

The Pattern of the Letters: (chapters 2 & 3)

1 Salutation or address

2 Jesus' self-designation

3 Jesus' commendation(s)

4 Jesus' condemnation(s), or criticisms

5 Jesus' warnings or threats

6 Jesus' exhortation

7 Jesus' promise(s)

Questions for discussion:

- 1 What positive comments would the community or neighbourhood in which your church is set make about your church?
- 2 What negative comments might they make? Do you think those criticisms are justified?
- 3 What do you think of the idea that the Church is "Our Mother"? Is this a biblical notion? And if so, how might it change our attitude to the Church in general, and our church in particular?
- 4 If it is true that each local church has its "angel", what impact does this truth have? What difference might it make to your local church?
- 5 Jesus' round-robin chosen circular route seems a wise strategy by the world's reckoning. In what ways should our churches learn from the world's wisdom, and in what areas should they reject it?

Jesus' Commendations of the Church in Ephesus:

What sort of rating would you give your church in the areas Jesus highlights? On a range of 1 to 10 (10 being the highest), give your church a score in these areas:

Hard work (deeds) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Perseverance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Enduring hardships 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

(any particular ones?.....)

Loyalty to Christian doctrine 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

"Testing the spirits":

- 1 Listen
- 2 Sift (discuss, pray, search the Scriptures)
- 3 Discern standards of behaviour, the "fruit"
- 4 "Hate" the practices, not the people.
- 5 Decision, and as appropriate, decisive action

The first love forsaken:

Do you think you, or your church, have lost your/its first love for Jesus?

If so, what are the tell-tale signs of this?

Does your church have **traditions**? If so, which of them do you find helpful?

Are there any that you find unhelpful? If so, why?

What might **repentance** entail for you as an individual / for your church?

"Where is the blessedness I knew when first I saw the Lord? Where is the soul-refreshing view of Jesus and his word?" (William Cowper)

The Martyrdom of Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna in 156 AD

February 156 AD was the time of the public games in Smyrna. The city was crowded, the mob excited. At a time when Christians were being persecuted, a shout from the crowd quickly gained momentum: "Away with the atheists! Let Polycarp be searched for."

Polycarp had fled from the city at the pleading of his congregation, but his whereabouts were betrayed by a slave who collapsed under torture. When the authorities arrived to arrest him, Polycarp made no attempt to run away, but instead offered food and drink to his captors, and asked permission to retire for prayer.

Then, as they travelled into the city, the officer in charge urged Polycarp to recant. "What harm can it do," he asked, "to sacrifice to the emperor?" But Polycarp refused. On arrival, he was roughly pushed out of the carriage, and brought before the proconsul in the amphitheatre.

Proconsul: "*Respect your years. Swear by the genius of Caesar. Swear, and I will release you. Revile Christ!*"

Polycarp: "*For 86 years I have served him, and he has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?*"

Proconsul: "*Swear by the genius of Caesar. I have wild beasts; if you will not change your mind, I will throw you to them.*"

Polycarp: "*Call them!*"

Proconsul: "*Since you make light of the beasts, I will have you destroyed by fire, unless you change your attitude.*"

Angry Jews and Gentiles then gathered wood for the pile. Polycarp stood by the stake, asking not to be fastened to it. He then prayed:

"O Lord, Almighty God, the Father of your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, through whom we have come to know you....I thank you for counting me worthy this day and hour of sharing the cup of Christ among the number of your martyrs."

The fire was lit, but as the wind drove the flames away from him, a soldier killed him with a sword.

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Two comments on Polycarp's sacrifice:

"Christianity is something worth living for, and you only know whether you've got something worth living for when you are ready to die for it."

"He is no fool who gives what he can't keep, to gain what he can't lose."

What is your reaction to these sayings?.....

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Behind the Scenes in Thyatira (2: 18-29)

Parts: narrator Crispus – a business man in Thyatira, not a Christian Gaius – a Christian business man in Thyatira, trying to be loyal to Christ.

Narrator: Crispus and Gaius, two business men and both members of the church in Thyatira, meet in Gaius' shop in the city.

C: Hello, Gaius, how's business these days?

G: Quite good, thanks. I sold a good number of clothes to those merchants who came in from Pergamum yesterday. How's your business going?

C: Yes, also quite well, thanks. I managed to land a bulk order through the guild with a retailer in Sardis. He's coming to see me about it tomorrow. By the way, Gaius, are you coming to the guild meeting tonight?

G: No, I don't think so.

C: Why not?

G: Well, you see, I don't feel that I can join in with the prayers and sacrifices that they make to the gods at the beginning.

C: You realise that if you miss two guild meetings in a row, you are liable to be expelled from the guild?

G: I am well aware of that.

C: And I don't need to tell you that if you are thrown out of the guild, your trade doesn't stand a chance.

G: Perhaps, yes.

C: Well, be realistic, man! Can't you set aside your Christian convictions for once, for the sake of your wellbeing, your wife and family? And anyway, Gaius, some of the Christians in the town come along to the guild meeting. For instance, that large middle-aged woman with the booming voice. What's her name? Jennifer, or Jezebel somebody.....

G: Jezebel Williams, a member of our congregation.....yes, she thinks it's alright to go, and she has persuaded a number of people in the church to go along with her thinking.

C: Well, why don't you come, then?

G: I've told you already. I can't bring myself to take part in worship to the gods, when I believe in one God, **the** God – the only One who should receive my worship. And there's another thing – look at what goes on at our guild banquets in the name of so-called religion: all that drunkenness, and sex, in which, so I'm told, Jezebel and co. gladly take part.

C: Well, it's your decision, but be it on your own head if the guild chucks you out.

G: If that happens, I believe that Jesus – who is invisible, but alive – I believe that he will help me and provide for me.

C: Huh, we shall see! Anyway, good-bye, Gaius.

The Nicolaitans: (2: 6,15)

Either: from the Greek “nikolaos”, meaning.....

Or: from the Greek “nikon”, meaning.....(ie overpower)

Balaam and Balak: (2: 14)

For the Old Testament background, see Numbers 22-24, and 25: 1-3; 31: 16. Having been forbidden by the Lord to curse Israel as the pagan king Balak wanted, Balaam, a rather unwilling servant of the Lord, tells him another way of attacking Israel – getting the men to commit adultery with neighbouring Moabite women, who would then entice them into worship of pagan gods. This in turn would arouse the anger of the Lord against his unfaithful people.

New teaching – a diagnostic check list:

- 1 Are there self-nominated leaders claiming special status (prophet/ prophetess), or “secret revelations”? What is the life-style, or “fruit”, of these leaders? (Matthew 7: 15-20)
- 2 The offer of a “silver bullet” or “easy”, undemanding solution for a smooth relationship with the world and its culture?
- 3 An overemphasis on “grace” at the expense of holiness, self-discipline, and loving obedience?
- 4 A watering down of Jesus’ unique identity, or of the atonement for sin achieved by his substitutionary death?
- 5 A harsh asceticism that is negative about our sexuality and our bodies? (Rev 2: 24)

Jesus’ promise to the church in Pergamum: (2: 17)

Some commentators view the promised, individual, private “**new name**” promised by the Lord as the promise of a new character, or refined personality, rather as Peter was re-christened “the rock” by Jesus. This “reformation” may, and indeed should, begin in this life, but the perfect fulfilment will only be achieved in heaven, and will be “a little secret between each believer and the Lord.”
“**known only to him who receives it..**”)

What “**new name**” in the sense of “new character” or reformed personality is Jesus beginning to work in you now, and what would you hope it might look like when the Lord delivers his personal gift to you in full?

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“Refusing to dive into the depths of Satan, faithful Christians will fathom the depths of Christ. Turning their backs on the darkness of sin, they will see the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Christian overcomers, however great their renunciations may have been on earth in the battle for holiness, will with this star, this Christ, remain absolutely and eternally content.”

The Church at Sardis (3: 1-6): This church is one of the two (the other being Laodicea) about which Christ has nothing – or almost nothing – good to say. The church had a very good reputation for being lively, but the reality was different. (3: 1)

What humans see and what God sees is not always the same. A verse to meditate on: “The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” (1 Samuel 16: 7)

Unlike the churches at Thyatira and Pergamum, the church at Sardis had not flirted with the Nicolaitans or Jezebelites – it was totally orthodox.

Question: suppose you were moving to a new location, and so looking for a good church to join. If you visit one which has a good reputation, how would you set about discerning whether that reputation was truly valid? What questions would you ask? What things would you be looking for?

The letter isn't all negative! Christ acknowledges the existence of a godly remnant (verse 4). It's a principle of Scripture that even in the most spiritually unpromising of situations, the Lord somehow manages to raise up and preserve a “godly remnant”. (2 Peter 2: 7; 1 Kings 19: 18; Isaiah 1: 9; 10:20-22)

This constitutes a warning for us: never to write off a whole church or congregation as “those unspiritual or unconverted people.” Somewhere in every congregation, there will be one or two with a genuine faith, and love for the Lord.

The Church at Philadelphia: (3: 7-13)

As with the church at Smyrna, Jesus has no criticisms to make.

Jesus promises that he has set before them “an open door that no one can shut.” This probably means opportunities for evangelism. But what three salient factors could have discouraged the Christians from attempting outreach?:

- 1 (verse 8).....
- 2 (verse 9).....
- 3 (verse 10).....

What factors or threats, real or imagined, can deter a church from evangelism and outreach?

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Do we detect any of these as particularly prevalent in the UK at present?.....

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Do we detect any “new doors” opening for the churches, as a result of recent changes in society?

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Verse 12 is a wonderful promise to the Christian who remains steadfast, and who is prepared to go out through the Christ-provided door of service and ministry. What is the force of the “pillar-in-temple” metaphor?

A summary to meditate on: The open door stands for the church’s **opportunity**.

The key of David stands for Christ’s **authority**.

The pillar of God’s temple stands for the overcomer’s **security**.

The Church at Laodicea: (3: 14-22)

The sternest of the 7 letters, containing much censure and no praise, but also containing the famous verse of “invitation” (verse 20). Unlike most of the other 6 churches, Laodicea had not been infected with the poison of any particular sin or error. There is nothing about heretics, evil-doers, or persecutors.

Its fault was **lukewarmness**. This was a remarkably apt criticism, for right opposite Laodicea the hot springs of Hierapolis discharged themselves over a cliff, having become lukewarm in their journey across the plateau above.

If the Christians at Sardis were “dead”, those at Laodicea were “half-dead”, neither one thing or another.

How does Jesus the great Physician diagnose the results of lukewarmness? (verses 17)

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“Hot” (verse 15,16): literally, boiling hot – or: on fire. We might say: whole-hearted. Wholeheartedness is not the same as fanaticism, which is unreasoning and unintelligent wholeheartedness.

So Jesus is severe, but all is not lost for Laodicea. For instance, how else does Jesus reveal himself? (verses 19-20) And what ray of hope does even verse 16 contain?

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Verse 20: “Behold! I stand at the door and knock....” The classic Gospel invitation. What does it tell us about the real essence of being a Christian?