

THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF JESUS'S MESSAGES TO THE CHURCHES IN ASIA: A STUDY OF REVELATION 2.*

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Abstract: *This paper highlights the importance and challenges of fulfilling one of the central themes of Revelation, being and remaining faithful witness to the end through prioritising love for Jesus and others. It also examines the contemporary relevance of the letters to the churches in Ephesus and Smyrna, what Jesus meant by first love, and the discrepancy between Jesus's emphasis on love and faithfulness versus the present-day's focus on knowledge, service and prosperity. Employing the eclectic approach, the study combines different interpretive methods. A significant conclusion is that without love for God and others the Christian witness is at best compromised.*

Introduction

This article will examine how loving Jesus and making him the primary object of one's love ought to be the believer's priority. John's overall aim in Revelation is to encourage believers to be faithful witnesses unto the end. This main purpose ties in with the theme of love – love for God and love for others which fuels perseverance in faithful witness. The study will emphasise the importance and contemporary relevance of Jesus's messages of hope, comfort, warning, and challenge to the churches in Revelation (Rev 2-3). John's portrayal of Jesus in Revelation depicts Jesus's views on issues related to love and its manifestations, including faithfulness, suffering, poverty, and prosperity. By emphasising the theme of love Revelation highlights the consistency between Jesus's teaching in the Gospels and his teaching in Revelation. During his earthly ministry Jesus made it clear that loving God with all of the heart, soul and mind, and loving one's neighbours as oneself are the greatest commandments upon which hang all the laws and prophets.¹ He also taught that those who love him would obey his teachings and attract the father's love.²

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¹ Matt. 22:36-40.

² John 14:23.

Revelation 2-3 is important and relevant for the contemporary church because it emphasises the struggle to keep Jesus as the first object of our love. These letters indicate both perennial challenges to and manifestations of that love.

Authors such as Jim Taylor and Grant Osborne acknowledge that the book of Revelation is difficult to interpret. While some question the modern relevance of the book, others neglect Revelation because they find its message and imageries difficult to understand and yet others fear the judgements of God pronounced in it.³ I argue in this article that Revelation 2-3 is important and relevant for the contemporary church because it emphasises the struggle to love God single-heartedly and to demonstrate that love in selfless obedience to his commandments. These letters are applicable to the modern Western church because it is an extension of the early church to which Revelation was originally given. Terrifying, though it is, and despite its warnings and challenges, Revelation is a message of reassurance to Christians⁴ today as it was to those in the early church. To disregard Jesus's messages in Revelation 2-3 would amount to overlooking some of his core instructions to his followers. Therefore, to enhance readers' understanding, this study will explore specifically the contemporary relevance to the Western church of two of the messages to the churches in Revelation 2-3, those to Ephesus and Smyrna.

The second section of this article discusses the hermeneutical approach. In the third section I will investigate the concept of *church* as it was used in John's time and how it is used today. I will examine the characteristics of the early local churches and those of the contemporary Western local churches and explore the relationship between them. In the fourth section of this article I will analyse the message to the church in Ephesus, comparing it with the message to the church in Smyrna while highlighting the meaning of the messages in the context of the early church. In the fifth and final section I will discuss the contemporary relevance of these messages.

Why Ephesus?

I will focus on and explore the message to the church in Ephesus for an in-depth study because, of the seven letters written to the churches in Asia, it mostly emphasises the pre-eminence of loving Jesus above other services Christians render to God. This church demonstrates the

³ Jim Taylor, *Revelation to John's Apocalypse Unveiled and Revealed: The Spiritual View of a Carnal War* (Bloomington: WestBow Press, 2017), ix.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

possibility that a church could be actively carrying out religious activities commendably while disobeying the greatest commandments to love God with all of the heart, soul and mind, and to love neighbours as much as oneself. Today with money, suffering, persecution and worldliness all working together to hinder our undivided loyalty to and love for Jesus, the letter to the Ephesian church holds lessons for contemporary churches. The Ephesian church is therefore the best example to examine some of the struggles churches today face to ensure that obedience to God is not just mechanical, but is borne out of a genuine love for God.

Like most contemporary western cities, Ephesus was religious, large, and important in trade and culture. It was then the “fourth largest city in the world, after Antioch, Alexandria and Rome” and was referred to as “the market place of Asia Minor.”⁵ Ephesus was “the most cosmopolitan of the seven”⁶ cities to which the letters were sent. Like contemporary western Christians the Ephesian Christians were living in a prestigious city with political and religious influence and were also experiencing the challenges of a prosperous urban setting. Travis notes that as Paul had experienced during “his encounter with the silversmiths, the power of business and commerce to harass Christians is enormous if it finds that its own interests are being undermined by the gospel.”⁷ Emperor Domitian’s totalitarianism was at a peak with a temple dedicated to his worship and devotion to Artemis. However, some suggest that an early version of Revelation was written during the reign of emperor Vespasian, Domitian’s father, from AD 69-89 and later updated during emperor Domitian’s rule. But most modern scholars agree with early church tradition that Revelation was written towards the end of Domitian’s reign from AD 81-96.⁸ Against the prevalent idolatrous backdrop of that time, Christ declares himself as “the Lord of the universe who holds each church in his care.”⁹

Specific problems affecting the Ephesian church include the false apostles, the Nicolaitans and the loss of their first love. But this same church was once commended for their love by Paul, who writing to them said “for this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and

⁵ Stephen Travis, *The Church Under Fire Messages to the Seven Churches of Asia* (Revelation 2-3) (Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship, 1995), 29.

⁶ Colin J. Hemer, *Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in their Local Setting* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 35.

⁷ Travis, *The Church Under Fire*, 29.

⁸ Rusty Entrekin, “[When was the Revelation of Jesus Christ written? The Testimony of the Church Fathers.](http://www.thingstocome.org/datrev.htm)” accessed July 17, 2018, <http://www.thingstocome.org/datrev.htm>.

⁹ Travis, *The Church Under Fire*, 30.

your love for all God's people, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers."¹⁰ It is possible therefore for a church which was doing well at some point to veer off, or even one that is being applauded by men to be seen differently by Jesus. In Ephesus many were devoted to Artemis, and some like Demetrius the silversmith, were business proprietors who earned their livelihood from making shrines of Artemis and miniature replicas of Artemis' temple. The uprising Demetrius incited against Paul, as he acknowledged when he addressed his artisan colleagues, was mainly due to their business being threatened by the conversion of "large numbers of people" to Christianity in Ephesus as well as in "the whole province of Asia."¹¹ In his address, Demetrius stated plainly, "you know, my friends, that we receive a good income from this business."¹² To the Ephesian craftsmen part of the allure was their business, their income and livelihood. The contemporary Western church must ensure that the modern church is not just about the business of buying and selling or receiving a good revenue.

False doctrines crept into the Ephesian church and corrupted their genuine faith. Consequently, Paul urged Timothy to stay in Ephesus so as to "command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer or to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies" because "such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God's work - which is by faith."¹³ According to Margaret Mowczko, "it is possible that some of these false teachings were influenced by myths related to the Ephesian goddess Artemis."¹⁴ Paul also admonished Timothy to "have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly."¹⁵ Like Timothy in the Ephesian church, the Western church needs to guard the word of God which has been entrusted to its care, and "turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and in so doing have departed from the faith."¹⁶

¹⁰ Eph 1:15-16.

¹¹ Acts 19:26.

¹² Acts 19:25-26.

¹³ 1 Tim 1:3-4.

¹⁴ Margaret Mowczko, "[1 Timothy 2:12 in context: Artemis of Ephesus and her temple,](https://margmowczko.com/1-timothy-2-12-in-context-2/)" accessed April 19, 2018, <https://margmowczko.com/1-timothy-2-12-in-context-2/>.

¹⁵ 1 Tim 4:7.

¹⁶ 1 Tim 6:20-21.

The Ephesian church fell from their first love while carrying out other good works, just as activities and programmes can distract from focusing genuinely on loving God and others and being a faithful witness. In addition, the seduction of wealth, influence, false doctrines, alluring claims, compromise, and so on, intensify the distractions faced by modern believers. These infiltrate subtly in the guise of half-truths that corrupt the sincere faith of believers. The Western contemporary church needs to watch out for and strongly condemn such characteristics. For instance, in the Western local churches there are groups which uphold prosperity theology at the expense of the doctrines of suffering and self-denial for the sake of Christ. The views of leaders of such groups on prosperity have been judged as unscriptural by some Pentecostal, Charismatic and secular critics who consider their main emphasis on material success as idolatrous and exploitative. The prosperity message focuses on material blessings and increase in financial wealth as a result of giving financially to religious causes. It is important to note that the argument is not whether God is able and willing to bless his children, it is rather that emphasising material prosperity alone undermines the other areas (such as love, steadfastness, obedience, being a witness for him etc) where God wants his children to prosper which can distract from prioritising our love for God and others, and lead to a compromised witness.

Although the Ephesian church did well in some aspects including knowledge and service, it failed in one important area that was capable of rendering even its good works useless. The Western church needs to learn from what Jesus said to the church in Ephesus. Also, a church that counted itself as materially wealthy received a very poor review from Jesus. “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked,”¹⁷ Jesus tells the Laodicean church. Jesus’s message to the early church holds cogent lessons for the Western church today. Although my aim is to focus on and explore the message to the church in Ephesus for an in-depth study, I will make comparison between the letter to the church in Ephesus and the letter to the materially poor but commended church in Smyrna, which is the only church among the seven, besides Philadelphia, to receive commendations and exhortations without any rebuke.

¹⁷ Rev. 3:17.

Why Smyrna?

Ephesus is compared with Smyrna in this study because having received only commendations and encouragement from Jesus, Smyrna can be considered an exemplary church. The message to the church in Smyrna will help the contemporary Western church to learn not to measure its wealth only in monetary terms. By today's standards the church in Smyrna was not doing fine, in fact it was doing very badly because it was poor. The church was also suffering and under great persecution, conditions that some modern Christians would not associate with God's will. The prosperity message emphasises what we can get from God and not what we can sacrifice for his sake. Therefore, to make Jesus the object of our love, we must ensure that the Christian work is done in the spirit of service to God and not just for gains. While it is the will of God for believers to prosper,¹⁸ prosperity from biblical point of view is all embracing and includes prosperity in the knowledge of God, love for God, obedience, love for our neighbours, persevering in faithful witness etc. So, emphasising just the material aspect of prosperity disregards the other aspects. Jesus's commendation of the Smyrnaean church in their poverty and his story of Lazarus and the rich man,¹⁹ during his earthly ministry, are indicative that material wealth alone does not impress Jesus, it is not a measure of good success and it does not count as true prosperity.

Like Ephesus, Smyrna (also called "ornament"²⁰ of Asia because of its beauty) was another important city with secure harbour and flourishing economy. The city was a centre for false religion and the worship of Caesar and built a temple for Tiberius Caesar.²¹ The Lord had no criticism for this church, but only praise and encouragement. While in a prosperous town, the Smyrnaean Christians were poor, slandered and afflicted (2:9-10). They lived in sheer poverty in a city that was very rich.²² The Smyrnaean believers were faithful in their witness irrespective of the persecution and tribulation they suffered. One of the earliest accounts of Christian martyrdom

¹⁸ 3 John 2.

¹⁹ Luke 16:19-31.

²⁰ Travis, *The Church Under Fire*, 43.

²¹ Taylor, *Revelation to John's Apocalypse Unveiled*, 12

²² *Ibid.*, 14

is the death of the Bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, in 156 CE.²³ Their faithfulness in the face of hardship has an undying relevance not only to the contemporary but also to the future church.

Hermeneutical Approach

A few authors²⁴ have examined the letters to the churches in Asia in their works to differing degrees. Most of them discuss the seven letters as part of an exploration of the book of Revelation and so do not focus totally on any one of them. Their general conclusion is that the letters to the early church are also relevant for the contemporary church. For instance, Taylor asserts that although the letters contained a message to “the first-century Church telling it about the things that were going to start taking place right then,” the message “was not intended for just the seven churches of Asia, but for all of the churches then, today, and of every age.”²⁵

However, Osborne opines that the hermeneutical perspectives that readers employ impacts on their understanding of Revelation. The Historicist interpretive approach considers Revelation a prophecy of the “events of Western history from the time of the apostles until the present.”²⁶ Osborne notes that the Franciscans and the Reformers followed this method of interpretation.²⁷ The Preterist interpretive approach holds that the details of Revelation “relate to the present situation in which John lived rather than to a future period.”²⁸ Osborne considers both the Historicist and Preterist interpretive approaches “problematic because they would involve an error of prophecy (which many critical scholars state openly) since final judgment and the end of the world did not come with the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century.”²⁹ He also considers as unrealistic a third interpretive approach which holds that Revelation was written before A.D. 70 because “it necessitates an early date of writing” and also “limits the universal language of the book (all “peoples, languages, tribes, and nations”) to the Jewish people.”³⁰ The Idealist approach considers Revelation as relating to the church between Christ’s first and second comings and therefore relevant for the ancient, modern and future church. There is also the futurist approach

²³ Scott T. Daniels, *Seven Deadly Spirits: The Message of Revelation's Letters for Today's Church* (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009), 57.

²⁴ Hemer (1989), Osborne (2002), Taylor (2017), Daniels (2009), and Travis (1995).

²⁵ Taylor, *Revelation to John's Apocalypse Unveiled*, 1.

²⁶ Osborne, *Revelation*, 18.

²⁷ Osborne, *Revelation*, 18.

²⁸ Osborne, *Revelation*, 19.

²⁹ Osborne, *Revelation*, 20.

³⁰ Osborne, *Revelation*, 20.

which holds that a greater part of Revelation (4-22) will occur at the end of time. Under this umbrella are the Dispensationalists and the classical premillennialists. The proliferation of interpretive approaches in contemporary times can cause confusion if the resulting interpretations are disparate. But if the readings are complimentary, then a combination of approaches can possibly enrich interpretation.

Osborne recommends an eclectic approach which combines more than one of the above approaches. He suggests that an interaction between Preterist, Idealist, and Futurist methods is necessary to maximize their benefits and minimize their weaknesses. In agreement with this recommendation, this study will employ an eclectic interpretive approach, which will enable me to use a combination of historical and contemporary readings. I will be able to examine the meaning these messages conveyed to the believers in Ephesus and Smyrna who first received them, considering their cultural and linguistic settings. An eclectic approach also allows me to explore the sort of meaning the messages hold for contemporary Western Christians. The use of a combination of interpretive approach is very important because of the difference between the religious and social environments of Ephesus/Smyrna and the contemporary western religious and social assumptions. By not employing one model of interpretation exclusively, I can view scripture from different lenses which can potentially enrich interpretation³¹ and “combine the best features of each while avoiding their chief pitfalls.”³²

The Relationship between the Early Church and the Contemporary Church

What is the Church?

Over a century ago, Shailer Mathews examined the different meanings attributed to the word church noting that, “the word means today almost every sort of religious organization, from a mission to the Roman Catholic empire,”³³ while the proper meaning of the word was overlooked. Currently, the word church is frequently used to refer to a place of worship, just an aspect of its real meaning. Therefore, this section examines the meaning of the word *church* as it was used in

³¹ N. Clayton Croy, *Prima Scriptura: An Introduction to New Testament Interpretation* (Michigan: Baker Academics, 2011).

³² Jason David BeDuhn, *Truth in Translation: Accuracy and Bias in English Translations of the New Testament* (Maryland: University Press of America, 2003), 26.

³³ Shailer Mathews, “The Significance of the Church to the Social Movement,” *American Journal of Sociology* 4 (1899): 603-620.

the New Testament because a clearer understanding of the word enhances the readers' insight into the significance of Jesus's relationship with and subsequent letters to the churches. *Ekklēsia* is a Greek word used to refer to an assembly, a gathering, a congregation (usually translated church). In its traditional use "among the Greek states" church was used to "denote the assembly of the citizens summoned by the public crier; although it was publicly occasionally employed in a looser sense, to denote any sort of public meeting."³⁴ In the rest of the New Testament, it is used to mean "the Christian assembly, the company of Christ's people, the congregation of the faithful."³⁵ For instance in Acts 8:3, "But Saul began to destroy the Church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison."³⁶ So the church essentially consists of people; the early church met in homes as there were no institutional structures dedicated to worship as we have them today. Using the term to refer to buildings where Christian worships were held started after the apostles' age.³⁷

Although in contemporary world and in a narrow sense church is sometimes used to refer to structures, Cole notes that in the Bible, church was never used to refer to a building where believers met, "but almost always to the cities where they met: The church in Jerusalem, Philippi, Corinth, Rome, etc."³⁸ William Binnie observes that sometimes the group designated as the church of Galatia or the church at Corinth could be a very large group "too numerous to meet in one place."³⁹ For instance, the church at Jerusalem must have had "a plurality of congregations," but were still one *ekklēsia* overseen by the same group of elders. Besides the large groups, there were also local churches that were able to worship together in homes (1 Cor 16:19). Binnie asserts that the 'Church of God' persecuted by Paul was the whole Christian community particularly those in Syria.

Jesus first used the word *church* in Matthew 16:18 when he said, "and I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." In this case also, Jesus was referring to the whole church. He used the word *church* again when he taught on how to deal with sin, "if they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse

³⁴ William Binnie, *The Church*. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1882), 1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

³⁶ Acts 8:3.

³⁷ Binnie, *The Church*, 2.

³⁸ Stephen Cole, "[What is the Church?](https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-1-what-church-various-scriptures)", accessed March 16, 2018, <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-1-what-church-various-scriptures>.

³⁹ Binnie, *The Church*, 2.

to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”⁴⁰ In both of these cases, Jesus seems to have used the word *church* to refer to his followers, the people of God. Locally, the *church* could refer to a body of believers in a particular place (for instance, Antioch as in Acts 15:22), it can also refer universally to all or a group of the local churches (as in Acts 9:31). Paul refers to the church as the body of Christ with Christ as the head (Ephesians 1:22), and the Bride of Christ who is the Bridegroom. In Acts 9: 31, the *church* was used to refer to the body of believers in all Judea, Galilee and Samaria. But Dods and Whyte note that in the greatest and widest sense of the word, *ekklēsia* refers to the spiritual body of Christ “the whole company of those who have been given to Christ by the Father, and whom he will present faultless in the great day”.⁴¹ For instance in Eph. 5:23, 25, 27, 29 and Heb. 12:23, the *church* was used in this sense. *Church* was also used in a sense to refer to a group of professing Christians who were gathered for worship (1 Cor 14:19 & 35).

Theologians often make a distinction between the visible church and the invisible church. There are clearly three-fold notions of the church. First, the local church refers to and comprises all the believers in a locality or neighbourhood who are associated in the worship and service of God. Stephen Cole defines the local church as “a gathering of those who believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, who are committed to meet regularly for worship, teaching, fellowship, and prayer, and who help make disciples of all people.”⁴² Secondly, the universal church consists of the whole community of true believers worldwide. And thirdly, the invisible church comprises of an innumerable company of believers from all ages. They are referred to as the congregation of the redeemed and the bride of Christ. *Church* can therefore be used to refer to the whole body of believers worldwide and from all ages, those in a given region or those who are gathered together worshipping.

Revelation employs the word church repeatedly in chapters 2 and 3 with respect to the letters to the seven churches. Altogether, the word church is used about 19 times in chapters 1-3. In the messages, Jesus uses *church* (Rev 2:1) to refer to his followers but as groups in given locations. Perhaps the church in Ephesus would consist of all the house churches in the city. Jesus’s messages indicate his vested interest in the church and his acute awareness of what goes on therein.

⁴⁰ Matt: 18:17.

⁴¹ Binnie, *The Church*, 2-3.

⁴² Cole, “What is the Church?”

Jesus is seen walking among the churches, signifying his active presence and involvement in the churches. *Church* in this study will refer to the local churches in Revelation and the local contemporary Western churches. However, the universal church (Rev 2:7, 5:8) is also very important in Revelation and comprises the universal and heavenly body of believers. Since the universal church is not geographical, what Jesus said to a local church is relevant and applicable to the universal church.

The Characteristics of the Early Church and their relationship with the contemporary Church

This section examines briefly the features of the early and modern churches pointing out one of the major differences in the characteristics of both, which is institutionalisation. The early church existed as small communities in large cities and separated from one another; had no “long-standing Christian tradition, church buildings”⁴³ or the Bible as we have it today. They met in homes and were overseen by elders who totally depended on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. For instance, Phillip was directed to meet the Ethiopian eunuch and was taken away by the Holy Spirit after the eunuch’s baptism.⁴⁴ Another example was at the church in Antioch when the Holy Spirit directed the prophets and teachers while they were worshipping and fasting to set apart Barnabas and Saul for the work to which they were called.⁴⁵ Some of the characteristics of the church include faith in God (Ephesians 2:8-9; Hebrews 11:6), regular fellowship among members (Hebrews 10:25), dedication to effective witness (Mark 16:15), demonstration of the power of God (Mark 16:17-18) and unity (John 17:20-21). These characteristics were seen in the early church and should be the basis for today’s contemporary church. The early church:

devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.⁴⁶

⁴³ Travis, *The Church Under Fire*, 14.

⁴⁴ Acts 8:26-40.

⁴⁵ Acts 13:1-2.

⁴⁶ Acts 2: 42-46.

Some of these characteristics are still true of the contemporary church; however, modern organisation of church differs greatly from what it was then. In terms of their governance, Western local churches today tend to be “institutionalized and hierarchical”⁴⁷ organisations different from the early local churches. The simplicity of the early church has been replaced in most cases by an institutional construct. Craig Kirkby observes that “too often, the modern church depends on institutional systems that askew our foundational dependence on the Lord Himself; soliciting our loyalties, usurping both our affection and attention.”⁴⁸ He notes that such institutions exalt systems above relationship and ignores the relational design the early church had. Although this cannot be said of all modern local churches, Kirkby encourages believers to rediscover church as “*organic, relational, missional and fluid* instead of institutional, hierarchical, attractional and rigid; a *family community* rather than a business enterprise or religious establishment.”⁴⁹ Institutional constructs invest more in systems such as organising, buildings and events, which are not inherently bad because they are necessary. But when exclusively emphasised, these things have the capacity to distract from the major events of loving Jesus and being his faithful witness. Jesus’s commendations of the Ephesus and Smyrna churches were not about their capability to govern, the beauty of their worship centres or the programmes they successfully hosted.

Institutionalisation can be a barrier to prioritising our love for Jesus and others. It does not nurture the unity among believers that Jesus prayed for during his ministry. In his epistles to different Christian groups, Paul emphasised the need to love and reach out to other Christians. For instance, to the Galatians he wrote, “carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”⁵⁰ To the Philippians he admonished, “do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.”⁵¹ And to the Ephesians he reminded them of the unity of all believers in Christ: “from 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.”⁵² The early believers were

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Evans Shively, “[Jesus and Ekklesia.](http://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/tools/ask-a-scholar/jesus-and-ekklesia)” accessed March, 29 2018, <http://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/tools/ask-a-scholar/jesus-and-ekklesia>.

⁴⁸ Craig Kirkby, “[What is Wrong with Institutional Church?](https://abetterfuturenow.com/what-wrong-institutional-church/)” accessed March 29, 2018, <https://abetterfuturenow.com/what-wrong-institutional-church/>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Gal 6:2.

⁵¹ Phil 2:3-4.

⁵² Eph 4:16.

thus reminded of the fact that they were part of a wider Christian community, and that they were duty bound to love this wider community for Christ's sake, rather than compete with them.

But Travis asserts that "most churches today have little sense of belonging to a worldwide community, enriched by varied histories and varied cultures;" as a result, there is little or no sense of real fellowship with Christians from other communities or those "facing particular trials and needing our love and support. Even within one nation, the suburban church is often abysmally ignorant of the life of the urban congregation five miles away."⁵³ Congregations using the same premises for meetings may have little or no knowledge of one another. Like the Ephesian church, the contemporary local churches need to consider the extent of their fall from prioritizing love for God and their neighbours, and repent. The contemporary church can learn from the Ephesian church that in God's estimation love has to be the priority and must be placed above other works. In a prosperous American culture, the good church can today be defined variously. But every man-made definition must be subject to Jesus's requirement of what he wants from his body because "it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends."⁵⁴ The church today must learn that it is how Christ views the church that is of utmost importance and his message to the churches in Asia gives the contemporary church a glimpse of what he thinks and how he judges performance even in the midst of suffering.

The differences between the ancient local churches and modern Western local churches notwithstanding, the letters in Revelation 2-3 can be seen as God's messages to the universal church. Since the universal church is not just a geographical entity, it can be assumed that in speaking to these seven churches, Jesus was speaking to the universal church in the same way he prayed for the universal church while praying for the unity of his followers who were then present.⁵⁵ Also, the number seven is symbolically used in different places in Revelation to represent completeness; therefore the messages to just seven local churches out of all the local churches existing then could be symbolic. Jesus's messages can be seen as "addressed not just to seven particular congregations but to the entire or complete Church."⁵⁶ Travis agrees that the number seven signifies universality, asserting that in a sense, each one of the churches addressed directly "stands for, and is part of, the whole Church of the first century and of all time. The letters

⁵³ Travis, *The Church Under Fire*, 24.

⁵⁴ 2 Cor. 10:18.

⁵⁵ John 17:20-21.

⁵⁶ Daniels, *Seven Deadly Spirits*, 29.

meant for them are meant for us also.”⁵⁷ Although the world in which the early church lived and operated in was remarkably different from the contemporary world, “it is just as difficult for a person to live a faithful Christian life today as it was in the first century”.⁵⁸ The first century Christians suffered “daily oppression and social ostracism that resulted from Christians refusing to participate in the life of the Roman cult.”⁵⁹ Contemporary Christians are also faced with the temptation to compromise and give up their faithful witness.

Analysis of Revelation 2-3: The Churches of Ephesus and Smyrna

In this section, I will discuss the letters to the Ephesian and Smyrnaean churches. From his message to both churches, Jesus implied that Ephesus had failed, and Smyrna had succeeded in their demonstration of “first love” for him. Due to this failure, Ephesus was in danger except it repents and successful Smyrna was safe if it continues to be faithful. Because of its importance, I will investigate what Jesus meant by “first love,”⁶⁰ and make comparison between how the church of Ephesus and the church of Smyrna manifested their love for God. The seven churches addressed in Revelation 2-3 were in hostile environments in the province of Asia. They were persecuted by the synagogue of Satan which Osborne considers to refer to the deteriorating relationship between the churches and the synagogue. While the “synagogue of Satan” can be seen as referring to some religious pretenders, most scholars agree that it denotes the Jewish opposition to the church. This view is credible from Jesus’s statement (Rev 2:9); he was referring to a group of people who confessed to be of Jewish origin, and had a synagogue but who contrary to their religion, had treated Jesus and his followers with enmity. Although they belonged to the Jewish race and Judaism, they were untrue to their religious confessions. By persecuting the church, they were serving Satan’s interest, consequently Jesus branded them as agents of Satan. Revelation portrays Satan as the accuser of the believers (Rev 12:10); therefore those who persecute Christian are his agents. Jesus spoke of the blasphemy of the synagogue of Satan; they committed blasphemy by professing to serve God while serving the devil.

Considered as part of Judaism, Christians were exempted from worshipping the Roman gods along with other members of Judaism. But Christians refused to pay the “Judean tax that the

⁵⁷ Travis, *The Church Under Fire*, 23.

⁵⁸ Taylor, *Revelation to John’s Apocalypse Unveiled*, xxxi.

⁵⁹ Osborne, *Revelation*, 9.

⁶⁰ Rev. 2:4.

Romans imposed on Jews for the rebuilding of the Capitoline temple” which allowed them exemption from participation “in the Greco-Roman cults.”⁶¹ Partly for this reason, Judaism began to separate itself from Christianity, exposing Christians as not exempt. Additionally, the Christians then, although not officially persecuted by Rome, experienced the pressure to compromise. They were under an enormous “deal of economic and social pressure to participate in Roman life, including the trade guilds with their idolatrous feasts and cultic practices as well as the imperial cult.”⁶² Osborne notes that while the Nicolaitans succumbed, Christians resisted and suffered antagonism directed towards them as a result. James Orr explains that “the Nicolaitans disobeyed the command issued to the Gentile churches, by the apostolic council held at Jerusalem in 49-50 AD, that they should refrain from the eating of ‘things sacrificed to idols’ (Acts 15:29).”⁶³ Such restrictions prevented “the Christian communities from joining in public festivals, and so brought upon them suspicion and dislike, was yet necessary to prevent a return to a pagan laxity of morals.”⁶⁴ One of the problems addressed in the letters was compromise; the letters encouraged believers not to conform to a pagan world at the expense of their allegiance to Christ. Total submission to God as a result of deep and genuine love was to be their shield against compromise.

Keeth explains that “each description used in each letter is specifically appropriate for that church. It is always related in some way to the needs, to the problems, to the condition of the church and ... is a reminder that Jesus Christ is the only solution for any of our needs, for any of our problems.”⁶⁵ In the letter to the Ephesian church Jesus identifies himself as the one who holds the seven stars in his hand (2:1) and walks in the midst of the seven candlesticks. Jesus holds the solution to every problem, and so he introduces himself to this church in relation to their problems. He is the one in charge, holding the angels of the churches in his right hand and walking amongst the churches. This letter “was written in a relatively direct style of assessment and exhortation.”⁶⁶ The church at Ephesus has been described as faithful but unloving.⁶⁷ While contending for the

⁶¹ Osborne, *Revelation*, 11.

⁶² Osborne, *Revelation*, 11.

⁶³ James Orr, “[Nicolaitans](https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/nicolaitans/)”, accessed June 27, 2018, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/nicolaitans/>.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Janene Keeth, “[Ephesus -- The Loveless Church](https://bible.org/seriespage/2-ephesus-loveless-church),” accessed May 28, 2018, <https://bible.org/seriespage/2-ephesus-loveless-church>.

⁶⁶ Hemer, *Letters to the Seven Churches*, 37.

⁶⁷ Travis, *The Church Under Fire*, 27.

truth they lost their commitment to love which is also indispensable. The church had lost her first love; therefore, the theme of repentance was insistent.

According to Craig Evans, the lampstand “is the menorah, the seven-branched candelabrum, perhaps the best-known Jewish religious symbol in late antiquity.”⁶⁸ Failure to repent will result in the removal of its menorah which implies “a loss of Jewish identity as much as its loss of Christian witness in the city.”⁶⁹ Another interpretation of Jesus’s threat is that he will “unchurch” the Ephesian church and declare “you are not my people” to them;⁷⁰ so that they would no longer be recognisable, just as the Jews lost their Jewish identity. In this new context Christians would lose their Christian identity, because to be a Christian is to love and “whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.”⁷¹ Jesus’s allusion to the lampstand has been linked to the tabernacle and the temple and as such it has been argued that the lampstand cannot be removed “without suspending the whole Levitical service.”⁷² From that point of view, to remove it would mean that the church of Ephesus would suffer the loss of their identity markers. Jesus said he would come quickly to remove the lampstand but does not elaborate on how he would do it. However, he threatened the removal and not extinction of the lampstand, so perhaps removing the church could mean planting it somewhere else. Evans relates this threat to the removal of the great menorah in Jerusalem’s temple, which was taken to Rome after the destruction of the temple. In view of their remarkable characteristics it can be suggested that the Ephesian church still loved Jesus but had lost the fervency they had at first. So perhaps they still had some love for him which they demonstrated in their endurance, toil, abhorrence of evil and falsehood for Christ sake. But Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians made it unequivocally clear that without love, every act of service or self-sacrifice rendered to God amounts to nothing:

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am

⁶⁸ Craig Evans, *From Jesus to the Church: The First Christian Generation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 127.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁷⁰ Matthew Poole’s *Commentary*, accessed June 28, 2018, <http://biblehub.com/commentaries/revelation/2-5.htm>.

⁷¹ 1 John 4:8.

⁷² Adam Clarke *Commentary*, accessed 28 June, 2018, <https://www.studylight.org/commentary/revelation/2-5.html>.

nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.⁷³

Jesus said that the Ephesian church had forsaken the love they had at first and he urged the believers in Ephesus to repent to enable them regain paradise and eat of the tree of life, which Adam and Eve were denied because of their sin.

But what is the first love?

First love as used in the letter to the church in Ephesus could refer to either love for God,⁷⁴ and or love for others;⁷⁵ I have chosen to include both in the meaning. Lack of fervent love for God and others results in coldness towards God and a compromised witness; therefore, the Ephesian church was enjoined to repent from their state of declension. As a church, they had less love than they had at first, having lost their ardour of affection towards God. However love is defined, it is evidently love for the Saviour, and love for him entails love for others as can be seen from Jesus's teachings. Primarily, the church is in a love relationship with Christ as his bride (John 3:29). Jesus commanded his followers to love God by loving others (John 13:35). Loving Jesus becomes the basis for loving others while loving others is a demonstration of loving Jesus.⁷⁶ While Samuel Siders considers first love as intimacy with God, spending meaningful time with him and having deeper fellowship with him for more effectiveness,⁷⁷ during his earthly ministry Jesus himself said that love for him is demonstrated in obedience.⁷⁸ So even though the Ephesian believers were hard working, patiently endured suffering for Christ without quitting, did not tolerate evil, exposed liars who claimed to be apostles, and hated the Nicolaitans,⁷⁹ — commendable acts — their obedience was incomplete if they were lacking in their love towards God or towards others. Jesus said, “a new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” because “by this everyone will know that you are my disciples,

⁷³ 1 Cor 13:1-3.

⁷⁴ *Barnes' Notes on the Bible*, accessed August 11, 2018, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/revelation/2-4.htm>.

⁷⁵ John Gill's *Exposition of the Bible*, accessed August 10, 2018, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/gills-exposition-of-the-bible/revelation-2-4.html>.

⁷⁶ Qingping Liu, “On a Paradox of Christian Love,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 35(2007): 681.

⁷⁷ Samuel Siders, *The Seven Churches of Asia Revelation 2-3* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2007), 30.

⁷⁸ John 14:15.

⁷⁹ Rev 2: 2-4.

if you love one another.”⁸⁰ As part of the love for one another, during his earthly ministry Jesus taught his followers to also love their neighbours, which included the Israelites, Gentiles and Samaritans. He even taught them to love their enemies by doing good to those who hated them.⁸¹ Consequently when asked by one of the teachers of the law what the greatest commandment was, Jesus responded with the double love command:

The most important one...is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.⁸²

From this new “Jesus creed”⁸³ everything hinges on love: love for God and love for others are the principal requirements and proper foundations upon which other services are laid. Jesus introduces himself as the “one who died and came to life again.”⁸⁴ As in all areas, he illustrated to his followers love for God and others, and Revelation depicts this priority by presenting the Lamb of God who submitted to God’s will and conquered through suffering. His love for God the Father was the foundation of his sacrificial death and his love for humanity was a demonstration of his love for God. His commendations and encouragement to the churches to overcome and his promises to overcomers portray his love. So, lack of fervent love for God puts the Ephesian believers “in a compromising position for false doctrines something many of the other churches fell prey to.”⁸⁵ Besides love for God and love for others, first love could also be interpreted to mean first in priority. The Ephesian church was a loving church and Paul commended them in his letter to the Ephesians (1:15). They used to love the Lord and other believers but from Jesus’s message to them, we can deduce that their excitement had waned, and love was no longer the priority. Perhaps other things had taken priority above their love. But if the Ephesians had stopped loving God and others, what was their motivation in doing all the other good acts for which they were commended? Is it possible to carry out acts of religious services in modern times without loving God or our neighbours?

⁸⁰ John 13:34-35.

⁸¹ Luke 6:27.

⁸² Mark 12:28-31.

⁸³ Scot McKnight, *The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2005).

⁸⁴ Rev 2:8.

⁸⁵ Siders, *The Seven Churches*, 32.

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From the experience of the Ephesian church we know that it is possible to begin by loving God totally and then burdened with activities and in an unguarded moment allow something else, like prosperity or religious activities to take the priority and to become the object of love. But real wealth and true service for God should not distract from loving God and others but should arise from it. For instance, in his personal testimony John Wimber, a pioneering pastor of many charismatic congregations spoke of a time in his ministry when God enabled him to realise that his services were taking first place. He realised that he had got “caught up in” ministration, had become “mechanical and manipulative,” had begun to “love the institution more than the body of Christ” and had prioritised things that seemed logical, right, prosperous; things that could be easily “adapted into the institution and organisation.” In the process, institution and ministry had taken over the place of love for God. He understood that he had become critical and impatient with the church members he once loved and defended when he was instrumental in their conversion. He repented before God and resigned from a church he helped pioneered and had been part of for nearly thirteen years in order to work towards making Jesus the object of his love again.⁸⁶

From Jesus’s warning to the Ephesian church that he would remove their lampstand if they failed to repent, the importance of love for God and others as the bedrock on which every act of service is based cannot be overemphasised. This sort of love engenders self-sacrifice, promotes unity and resists institutionalised religious tendencies which raise walls and exclude others. Such religious institutions existed when Jesus was on earth; they exalted rituals and traditions above the love of God. For example, the Pharisees and Sadducees failed to recognise Jesus and took offence when he fiercely challenged their traditions and hypocrisies. Contemporary Western local churches must reach out in love to one another, rather than building dividing walls. The churches belong to Christ, not necessarily to the overseers. Believers are admonished throughout the Bible, to love Christ and others including their enemies and those who spitefully use them; this injunction is true for the contemporary church:

But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what

⁸⁶ [John Wimber - Personal Testimony](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HcwhIot4W7o), accessed May 29, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HcwhIot4W7o>, especially from 48:45 to 49:58.

reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.⁸⁷

The Ephesian believers started out with love for God and others but along the way dropped this vital part while continuing with the other good deeds. Jesus asked them to repent and remember the height from which they had fallen and go back to carrying out those first acts of love. From the foregoing discussion, first love encompasses both love for God and love for others. Whether by “first love” Jesus referred to their original love for and devotion to him and one another when they first received the gospel or just loving God by loving others; Jesus considered love more important than all the other diligent services carried out by the Ephesian church in his name. He placed their love for him above all their services for him. Therefore, service must not be a substitute for love; service must not be allowed to take priority over our love for Jesus.

The all-important place of love for God and love for others

The letter to the Ephesian church emphasises the struggle to keep Jesus as the first object of our love and depicts to the modern church the all-important place of love for God and others in Jesus’s estimation. The precarious position of the Ephesian church in spite of the other commendations that Jesus gave them highlights the pivotal role that love for God plays in our relationship with him. Jesus commended the Ephesian church (Rev. 2:2-6) for their hard work in the midst of idolatry and oppression. He applauded them for their perseverance. Travis claims that the Ephesian church outshines the contemporary church with the current lack of perseverance and faithfulness. Jesus also commended them for hating what he hated; the Nicolaitans speaks of compromise. This church tested and proved wrong those who claimed to be apostles. By refusing compromise and falsehood, they rejected “a distorted Christianity.”⁸⁸ They resisted wicked men and the totalitarian power of Domitian who even by secular standards was considered a ruthless tyrant. The Ephesian believers stood against the public worship of Domitian, a feat that would have possibly put them in a “very vulnerable and isolated position.”⁸⁹ They were at the risk of

⁸⁷ Matt 5: 44-48.

⁸⁸ Travis, *The Church Under Fire*, 31.

⁸⁹ Hamilton Moore and Philip McCormick, “[Dominitian \(Pt ii\).](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/irish-biblical-studies/25-3_121.pdf)” accessed July 19, 2018, https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/irish-biblical-studies/25-3_121.pdf, 39.

suffering mob violence as Paul did. But in spite of their sacrifice, a lack of fervent love relationship with God exposed them to the danger of having their lampstand removed. To return to their first love the church in Ephesus was instructed to consider the extent of its fall, repent, and do the works it did at first.⁹⁰ By asking them to remember from where they had fallen, Jesus implies that there was a strong love relationship at first. They were to repent, change direction and return to doing the acts of love they did at first (not necessarily more acts of service) or lose their light-bearing ability when their candle stick has been removed.

While the Ephesian church failed the love test, the Smyrna church succeeded.

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In the letter to the Smyrnaean church, Jesus identifies himself as “the first and the last,”⁹¹ echoing Isaiah 44: 6 and 48:12. This identity of Jesus reminds believers that without him nothing was made,⁹² and he remains when they are all passed away as the bible declares:

In the beginning, Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end.⁹³

By introducing himself as the one who died, Jesus presented himself as sharing in their suffering. But as one who is alive again, he is able to keep the faithful from suffering the second death. This introduction also speaks of his victory through suffering and his love for humanity that led him to subject himself to such cruel suffering unto death. Jesus declares to the church in Smyrna as he did to the Ephesian church his infinite knowledge of the situation of each church. He knows about their past suffering, poverty, and persecution but also the future trials:

Many were placed on the rack where they were stretched so far that their legs and their arms were pulled out of their sockets. Some were boiled alive in oil. Others roasted alive. Some suffered the Roman crucifixion, a horrible way to die. Others were taken to the Coliseum and fed to angry, hungry lions. Life was hard for these Christians.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Rev 2:5.

⁹¹ Rev 2:8.

⁹² John 1:3.

⁹³ Heb 1:10-12.

⁹⁴ Janene Keeth, “[Smyrna -- The Suffering Church.](https://bible.org/seriespage/3-smyrna-suffering-church)” accessed May 22, 2018, <https://bible.org/seriespage/3-smyrna-suffering-church>.

Jesus admonishes them to be faithful unto death for the reward of the crown of life. The Smyrnaean believers endured torture as unpatriotic traitors because of their steadfast love for God. It takes loving Jesus with all of the heart, soul and strength to be willing to lay down their lives to obey him so resolutely. Having himself set an example of suffering and steadfastness unto death, Jesus rebuked the Ephesian church for the absence of such unwavering love.

The church in Smyrna, though very poor economically was deemed to be rich by Jesus. This gives a sense of how God measures wealth, which is not necessarily in terms of the abundance of economic gain but according to the extent of love and obedience demonstrated by a church. Thus, any prosperity message that places material acquisition above the love of God has failed to adequately represent God's point of view. The Smyrna church's wealth consisted of "a relationship with God and the hope of heaven."⁹⁵ This is demonstrated in the story of Lazarus and the rich man.⁹⁶ Lazarus in spite of his poverty and failing health remained a faithful witness till death. Although materially very poor, he was wealthy spiritually and received the reward of his faithfulness.

But in this earthly life, this sort of spiritual unseen wealth seems far-fetched amidst acute poverty and persecution. Consequently, this letter serves as a warning against the desire to pursue with all vigour the subtle allure and materialistic tendencies of this life. In their pursuit of God, the Smyrnaean Christians made Jesus the object of their love, exhibiting the sort of love that the Ephesian believers needed to return to. We can assume that the Smyrnaean church continued in their first love since Jesus did not rebuke them at all. Their letter challenges the modern church to consider its priorities and to ensure that loving Jesus and obeying him are at the central position. Loyalty to Rome has its earthly rewards but fidelity to Jesus brings about a crown of life (Rev. 2:10), an everlasting reward which outweighs momentary earthly rewards. The church in Smyrna remains a faithful witness in spite of its poverty and a challenge to modern church groups which major on prosperity messages.

Comparison between the Church of Ephesus and the Church of Smyrna

⁹⁵ Tim Chester and Jonathan Lamb, *Revelation 2-3: A message from Jesus to the Church today* (Epsom: The Good Book Company, 2007), 50.

⁹⁶ Luke 16: 19-31.

Ephesus and Smyrna were both important and prosperous cities. Believers from both churches operated in the midst of idol worshippers. While the book of Ephesians gives some insight into the Ephesian church, there is no such letter from Paul to the church in Smyrna to which we can refer. Paul's letter to the Ephesian believers indicates some of their needs and struggles. Paul urged them to live in unity, newness and maturity.⁹⁷ Their problems notwithstanding, the Ephesian church received such commendations that were not even given to the Smyrnaean church – it laboured, was patient, did good works, resisted evil, tested false apostles, had not become weary and hated the Nicolaitans. But from them Jesus required repentance and a return to their first love.

The church in Smyrna on the other hand suffered tribulation, was poor and blasphemed, but was about to enter a more severe season of suffering. They were under a huge pressure to join in the mandatory idolatrous worship of the Roman Emperor Domitian or face death. But they chose the latter, preferring to be faithful unto death for Christ sake. From them Jesus required courage and faithfulness unto death. So, unlike the Ephesian believers, those in Smyrna were faced with persecution, imprisonment and death. They were called to faithfulness not repentance and they were given a promise of a crown of life instead of a threat to remove their lampstand. The Ephesian believers were rebuked in spite of their knowledge and service but the Smyrnaeans were not. Both churches received exhortations giving them specific instructions regarding their situations and the general exhortation for those who have ears to hear the message to the churches. They also both have the promises to overcomers, promises which today as in the times of the early church serve to foreshadow what is to come and were intended to spur believers on.

To both churches and all others Jesus declares his power and authority over them, he holds them in his hand and he knows all things. He knows the work of the church; he knows their persecution, past, present and future. He knows their strength and weaknesses. Those who remain faithful will receive a crown of life and will not be hurt by the second death.⁹⁸ Jesus remains the same today and so are his promises and requirements from the churches. The central message of loving God and our neighbours is much more relevant today in a very divided, selfish and individualistic world which is focused on prosperity at all cost and has money as the object of its love. Contemporary Western local churches can learn from the message to the church in Ephesus

⁹⁷ Eph 4:1-31.

⁹⁸ Rev 2: 10-11.

that whatever else they are doing, genuine love for God and our neighbours must be the basis of Christian service. Also, the message to the church in Smyrna teaches courage and faithfulness in the face of tribulation and poverty. This message is very relevant today when the doctrine of suffering is being relegated to the background. Derek Thomas observes that more than ever, the modern church feels an entitlement to health, youthfulness and beauty and is thereby dangerously close to making an idol of health and beauty like the secular world does.⁹⁹ According to Timothy Keller in the last two millenniums, Westerners have argued against the existence and goodness of God because of suffering and evil. The church stands in danger of adopting a perspective on suffering as a punishment from God and the assumption that God exists only to make us happy.¹⁰⁰

The Relevance of Revelation 2-3 to the contemporary Church

Revelation as a whole is considered a prophetic critique of the church and the world in which it exists. It exposes “false religion not only in the blatant idolatries of power and prosperity, but also in the constant danger that true religion falsify itself in compromise with such idolatries and betrayal of the truth of God.”¹⁰¹ These messages present “a counterreality to the prevailing reality” of the ancient as well as modern world.¹⁰² In this section, first I will highlight the link between those early churches and their modern counterparts. Secondly, I will examine the relevance of the letters to the churches in Ephesus and Smyrna to contemporary Western local churches. Thirdly I will discuss some of the lessons that the letters to the early local churches had left for today’s local churches.

Links between early local Churches and their modern counterparts.

Jesus in the gospels made it clear that all believers are partakers of the benefits of his mission and suffering. While praying for the unity of believers who were with him and for those who will believe through them, Jesus said “my prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message.”¹⁰³ The church universal is not geographical;

⁹⁹ Derek W. H. Thomas, “[The Theology of Suffering.](https://www.fpcjackson.org/resource-library/seminars/suffering-the-theology-of-suffering)” accessed May 29, 2018, <https://www.fpcjackson.org/resource-library/seminars/suffering-the-theology-of-suffering>.

¹⁰⁰ Timothy Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering* (New York: Viking 2013).

¹⁰¹ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), 162.

¹⁰² Osborne, *Revelation*, 11.

¹⁰³ John 17:20.

therefore Jesus's messages to some local churches would hold relevant lessons to all the local churches. Besides, the same requirements of love for God and others, and faithfulness even unto death from the churches in Ephesus and Smyrna are still God's requirements from the local churches today. As Ephesus, Smyrna and the other churches to which the letters were addressed read the whole book of Revelation, not just the letter written to each, thereby learning also from the letters to the other churches, even so the churches today need to read the whole book of Revelation and learn from these messages to specific churches.

God's standards for his church remain the same; love is still the primary virtue, "and now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love."¹⁰⁴ The fact that God has not changed and his word is steadfast is a strong link between the ancient and modern churches. Without these messages, some modern churches would be satisfied with performing just as much or even less than the Ephesian church. The Ephesian church could be seen as a diligent church because they toiled for the Lord. They were also so determined that Jesus mentioned their perseverance. They were disciplined and did not tolerate evil men. "They held to a high, holy standard of behavior. They were sensitive to sin... They saw sin and they did not just push it under the rug. They practiced church discipline."¹⁰⁵ They were a discerning church able to determine false prophets, not just relying on people's testimonies of themselves. Seeing that all these good deeds were not sufficient challenges modern churches to examine their love relationship with the Lord, to ensure that knowledge and service have not overtaken love and that the basis of their good deed is love.

The relevance of the Ephesus and Smyrna letters to contemporary Western local churches

The letters are still relevant today because from them we can see how Jesus's perceptions differ from those of the ancient churches as well as modern day views. For instance, Jesus defined prosperity according to love whereas then (and now) prosperity is gauged by material acquisition. In a contemporary world where suffering and sacrifice are neither expected nor seen as signs of

¹⁰⁴ 1 Cor 13:13.

¹⁰⁵ Janene Keeth, "[Ephesus -- The Loveless Church.](https://bible.org/seriespage/2-ephesus-loveless-church)" accessed May 28, 2018, <https://bible.org/seriespage/2-ephesus-loveless-church>.

victory, where the desire to have more from God supersedes the desire to have more of God, where positions, possessions and worldliness compete for the first place as objects of love, the church in Smyrna by following Christ's example of victory through suffering exemplifies for the church in the West what true riches are and Christ's expectations of his church even during persecution. They also set an example of faithfulness to contemporary believers living in the wealthy cities of Western countries but are themselves struggling under poverty. Their steadfast love for Jesus and obedience to his teachings stand out as exemplary in a modern world hooked on a prosperity message which some elevate above the message of the suffering Christ.

One of the ministers in a contemporary church observed that her church was known for great Bible exposition and missions. But she rather prayed for and wished that her church would be known as the one that loves "Jesus Christ more than anything else...because all those other things will fall into place if that love for Him is first."¹⁰⁶ Janene Keeth notes also that when the letters were carried to the seven churches, each church read the whole of Revelation, thus each one of the seven churches also heard the message to the other churches besides theirs. Jesus wanted every church including contemporary churches to hear what he said to the churches; therefore, these letters are relevant today. Allan McNicol considers the letters of Revelation significant for the contemporary church because the "churches of Asia faced a situation that parallels what people today encounter who are serious about their faith."¹⁰⁷ Like the Ephesian church, the contemporary church is in danger of prioritising Christian activities, programmes and doctrinal matters above loving God, loving others and making disciples.

Although the cultural, social, political and religious accounts of the early local churches differ significantly from present day, the letters in Revelation 2-3 are still very relevant to the modern local churches because of the challenges faced by the contemporary Western local churches. For instance, the local church in most communities in contemporary societies is not necessarily the sole Christian community. The presence of several groups in itself is not a problem except that most of them are "strongly opposed to each other in their beliefs and practices, and yet all claiming to be churches of Christ, the only true Christian church in the place, and branding all

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Allan J. McNicol, "Reading Revelation Today: A Word to a Complacent Church," *Christian Studies Journal* 25 (2011): 22.

the others as heretical or schismatic associations.”¹⁰⁸ Love for God and love for others can break down such walls of partition between churches, bring about unity and separate the genuine from the false. Thus, the messages to the churches in Asia can serve as a yardstick to measure what Western local churches should prioritise today. These messages are therefore relevant and helpful as guides to Christian conduct today.

The relevance of the messages for today is also huge because “Revelation is a statement of great faith that the followers of the Lamb will be the ultimate victors.”¹⁰⁹ Like the Christians in Ephesus and Smyrna, contemporary Christians face all manner of opposition, some from family members, co-workers and those in authority. For instance, some believers are disowned by their families because of their faith. Others are denied promotions at work due to their faith and yet others forgo all their entitlements when they convert. Recently, a Christian politician, leader of a political party resigned because he could not keep his job and still be a faithful witness for Christ. Tim Farron, former leader of the Liberal Democrats, resigned shortly after his election because of the focus on his faith which led to him being “torn between living as a faithful Christian and serving as a political leader.”¹¹⁰ BBC further reported him as saying that: “To be a leader, particularly of a progressive liberal party in 2017 and to live as a committed Christian and to hold faithful to the Bible's teaching has felt impossible for me.”¹¹¹ These are forms of persecution and suffering although different from the ones experienced by the early church. From the message to the Smyrna believers who suffered tribulations and were encouraged to be faithful to death, contemporary churches will learn that love for God and keeping Jesus continuously as the object of our love will enable believers to remain faithful notwithstanding what their current persecutions might entail, considering that the current suffering is not even unto death yet.

The Smyrnaean church was poor, but the believers were able to remain faithful witnesses. Today, due to the emphasis on prosperity theology, suffering and self-denial can be seen as curses. Despite their material poverty, the Lord considered the Smyrna Christians “rich in everything that really matters.”¹¹² Also, as there was then a struggle between the Roman culture on one hand and

¹⁰⁸ Binnie, *The Bible*, 5.

¹⁰⁹ McNicol, “Reading Revelation Today,” 34.

¹¹⁰ Jessica Elgot and Heather Stewart, “[Tim Farron quits as Lib Dem Leader.](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jun/14/tim-farron-quits-as-lib-dem-leader)” accessed June 29, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jun/14/tim-farron-quits-as-lib-dem-leader>.

¹¹¹ “[Farron quits as Lib Dem leader over clash between faith and politics.](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-40281300)” accessed June 29, 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-40281300>.

¹¹² Travis, *The Church Under Fire*, 45.

Christian commitment on the other, there still is a conflict between contemporary cultures and Christian convictions. Then the messages warned against assimilation to and compromise with the Roman culture and complacency. In the same way, the contemporary church must see contemporary rulers and rulings against God as typifying Rome with its imperial cult and its pressure on Christians to conform.

Daniels notes that John's inspired message to the seven churches is central in Revelation's objective to strengthen the faith of believers that "God indeed has the final word in creation and will redeem all things and reconcile the creation to himself in his time."¹¹³ These messages serve as an encouragement to modern believers who are enduring hardship for Christ's sake like the Ephesians and to those who are poor like the Smyrnaeans. There are modern Christians who can identify with the experience of economic marginalization suffered by the believers in the early church. Just as the spiritual survival of the early Christians depended on their ability to resist the temptation to compromise, worship false gods, accept false teachers, imbibe the doctrines of the Nicolaitans, and falter under persecution; contemporary Christians must recognize the "trap and lure" of the present world standards for what they are.¹¹⁴ The economic systems of the present world are still antagonistic to righteousness and must be seen as another Babylon. Revelation refers to the Roman Empire as Babylon the prostitute and Christians were admonished to come out of her and her value system (Rev 18:1-4) because Babylon was "the Old Testament epitome of human society in opposition to God."¹¹⁵ Modern Christians have to daily resist the dishonest and compromising situations that seek to weaken their love for God and one another.

Unlike the church, Babylon's first love is "for wealth, power, fame and personal glory."¹¹⁶ Chester and Lamb compare "the refinements and enticements" of the Roman Empire as displayed in Ephesus with "the posters that line our streets and the adverts that fill our television screens."¹¹⁷ The early local churches were all subject to forces that threatened to weaken their commitment through persecution or compromise.¹¹⁸ Daniels observes a correlation between the concerns

¹¹³ Daniels, *Seven Deadly Spirits*, 21.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹¹⁵ Chester and Lamb, *Revelation 2-3*, 45.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2-3, 44.

¹¹⁸ Daniels, *Seven Deadly Spirits*, 23.

addressed in these letters and the concerns in the contemporary church. He notes that the messages “address general attitudes or spirits that continue to be at work in the church today.”¹¹⁹ From the letters to these two churches Jesus clearly demands love as a priority and faithfulness in the face of persecution. Contemporary Western local churches need to examine their demonstration of love towards God and others within and outside the local churches. This has to be an ongoing exercise to ensure that the focus has not shifted from love to other things as was the case with the church in Ephesus.

Lessons from Ephesus and Smyrna

The letters to these churches highlight the theme of love and perseverance in faithful witness. The Smyrnaean believers prevailed through suffering and were faced with more sufferings. Their love for God anchored them in the midst of a tempestuous storm of persecution, imprisonments and abject material poverty. The Ephesian Christians dropped their first love while holding on to their knowledge of and service for God. But love for God and others was what they needed to be able to persevere in faithful witness as required of them. Scott Daniels notes that “there does seem to be an especially toxic mix of cultural, economic and spiritual influences that make leadership in the church today a sometimes less-than-desirable life pursuit.”¹²⁰ He listed those influences as including “consumerism, materialism, and sensuality, militarism, personal preferences in style of worship, the rise of technology, and the politicization of the Church.”¹²¹ Daniels argues that there is “something profound and complex about the way churches are formed as communities,” and as communal bodies, churches “have an essence or collective spirit that is at work either aiding or hindering the life-giving work of the Spirit of God.”¹²² Therefore spiritual warfare against the spirit or ethos to which a church is captive is necessary before the church can be transformed. Though an empiricist himself, Daniel cautions against the tendency to focus on the material parts of the church or the assumption that working harder, planning smarter and tampering with the structure will bring about better results. He recognizes the place for hard work

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 29.

¹²⁰ Daniels, *Seven Deadly Spirits*, 16.

¹²¹ Ibid., 16.

¹²² Ibid., 17.

and church programs, as a pastor but argues that church leadership should be approached differently especially because of the spiritual challenges facing the church today.

The messages to these churches in Revelation speak powerfully to all churches all through the ages. The contemporary church can see aspects of her life mirrored in the life of first-century believers who faced persecution, were exposed to false teaching, had a mixed multitude and judged their success differently from God's point of view. Like the early church the church today is operating in a hostile world and needs as much as the early church to pay close attention to what Jesus said to the churches. Revelation 2-3 is a portrayal of how Christ wants his body (the church) to be and as Travis observes "this is the kind of Church we need to be, if we are to respond to the challenge that confronts us, whether in the first century or the twentieth century."¹²³

Consequently, the contemporary Western local churches can draw many lessons from Jesus's messages to Ephesus and Smyrna including the primacy of love for God and love for others, labouring in love, faithfulness at all cost, contentment with little, resisting and exposing falsehood, and suffering for Christ sake. Jesus still expects from modern local churches that fervent love for him should precede faithful service to him as he expected from and commended in those early local churches. The messages to these churches remind readers that human perspectives on things are incomplete and distorted as is the case with the churches that felt they were rich and doing well when Jesus thought differently from his divine perspective. Some of the lessons that the modern churches can draw from the early churches are discussed below.

Suffering

The Lord Jesus was walking in the midst of the seven churches majestically; he had their stars in his right hand, yet he chose neither to hold back the persecution of the Smyrnaean believers nor to stem their tribulation. In some local churches today, suffering could be seen as the absence of the love of God because God's love is equated with no suffering. But Jesus himself suffered, "son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him."¹²⁴ From the experience of the two local early churches, contemporary local churches can deduce that suffering could be allowed to serve other purposes; as co-heirs with Jesus "we share in his sufferings in order that we may also

¹²³ Travis, *The Church Under Fire*, 19.

¹²⁴ Heb 5:8-9.

share in his glory.”¹²⁵ Suffering in the church today manifests in all sorts of ways in spite of the progress in human rights over the years. As civilization progresses into secularism, the church is increasingly seen as an option among many. To remain effective witnesses entails that believers will bring their faith into the public arena and debate overtly or covertly with other ideologies. Tailoring the Christian witness for a secular age still draws antagonism and persecution as it did during the period of the early church. For instance, Tim Farron’s example above, where he became “the ‘subject of suspicion’ because of his own beliefs.”¹²⁶ The church is persecuted when it answers contemporary questions from a biblical perspective whether on issues relating to evangelism, abortion or gender identity and dysphoria. As part of relativism, contemporary cultures affirm and celebrate things that oppose the biblical stance and insist on politically correct answers to societal problems. While being dissuaded from calling sin by its proper name, the church is increasingly exposed to the drama of politics and speaking up against these issues creates all sorts of problems for the church. Recently, a prominent evangelical pastor was refused entry into a country he visited because of his faith and Christian work. But like the early church, the contemporary church must go against the worldly cultural grain to exemplify the genuine Christian love that will bring about reconciliation and healing.

Modern believers need a continuous re-examination of their preparedness to be faithful in suffering for Christ even unto death; suffering was part of the experience of the early church. In the same vein, Jesus, who is the great provider, watched Smyrna’s poverty without supplying to them abundantly in spite of their faithfulness. In a materialistic contemporary world and in a local church with a focus on prosperity theology, many will stumble at this seeming contradiction. But Jesus calls his followers from material mindedness to Christ mindedness saying, “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”¹²⁷ Many Christians are not rich in material possessions and like Jesus’s assessment of Smyrna, modern Christians must learn not to judge their wealth or spirituality only in terms of the abundance of material possessions. McNicol notes that “powerful elements in Roman society, as well as contemporary Western culture, offer attractive alternatives to the exclusive lordship of Christ.”¹²⁸ But Revelation is a clear warning then and now for Christians to disregard those persuasions. Jesus

¹²⁵ Rom 8:17.

¹²⁶ Elgot and Stewart, “Farron quits as Lib Dem leader over clash between faith and politics.”

¹²⁷ Matt 6:33.

¹²⁸ McNicol, “Reading Revelation Today,” 22.

presented himself as the living one who died but is now alive for ever, and who holds the keys of Death and Hades (Rev 1:17-18). “The model of Christ who suffered, died and rose from the dead makes suffering and death tolerable, gives them value, and allows hope which transcends death.”¹²⁹ Contemporary Christians like the Smyrnaean Christians must find solace in the sufferings of Christ, endure hardship and resist falsehood.

Resisting falsehood

The Ephesian church resisted liars and those who were evil as well as the Nicolaitans and received commendations for these acts. The local churches today stand in danger of deviating from the word of God and the simplicity of the early Christians. Returning to first love would require the modern local churches to rise in unity against false teachers and doctrines. Indifference, whether to truth and error or good and evil, amount to compromise not gentleness, and is displeasing to Jesus because it is not a marker of true loyalty to him. Travis encourages contemporary Christians to emulate the Ephesian church’s example, and shun distorted Christianity, rather than accept prosperity gospels, which exclude the doctrines of suffering and self-denial. Chester and Lamb observe that the church today can allow its theology to be “infected by worldly ideas” such as consumerism and individualism causing believers to “be infected by worldly priorities” such as self-love, compromise, finding security in and living for earthly things.¹³⁰ Worldly ideas are different from God’s ideas whether it be on love, suffering, patience, giving, prosperity, time or eternity. For instance, faithfulness even to death in the face of tribulation or loving Jesus enough to love others sacrificially for his sake do not make sense to unbelievers. As the first love of the churches, Jesus calls the churches back to himself in these letters.

Just as the first-century Christians were exposed to an oppressing pagan atmosphere: “the temples and statutes of pagan gods, the obscene graffiti which covered many a wall, and the symbols of the old fertility cults which retained a prominent place in popular religion,”¹³¹ contemporary believers are exposed to the “potentially harmful influence of the media.” Daniels observes that “the Church in every era faces the continual challenge of warding off theological and

¹²⁹ Adela Y. Collins, “The Political Perspective of the Revelation to John,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96 (1977): 254.

¹³⁰ Chester and Lamb, *Revelation 2-3*, 45.

¹³¹ Travis, *The Church Under Fire*, 18.

philosophical attacks from within and without, while at the same time trying to maintain a posture of love and acceptance towards one another and the world.”¹³² We have come to know some of what Jesus expects from his church from all that Jesus commended in the two churches used in this study. It is also clear from the case of Ephesus that Jesus looks beyond the things done to the motives, and passion. It can be erroneous for a church to complacently assume that whatever good works they are doing is enough for the Lord. The churches in Ephesus and Smyrna operated independently, had their different lampstands, and Jesus spoke to them differently. Out of their surpluses, some western churches today can send money and missionaries abroad and commend themselves for being able to do that. While that is commendable, it is also important to seek to know what remains to be done from Jesus’s perspective of each church. The church in Smyrna could not show its generosity in such terms because it was very poor. But that church gave of its essentials and Jesus was pleased.

Closely associated with false doctrine is compromise. The Smyrna church did not compromise even when the refusal to compromise led to suffering. McNicol considers persecution as not the most pressing issue facing the Christian at the time of John’s vision; the main issue from his perspective was “a growing desire to accommodate the debased civic culture of Western Asia.”¹³³ In the face of hostility against Christians, the craving for social acceptance can lead to compromise and acceptance of the wider culture. This remains a challenge to the contemporary church. Daniels observes that the American religious culture has borrowed the worldly cultures of utilitarianism and individualism. Thus, while reinforcing these cultures, the church offers “a Messiah who can give us the desire of our utilitarian, individualistic hearts... a therapeutic Jesus who is the cure for our feelings of loneliness, inadequacy, and purposelessness.”¹³⁴

The two early churches manifested selfless tendencies, but contemporary Western local churches, according to Travis, spend a lot of their energy maintaining their “own life rather than bringing Christ’s light to the world” and manifest “pettiness and lack of vision” in their “internal argument.”¹³⁵ Along the same lines, Cole criticizes the consumer mindset of contemporary Christians which has driven numerous pastors to “cater to this consumer mindset by trying to put

¹³² Daniels, *Seven Deadly Spirits*, 36.

¹³³ McNicol, “Reading Revelation Today,” 24.

¹³⁴ Daniels, *Seven Deadly Spirits*, 56.

¹³⁵ Travis, *The Church Under Fire*, 12.

on ‘the best show in town’ every Sunday,”¹³⁶ in order to attract more religious consumers, increase offerings and make bigger shows. Although Cole’s assertion may be considered an extreme example, it is sobering to think of what Christ would say to the contemporary church today if he had to send out letters to contemporary Western local churches. Would he say, “well done” like he did to Smyrna or would he say, “you need to sort yourself out in some areas”? The other crucial question is, “does the contemporary church really care?” If the answer is yes, there is a chance to learn from the letters to the churches in Asia. But if the answer is no, the warning for the Ephesian church needs to be heeded today.

Remaining faithful witnesses

Smyrna remained faithful through the persecutions the church had already suffered and was encouraged to remain faithful during the tribulations yet to come. As McNicol observes “the quality of the moral life in the wider Western society in which we live has degenerated to an unbelievable degree of depravity.”¹³⁷ Now as it was during the Early Church period, awareness of this state of degeneracy does not automatically bring about a change. In Revelation men “cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but they refuse to repent of what they had done” (Rev 16:11). Today the agnostics and atheists are blaming God for the consequences of godlessness. They think that the confusion and suffering in our world is a proof that God does not exist. But even when the faithful witness of the church will not bring an idolatrous world to repentance, the church is still required to be a faithful witness.

During the Early Church era, the main enemy of the Christians may have been the Roman Empire which portrayed itself as the ultimate object of veneration and would have distracted some from the worship of the true God. Although politicians today are no longer mistaken for gods as the emperors of Rome were, McNicol suggests that Christians are still faced with “contemporary equivalents of the claims of the Roman imperium” which distract them from giving full loyalty to their faith in God.¹³⁸ Speaking about contemporary issues that lure Christians from paying full allegiance to the gospel of Christ he notes that:

there are syndromes of power in our society that do function as contemporary analogues to the ancient power of Rome. Today these forces claim ultimate allegiance and loyalty for

¹³⁶ Cole, “[What is the Church?](https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-1-what-church-various-scriptures)”, <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-1-what-church-various-scriptures>.

¹³⁷ McNicol, “Reading Revelation Today,” 27.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

those who are fully enmeshed in them. Following the ground rules of functional atheism, paradoxically, they themselves serve as centers of power demanding ultimate claims on our allegiance—indeed, our very souls. I refer to such syndromes of power as those found in big business, the scientism of higher education, the media, big government, and even sports at the top competitive level. These are the contemporary equivalents of the claims of the Roman imperium that face those who would owe full allegiance to the gospel of Christ.¹³⁹

As was required from the Ephesian and Smyrnaean churches, contemporary Christians are called to nonconformity with the values of the present world, to portray the truth of God through genuine commitment and worship of God, and by loving God and others to always overcome evil with the good (Romans 12:21). Bauckham notes that “to resist idolatry in the world by faithful witness to the truth, the church must continuously purify its own perception of truth by the vision of the utterly Holy One, the sovereign Creator, who shares his throne with the slaughtered Lamb.”¹⁴⁰

While the Ephesian and Smyrnaean churches contended with adulterous nations and rulers who did not hide their disdain for Christians, the contemporary churches are dealing with nations and rulers who declare themselves as worshippers of God, ‘Christian’ nations and leaders who openly oppose Biblical injunctions. For instance, America, nominally a Christian nation, allows “God little or no place in law, science, or the schools” and makes its prototype for education “based on the materialistic thinking that nature is all there ever was, is, and will be.”¹⁴¹ When Christians are ridiculed and God is considered as irrelevant to our world, McNicol observes that Christians “are drawn into these syndromes of power and enticed into living by these naturalistic presuppositions,”¹⁴² which he considers as still idolatry in a guise. The contemporary local churches are contending with subtle ideologies like relativism and tolerance with all the political correctness that goes with such ideologies. Love for God and others, along with faithfulness must be the priority in order for the local churches today to courageously remain God’s faithful witnesses.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 32.

¹⁴⁰ Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 162 -163.

¹⁴¹ McNicol, “Reading Revelation Today,” 33.

¹⁴² Ibid., 33.

Conclusion

Sadly the seven churches addressed in Revelation were over time “ruined and overthrown by heresies and divisions from within, and by the arms of the Saracens from without.”¹⁴³ By the 5th century; the church of Ephesus was out of existence and the city of Ephesus has been without inhabitants since the 14th century.¹⁴⁴ Ed Stetzer, after a 2011 Vision Tour of Smyrna reports: “there's really nothing left of the ancient city of Smyrna but a sad, crumbling wall in a city park on a hill overlooking the Turkish metropolis of İzmir.”¹⁴⁵ Contemporary Christians there are still suffering persecution. What is left of Ephesus and Smyrna today is desolation and wilderness; no more temples, no more splendours, no more churches of Ephesus and Smyrna. What a grim example of what could happen to a city, a church and an individual. But is it not possible for a church to still exist while it no longer serves as an instrument of effective witness for Christ? Would that state of affairs be akin to having their lampstand removed?

From the discussions this study concludes that the messages of Jesus to the ancient local churches are still relevant to believers as individuals, and to local churches as groups. We must go beyond being doctrinally sound, to allowing Jesus to be the first object of our love. When our priority is to love Jesus, we will demonstrate that love in obedience (John 14:23) to his commands which is to love the believers and others. The message to the Ephesian church should set every believer thinking. The Ephesian believers were conscientious and by rejecting falsehood were doctrinally sound and yet they required urgent repentance or face being disowned. Jesus deserves and demands first place in our affection; the letter to the Ephesian church reminds us of this and warns of the consequences of negligence. Church activities, family commitments, building a career or even material possession can unwittingly slip into the priority position if we are unguarded. Rather than being neglected, these messages should be read frequently because of the need to constantly remind ourselves that the priority place is reserved for Christ, and the urgency to repent and dethrone anything that attempts to contend for that position. Believers must examine themselves often and churches too. The temptation to give our affections to numerous other things is very subtle and our hearts can be wooed easily.

¹⁴³ Benson Commentary, accessed June 29, 2018, <http://biblehub.com/commentaries/revelation/2-5.htm>.

¹⁴⁴ Keeth, “Ephesus -- The Loveless Church.”

¹⁴⁵ Ed Stetzer, “[Thursday is for Turkey: The Church in Smyrna.](https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2011/june/thursday-is-for-turkey-church-in-smyrna.html)” accessed June 29, 2018, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2011/june/thursday-is-for-turkey-church-in-smyrna.html>.

As Keeth admonishes, Christians should prioritise love by clearly understanding what their main priority is. Believers should also renew their first love; there should be an ongoing effort to do this on a personal level and as a church group. They should also delight in their future hope of eating of the Tree of Life in God's paradise. Heeding these messages will enable the church to grow in grace and be in a position to be the effective light, salt and witness that it is called to be in a dark world. But ignoring these messages will expose churches to Jesus's threat to the church in Ephesus, which is rejection by removing its lampstand. The Smyrnaean Christians who were facing martyrdom were admonished not to fear death. Therefore, we have no excuse to be fearful of lesser threats in our contemporary world. The church and individuals must beware of what fuels their passion (Rev 2:5), if it is not the love of Christ there is need for repentance and a return to first love. It is also vital to ensure that hard work in churches is Christ-led and centred. Believers must reject false teaching, guard against the things that compete for the first place in their hearts and persevere.

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