rome.

Smyrna and Philadelphia

Smyrna and Philadelphia are the only city-churches that receive unmitigated praise from Jesus. Neither are told to repent, and both are lauded for their faithfulness. Smyrna was a very wealthy port city, located forty miles north of Ephesus.⁴⁰ It rivaled Ephesus as the “first city of Asia,”⁴¹ and though Ephesus officially took the title, Smyrna still minted its coinage with the inscription “Smyrna, first of Asia.” It was renowned for the beauty of its architecture⁴² and was a center for the imperial cult.⁴³ It was in every respect a successful cosmopolitan city.

We learn from the message to the church in Smyrna that the church looked nothing like the city it inhabited. This church was poor (2.9) and was a persecuted group within a city of worldly wealth and beauty. Its poverty may have been caused by

⁴⁰ Aune, 159.

⁴¹ Johnson, *Discipleship*, 65.

⁴² Hemer, 59.

⁴³ Aune, 175.

(1) the church being persecuted by plundering mobs, (2) the church's generosity to the poor, (3) the difficulty of earning a living without taking part in the practices of trade guilds in a pagan city, or (4) the fact that the gospel of Christ attracted poor folks to the church.⁴⁴

The reference to the "slander of the Jews" and the "synagogue of Satan" indicates that this church was met with opposition from non-believing Jews. At this point in time, the Jesus movement was not yet viewed as a separate entity from Judaism, but rather as a *sect of* Judaism. Jesus was after all not starting a *new* movement, but came as the fulfillment of Jewish Law (Matthew 5.17). In the Roman Empire Jews enjoyed the special favour of being exempt from imperial cultic obligations. In the case of Smyrna it appears that at its beginnings, the church had maintained its close association with Judaism and was thereby exempt from the imperial cult. Christians, however, came to be denounced by the Jews of Smyrna as not true Jews, and were thereby obligated under law to partake in the imperial cult.⁴⁵ However, the church of Smyrna, while finding itself in this difficult situation, remained faithful to Christ and accepted the poverty and affliction resulting from their refusal to take part in the cult.

Philadelphia was not a wealthy city like Smyrna. Its region was often hit with earthquakes, likely caused by the eruptions of a nearby volcano. One such earthquake had leveled Philadelphia in 17 CE. The city was rebuilt with help from Rome, but never fully recovered.⁴⁶ Agriculture was the main economic activity of the city as the volcano

⁴⁴ Hemer, 68.

⁴⁵ Aune, 176.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 244.

had nurtured a rich soil that was very good for grapevines.⁴⁷ The city did not have a very large population as many of its citizens took up residence outside city-walls to be near to their fields.⁴⁸

The church of Philadelphia had “little power”, yet it had kept Jesus’ word and not denied his name (3.8). “Little power” suggests that this was a small church lacking in clout in a city that itself was not particularly powerful. The church in Philadelphia endured similar persecution to the Smyrneans – the “synagogue of Satan” being a source of affliction (3.9). In AD 92, right around the time Revelation was written, the Emperor Domitian had issued a drastic edict that banned viticulture in order to substitute grape crops for corn. This edict hit Philadelphia especially hard.⁴⁹ If there was ever a Roman city that might become disenfranchised with the Emperor and the imperial cult, it would be Philadelphia. Perhaps this situation was part of the the “open door”, that Jesus had placed before the Philadelphian church. In the wake of imperial disappointment, the gospel of “He who is holy and true” (3.7) might find a people hungering for true hope and a true Emperor in the city of Philadelphia.

The city-churches of Smyra and Philadelphia are faithful and set before us a positive example. In the case of Smyrna, we see a poor church living in a city that was a center for Roman economic and religious activity. In its context, aware of the wiles of the beast and the harlot, the Smyrnan church refused to partake in the trade guilds to earn a living. It chose obedience and faithfulness over material prosperity and comfort,

⁴⁷ Aune, 244

⁴⁸ Ibid, 236.

⁴⁹ Hemer, 175.

and is offered high praise by Jesus for doing so. The Philadelphian believers also remained faithful to Christ in spite of Jewish opposition and despite their lack of power. They both abstained from the idolatries of Rome and they show us that faithfulness to Christ takes precedence over the physical comfort and well-being of the church.

Conclusion

We've journeying through Jesus' messages to the seven city-churches of Asia Minor and gleaned helpful insights from each one. The message that we ought to hear loud and clear is Jesus' desire for his churches not to defile themselves and drink from the cup of the harlot. Practically, this necessitated the separation of the church from all the activities of Rome that would compromise the church's allegiance to Christ as *Domine et Deus*. This was a costly separation, as shown in the cases of Smyrna and Philadelphia, but one for which they are commended.

It would be a mistake to walk away from these messages thinking that separation from the *city* is what is needed to be faithful to Christ. This is simply not so. What faithfulness requires is the separation of the church from those elements of society, which the city tends epitomize, that lead the church down the path of compromise and set it against the purposes and mission of God. These are the things that the harlot, or Babylon uses to draw the people of the earth into her idolatries.

In our context, the question that must be posed is: "Where do we see the dainties of Babylon at work in drawing the church into idolatry?" After all, Rome is not the only referent for the image Babylon the harlot. Darrell Johnson points out that we see many cases of "Babylon" in the Bible. "Babel—Babylon—is a code word for humanity seeking

to build the city without God.”⁵⁰ Thus, Nineveh is Babylon, Tyre is Babylon, Babylon is Babylon, and Rome is Babylon. Subsequent to Rome, Babylon continues to manifest itself in the cities and states that have sought to build without God.

Johnson highlights seven “marks of Babylon” that we must be flee from: (1) excluding God, (2) Sensuality, (3) Injustice, (4) the worship of products, (5) violence, (6) deception and counterfeit, and (7) idolatry. As the church lives and participates in the modern city, it must take care to discern where these powers are at work in drawing us into the machinations of Babylon. The difficulty that I see, and what often frustrates me, is that these are forces that are often at work in hidden and forgotten ways. In Revelation 2 and 3 the evils that threatened the seven city-churches seem so obvious and easy to identify, and therefore easy to abstain from. But my perspective is through the lens of retrospect and Scripture.

⁵⁰ Johnson, *Disciplehip*, 299.

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