



What Jesus Thinks About The Church

SERIES: *The Living Church*

When I was a boy I was a part of the Boy Scouts of America. Our troop consisted of a group of guys who loved the part of the Boy Scouts that allowed us to camp and fish and enjoy the outdoors, but when it came to some of the formalities of being Boy Scouts we were less than a model troop. As a matter of fact, we were affectionately nicknamed *F-Troop* after a TV program that featured a similar bunch of misfits who were part of the U.S. Cavalry.

In general we got away with our mischief, but every once in a while, we found ourselves in a precarious situation. A couple of times a year a local official from the Boy Scouts of America would make a visit to one of our scout meetings. I think they called it an "inspection." I can remember how we would want so much to make a good impression on this guy and how for that one meeting when he was present we were model Boy Scouts. Our uniforms, which rarely saw the light of day, were ironed and worn with uneasy pride. Our shoes were shined; our hair was cut; our bodies were bathed; we were ready. We wanted to make a good impression. And, much to our surprise, we usually did! I can remember the reports coming back from headquarters: "That's a fine group of boys. They've got their act together."

Imagine for a minute what it would be like to have Jesus Christ show up at our church for an inspection. How would we as a church prepare for his visit? When he arrived here, what would he see? What would impress him? What would he raise his eyebrows at? After he thought about it, what kind of report would he send back?

That scenario isn't so far from reality. This morning we're launching an eight week series called, "The Living Church." There is a lot of misunderstanding about the church today. We want to take another look at what a church is and what a church does. This morning I want to start this series by looking at a passage from the book of Revelation. That may surprise you. Revelation is not just about beasts and dragons and weird places like Babylon The Great; it's also about the church. And it's not just about the church in the last days, it's about the church of John's day and the church of our day.

In the first few chapters, Jesus is pictured as one who visits the churches and inspects the quality of their life together. He then writes letters to seven different churches, addressing their strengths and weaknesses in very specific ways. These letters tell us something of what Jesus thinks about the church. I can't help wonder what kind of letter he'd write to us.

CHRIST AMONG THE LAMPSTAND

In Rev. 1 Jesus appears to the Apostle John in a

vision. It was a vision that was meant to be passed on to the churches. Let's begin by reading vv. 9-11.

"I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet, saying, 'Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.'"

John begins by identifying himself. This John was the son of Zebedee and the brother of James. Jesus had called these two fishermen early on in his ministry. John wrote the fourth gospel in which he repeatedly referred to himself as **"the disciple whom Jesus loved."** Historians tell us that John outlived the other apostles and spent most of his ministry as leader of the church at Ephesus. No wonder Ephesus is the first of the seven churches that is addressed.

You can almost feel the affection as he identifies himself as **"your brother."** What a way for this John to identify himself. He doesn't set himself above them as a hand-picked apostle of Christ. He's just a brother, a part of the family. His relationship with them is made even closer because they've suffered together. They're **"fellow-partakers in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus."** John is on the island of Patmos, not on a sight-seeing trip, but as an exile. Patmos was an island just off the west coast of modern-day Turkey. It was a barren, rocky island about ten miles long and five miles wide. John was banished there by the authorities, as he says, **"because of the word of God and the testimony about Jesus."** He was bold in his preaching and faithful in his witness, and he had to suffer for it.

But being in exile didn't keep John from worship. He says he was **"in the Spirit on the Lord's Day."** I take this to mean he was worshiping the Lord, filled with the Spirit, on Sunday, the first day of the week, the day the early believers set aside for worship because it was on that day that Jesus rose from the dead. Isn't it great how even in exile our spirits can soar in the presence of God? Have you discovered that? Next week we're going to talk more about worship, but you can be in the worst circumstances, your world can be caving in, you can be separated from those you love like John was, but you can still be **"in the Spirit on the Lord's Day."** It doesn't always come naturally to do that. It's a choice we have to make. We have to decide that right here in the middle of my Patmos I'm going to worship

the Lord. I'm going to spend time praising him and thanking him and pouring my heart out to him.

While he's worshipping the Lord, John hears a voice behind him that sounds like a trumpet telling him to write in a book what he sees and send it to these seven churches of Asia. The vision he's about to have isn't just for him, it's for the churches. The vision comes in vv. 12-16.

"Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash. His head and His hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire. His feet were like burnished bronze, when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters. In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength."

John's vision is of the exalted Christ. He's called **"the Son of Man"** as he often referred to himself in the gospels. He's described in symbolic terms that help us understand various facets of his character. They're symbols taken out of the Old Testament. In Daniel 7 the Son of Man is described in similar ways. His long robe and golden girdle reveal that he is both King and High Priest who intercedes before the Father on our behalf. His white hair is a sign of purity and wisdom (the whiter the hair, the wiser the man!). His eyes are piercing in their scrutiny. Nothing gets by him. His feet have been through the refiner's fire. He's been tested and tried. His voice is like the sound of the breakers pounding against the rocky coast of Patmos. Out of his mouth comes a two-edged sword. His face is glorious and radiant like the sun.

But there is something else. Jesus isn't alone. The first thing that John's eyes are drawn to isn't Christ himself but seven golden lampstands which surround him. Later he sees seven stars which he holds in his right hand. What are these lampstands and stars all about? Down in v. 20 Jesus explains. **"As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches."**

The seven lampstands are the seven churches mentioned in v. 11. These were real local churches, but the fact that there are seven, a number which implies completeness, indicates that these seven churches represent the local churches of all ages and all lands. Notice Christ isn't seen apart from his church. You can't separate Christ from the lampstands. Dan Kimball, pastor of Vintage Faith Church in Santa Cruz has written a book about the emerging generations called, *They Like Jesus, But Not the Church*. That title says it all. For whatever reasons, a lot of people today see Jesus and the organized church as totally separate. That's because it seems to them that the Jesus they read about in the gospels is different than the church they see in our society. And sometimes that's probably pretty accurate. But here, for better or for worse, Jesus is identified with the church.

Why is the church represented by lampstands? Because that's the call of the church—to shine in the midst of a dark world. Jesus said, **"You are the light of the world... let your light so shine before men that they can see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven"** (Mt. 5:14). We're not here to "play church." We're not here as a religious country club which exists for the benefit of the members. We're a lampstand that ceases to be of any value at all if it doesn't give light.

What about the seven stars? These are the angels of the seven churches. This may mean that each church has a kind of guardian angel, but since the word for angel also means "messenger," it could also refer to a human leader of each church as a kind of representative. Either way, the point is clear—Jesus holds each church in his right hand, an honored place, and this is a symbol of his sovereign care and control of each and every church.

What does Christ think of the church? Before we can answer that question we have to see his basic connection and commitment to the church. HE STANDS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE LAMPSTANDS! He's present. He isn't an absentee Lord. He doesn't just check in on us a few times a year, maybe at Christmas and Easter. He doesn't make a few guest appearances. He is right in the middle of what the church is doing throughout the world.

Not only that, HE HOLDS EACH CHURCH IN HIS RIGHT HAND! It doesn't matter what we're facing. He holds us. As we study these letters, we'll see that these seven churches faced it all. They faced persecution. By this time, Nero had been succeeded by Domitian. Under his rule, the persecution of believers spread from Rome to Asia. Some of those believers couldn't take the heat. They also had to deal with false teachers within their own ranks. Men of great intellect who brought into the church ideas that clouded the simplicity of the gospel. They were persuasive and they were gaining a following. Finally, they had to face the constant pressure of sub-Christian values and morals seeping into the church from the culture. People who claimed their freedom in Christ gave them the freedom to live just like the world. The church has always faced these things. Those churches, like ours, were messy. The church is not a living room where everything is always neat and tidy. The church is a family room filled with sinners, so we can expect clothes strewn about and mud on the carpet and fingerprints on the walls. BUT the vision tells that he's still the one who holds the churches in his hand.

There is something else here about how Jesus relates to the church. Look how he describes himself in 2:1: **"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands,"**. Not only does he stand in the middle of the churches, and hold the churches, but HE ALSO WALKS AMONG THE CHURCHES! He's active. He's checking things out. He's hanging around. There's a management strategy called "management by walking around." That's what Jesus does with his churches. That's what he does with this church. He walks around because he cares. Some things make him happy. Some things make him laugh. Some things make him shake his head.

The worst thing that can ever happen to a church is to lose a sense that Jesus is alive and present and walking around in his church. That's when church becomes drab and boring. That's when we wake up on Sunday morning and say, "Let's see, shall I go out to breakfast or go to church?" That's when we can't get excited about plugging into some kind of ministry. Why do it? It's just another activity, another competing demand on my life. But if the churches are places where the living Lord of the universe, the first and the last, the Son of Man with hair like white wool, and feet like burnished bronze, and eyes like a flaming darts, and a voice like the roar of the ocean; if THAT ONE stands in the middle of us, and walks among us, and holds us in his right hand, then I want to be there!

Jesus plants himself in the middle of the churches and walks around. But what does that mean for us? As we read these seven letters, we see what it means. Even though each one is different, there are some common threads that help us see what it means.

THE SEVEN LETTERS

A. He shows us: First, it means he shows us himself. Each letter is introduced by John telling them of some aspect of the vision of Christ he has just seen; some truth about who Christ is which that particular church needed to hear. For instance, the church at Smyrna is about to go through some serious trials, some will even die, so John says at the outset that Christ is "**the first and the last, who was dead and has come to life**" (3:8).

Let me tell you something important: Before we need anything else we need a fresh reminder of who Jesus is. That may not sound very practical. You may not know what to do with that on Monday. But if we take away Christ; if we lose sight of Him, then we're no longer the church; we've lost our identity. When a church has an identity crisis it's because they have lost sight of Jesus.

I went on a college tour with my son this past week and we went to two very different schools. Both of them had similar roots as centered in Christ. One of the schools was spiritually alive. You just had this sense when you stepped on campus that God was at work. But one of the schools has lost sight of him and it's obvious. Most of the teachers don't even believe in him. They have thrown out his word. It's so sad. That can happen to a school, or it can happen to a church. What does the church become when it loses sight of Christ? At best it becomes a club for the advancement of high morals and social justice. At worst it becomes a place where people sit around and try to make each other feel better.

B. He knows us: Second, when Christ stands among us and walks among us it means he knows us. In every single letter, Jesus starts out by saying, "**I know this about you...**" To Ephesus he says, "**I know your deeds and your toil and your perseverance...**" (2:2). To the church at Smyrna he says, "**I know your tribulation and your poverty...**" (2:9). To the church at Pergamum he says, "**I know you dwell where Satan's throne is...**" Every letter affirms the fact that he knows each church. As he walks around, he takes notes. He knows where we live. He knows all about the Peninsula. He knows the pace of life, and the cost of living, and moral

climate is crazy. He knows our particular challenges as a church. He knows our tendencies and our strengths and our weaknesses.

Did you know churches have personalities? I remember living in Denver running across a church with an intriguing name. It was called, "The Happy Church." I always thought that was so goofy—the happy Church. It made me just want to go in there and be sad! But churches do have personalities. We're a culture that focuses on the individual. We glorify our uniqueness and our diversity. But Christ comes along in these letters and addresses communities and he speak to us as a whole. He says, "I know you are like this or that. I know the personality of your community." As individuals we take personality tests like Myers-Briggs. It tells us we are introverts or extroverts and all kinds of other helpful information. How do we get that information as a church? We get it from Jesus. He knows us because he walks among us.

C. He grows us: Not only does he know us but he grows us. In each letter, after Jesus says, "I know you," he goes on first to affirm and then to correct. This is how we grow. We hear what we're doing wrong, and then we hear what we are doing right. We hear the good news and then we hear the bad news. There are exceptions. Two of the churches (Sardis and Laodicea) get no affirmation. One of the churches, Smyrna, gets no correction. But, for the most part, the pattern is consistent.

Jesus affirms the church. He tells us what we're doing right. The church can be a glorious place. Lives are transformed, and we don't always even know it. People are living with immense faith in the midst of terrible odds. They never write a book. Their name doesn't appear in *Who's Who?* They live quiet, courageous lives. Jesus comes along and he affirms us. He says, "I know this about you... I know how you're honoring your parents. I know how you're standing for me at your job. I know how you're holding out for my best when it comes to a husband or wife. I know how you hold to my word as a church. I know those missionaries you support. I affirm you." Does your Jesus affirm you? I think Jesus would have affirmed what he saw happen on both our campuses last week. We had 480 people at Millbrae and 5 people baptized. We think we had close to 2,000 people here celebrating Easter in the dark. We baptized over 20 people. I know Jesus was here and I think he was pleased with what he saw.

But the church can also be a distressing place. The fleas come with the dog. And Jesus isn't a wimp. He's not afraid to point the finger. Over and over he says, "I have this against you..." He threatens the church at Ephesus with the possibility of losing their lampstand. He warns the lukewarm church at Laodicea he is about to vomit them out of his mouth. Five out of seven of these churches are called to repent for something. Repentance isn't just for the unbeliever; repentance is for the church. And it's not just for a few individuals within the church, it's for the whole church. Churches need to learn how to listen to the correction of Christ. That's why every letter ends the same way, "**He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.**" Are you listening?

D. He promises us: Not only does Christ show us

himself; not only does he know us and grow us by affirming us and challenging us, he also motivates us with his promise. The promise comes under a variety of images. Ephesus is promised a tree of life; Smyrna a crown of life; Pergamun is promised a white stone and a new name written on that stone; Thyatira is promised the morning star; Sardis is promised white garments; Philadelphia is promised they will become a pillar in the Temple of God; and Laodicea is told they will sit down with Him on the throne. The promise is always conditional; only those who repent and overcome will receive the reward.

Sometimes we think that the promise of reward is a kind of lesser motivation. We think the good we do is less if we're motivated to do it by the promise of reward. Shouldn't we want to do good just because it's good? Jesus doesn't worry about that. He walks among the churches and says, "I've got something wonderful waiting for you. But you can only have it if you straighten up and then hang in there for the long haul." That's how he motivates us.

CONCLUSION

What does Christ think of the church? Well, I know one thing, he thinks a lot about the church. He stands in the middle of us and walks among us and holds us in his right hand. He shows us himself; he knows us better than we know ourselves; he grows us up by telling us what we're doing right and what we're doing wrong; and he motivates us with his promise. He thinks a lot about the church.

What do you think of the church? Some of us are excited about the church. Some of us are disappointed or even angry. It could be so much more than it is; like a car that ought to run well but just hasn't been maintained. Some of us resent the church because it's always asking for more than we can give. Some of us may see the church like they see members of the opposite sex—can't live with it; can't live without it. Some of us feel fine about the church but we have a problem with the people who are part of the church. If we could just hand pick the members things would be so much better! What do you think of the church?

When my oldest daughter was small, Cabbage Patch dolls were the craze. She had one of these, and she and this doll were inseparable. His name was Lenny Nate. To be honest, I never understood what she saw in the doll. It was funny looking. Eventually, it got dirty and torn. It smelled. No one really wanted it around, except her. There was a kind of unwritten rule in our home at the time—if you want to be with my little girl, you also have to be with her doll. The two go together. They're a package deal.

Jesus and the church go together. He stands and walks among us; he holds us in his right hand. If you want to be with him, you have to be with his church.