
Learning from the Seven Churches of Revelation

SCOTT HOEZEE

The New Testament contains twenty-seven books, fully twenty of which are what we call epistles or letters, and we believe all those letters were inspired by the Holy Spirit; and yet, still we refer to them mostly by the human author. So, we have Paul's letter to the Romans, we have Peter's letter to God's Elect scattered around the world, we have John's letters to the Elder, to the Lady, to someone named Gaius; but in the book of Revelation, we have no fewer than seven letters, but these are distinct, in that although John of Patmos conveyed them, they were clearly written by none other than Jesus himself. Today on *Groundwork*, we will look at what was conveyed to seven early congregations, and what they might have to say to the Church also yet today. Stay tuned.

DARRELL DELANEY

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Darrell, this is now the second program of six that will cover the Bible's final book, Revelation. So, in the first program, we saw the setup for the book, as John is exiled on the island of Patmos, where he receives all the marvelous and mysterious messages that fill up this book's twenty-two chapters.

DARRELL DELANEY

And today, we are looking at Revelation Chapter 2 and 3, where we will see and talk about the seven churches: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are very happy for this program that we are joined by a special guest, Dr. Jeffrey Weima. Dr. Weima is a professor of New Testament at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan; and there, one of his primary areas of teaching are the epistles, especially the Pauline epistles in the New Testament; but recently, Dr. Weima also published the book: *The Sermons to the Seven Churches of Revelation: A Commentary and Guide*. So, as that title suggests, maybe what we have long regarded as letters are more mini-sermons; but in any event, we are glad to have you with us today, Jeff; so, welcome to *Groundwork*.

JEFF WEIMA

Thank you; I am very pleased to be here, and to talk with you about the seven letters, or as we have already hinted, better the seven sermons to the churches of Asia Minor.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So Jeff and Darrell, we are going to spend some time doing a bird's eye view of these letters to see what they really mean, and how they apply to us...clear up some misperceptions; but Darrell, first let's just remind our listeners how Revelation 1 concludes, because that is what sets up Chapter 2 and then 3.

DARRELL DELANEY

Picking up in Chapter 1:19, 20, it says: ¹⁹“Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. ²⁰The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.”

So, Dr. Weima, I know that there are a lot of things that people try to interpret, but could you help us understand some of the common misconceptions that people may read or pick up when they read the book of Revelation?

JEFF WEIMA

Well, sure; the first misconception is one that I myself shared until I looked at these letters a lot more closely. I originally thought of the readers of Revelation as kind of like super Christians; people who were persecuted for their faith, but were faithful and hung in there; and the book of Revelation is a word of encouragement to them to not give up, because, you know, Jesus will return, and he will vindicate your faith; but as I studied these letters more closely, I realized quickly that actually the majority of the churches to whom the book is written were unhealthy. They were written to Christians who wanted to be Jesus’ followers, but who also were compromising their faith in such a way they could fit into their culture and society; and that was really important because the old view I had, namely that these were super Christians, you know, who were persecuted for their faith...well, that made the book somehow not that relevant to me, or seemingly to my context here in North America, because I am not being persecuted; but when I started seeing that the readers were actually a lot more similar to us...you know, people who want to be Jesus’ followers, but are finding ways to kind of fit in, and as a result, compromising their faith, then suddenly these seven letters became immediately relevant for my life and that of the churches of which I am a part.

A second misconception is at first blush maybe not seemingly that important, but it has to do with whether these are letters or not. Now, they have been called seven letters for so long, I am not bothered if people continue to refer to them that way; but having known something about letters, they are not really letters, and the text doesn’t claim that they are. Instead, it is better to think of them as Spirit-led utterances from God addressing particular situations; and of course, that is not a very user-friendly idea: Spirit-led utterances; it comes closer to that of a sermon; and so, I think it is helpful for people today to think of these as seven messages or seven sermons from Jesus, through John, addressing very specific situations today.

Now, there is more at stake here than just the name of “sermon” or “letter”; and that has to do that even though they are not really letters, these sermons or messages do have a very clear structure or outline, and that is very important. If you laid all seven letters side by side, very quickly you would sense that pattern or outline; and not only is that outline important for understanding the flow of each message, but when John or John through the Spirit changes that structure, it is never by accident or fluke chance, but it is interpretively important. So for example, at the beginning of each message, the first thing that Jesus does is he commends the readers. He gives them a kind of thumbs up about what they are doing right; and when we then come to, say, Sardis, letter number seven, and we expect to find that commendation and it is not there, well, that is an important signal about the fact that, well, Jesus is unhappy with this church; and conversely, there are some healthy churches, where Jesus doesn’t do what he normally does and highlights what the church is doing wrong; and so, knowing the structure and changes to the structure of these sermons is really important for getting a better and more accurate read of what Jesus was saying through these messages.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, and I think that is so interesting. One thing that we sometimes talked about before here on *Groundwork*, Jeff...you know, we often hear people say: Boy, if only the Church today could be like the early Church...you know; and I say: Well, if you read the book of Acts, we are. I mean, the Bible isn’t hesitant to say in Acts, or as you just said, Jeff, in these letters, the early Church had problems too; and that is why the messages...as you just said, these messages...they apply to us just as much as they did to those churches two thousand years ago.

DARRELL DELANEY

I find it a great encouragement to me personally to know that God is still in the business of working with imperfect people in broken situations; even though he may not cause them, they do not thwart him or tie his hands, and in the situation with the book of Revelation, we see that the Church does have some issues, but yet he is still able to get his Word across, and still able to speak to them and use them to teach us today, that he works with imperfect people.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I think too, Jeff, maybe you could just comment a little bit...a lot of people are intimidated by the whole book of Revelation, and therefore by these seven letters. What intimidates people the most, in your experience, and in your research?

JEFF WEIMA

Well, it is obviously the rather dramatic images and metaphors that the book has so many of; and people don't understand them; they have heard maybe different, we could even say, rather strange interpretations about their meaning; and so, a little bit of uncertainty, maybe even fear, you know, causes people, I think, to ignore the book of Revelation; and I think that to understand this book, we need, I sometimes say, two ears. What do I mean by that? Well, one ear is an ear by which we need to hear the multiplicity of Old Testament echoes. The book of Revelation, even though surprisingly, it has almost no quotations from the Old Testament, it is just saturated with allusions to the Old Testament. John clearly expects his readers to pick up on these things. Because most of us, you know, aren't really experts in the Old Testament, and we miss those allusions, that is one way in which we struggle to properly interpret this message. The other ear has to do with the Roman world in which the original readers lived...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

JEFF WEIMA

I mean, there are all kinds of allusions to practices or to the Roman Empire, and to other institutions of that day that we frankly just don't get; and so, you really need these two well-trained ears to hear the Old Testament allusions and the references to the culture of that day in order to properly understand the message.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, in just a moment, we are going to try to open both of those ears as we dig into the specifics of these letters. So, stay tuned.

Segment 2

DARRELL DELANEY

I am Darrell Delaney, with Scott Hoezee, and our special guest today is Dr. Jeff Weima, and you are listening to *Groundwork*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, let's dig right back into these letters found in Revelation 2 and 3; and then, Jeff, you can guide us through them. You mentioned, Jeff, that there is a similar pattern in all the letters. Three of the letters, though, have some very similar language, and we are going to look at Ephesus, Pergamum and Thyatira. First Ephesus, where Jesus says:

2:2a "I know you deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people...³You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. ⁴Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first."

DARRELL DELANEY

And to the church at Pergamum he says: 2:13a “I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. ¹⁴Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

And now Thyatira. Again, similar to the others: 2:19 “I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first. ²⁰Nevertheless, I have this against you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols.”

So, we will take up these three, Jeff: Ephesus, Pergamum and Thyatira. Help us understand the messages of these three.

JEFF WEIMA

Sure; I have given titles to each of the churches because I figure if you get the title right, even if you forget all the other details, you are off on the right track to really getting at the heart of what each message is about. So, for Ephesus, I refer to it as the church of loveless orthodoxy. There are lots of good things happening in this congregation. Jesus has for his thumbs up, his opening word of praise, quite a bit, positive things to say about them; and then he gets to that complaint. He says: Nevertheless...or yet, I have this against you: You have forsaken your first love, or the love you had at first. Now, an older view is that this love that they had forsaken is their love for God and/or Jesus; and so, the supposed problem according to this older view is that their faith had kind of waned and grown weak. A newer interpretation, which can be defended, I think, quite clearly from the text is that it doesn't refer to their love for God and/or Jesus, but rather their love for one another...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Oh, okay.

JEFF WEIMA

Because, if you look at the commendation, Jesus commends them for their orthodoxy. Now, that is a big word that simply means right thinking or correct doctrine. This looks like a church that had to, because of the pluralistic environment they lived in and the threats that they faced, they had to be very concerned with false teaching and with false teachers; and that is a good thing, and that is why Jesus commends them for it; but too much of a good thing is not a good thing; and so, orthodoxy, which is a good thing, if it is taken too far, a climate of suspicion seemed to have pervaded this church in Ephesus, and it prevented them from being the loving or caring, compassionate community that they had been at one time.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, it reminds me, Jeff, of...this is Ephesus, but it reminds me a little bit about Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, where they had knowledge that puffed up, they were puffed up about their spiritual gifts, comparing to each other; so, they too, you know, maybe their beliefs were right, but their treatment of each other was wrong.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is also an echo of John's own writings. 1 John talks about loving God and loving one another. You cannot say you love God, that you haven't seen, and you don't love your brother, who you see every day; and John's theme of love comes through here as well.

JEFF WEIMA

Well, that is exactly right. That is one of the many reasons, in addition to details of the text itself, but if we put it within the theme of Johannine writings, this emphasis on love for brother and sister is a strong one; and

I think it emerges in this first sermon as well.

I better move on to the next two, and I say the next two because we can treat them together. So, Pergamum and Thyatira...they have different images in them, but the heart of the complaint is the same. Jesus accuses them of eating food sacrificed to idols, and its sister-twin, if I could say it that way: sexual immorality. It is inverted in Thyatira...the order of those two things...but both of the things are mentioned. So, what is going on there? Well, first of all, what name do we give to both of these churches? They are the church of idolatrous compromise. Here in both places, Pergamum and Thyatira...and we know it wasn't just here...we know from Corinthians and from Acts 15, that this was a great temptation in the early Church to participate in what the text refers to "meat sacrificed to idols". What is that all about? It was very common in that day to offer sacrifices to a god or goddess, and the best kind of sacrifice is a meat sacrifice. What happened is, only a small portion of that meat was actually sacrificed. So, the vast majority of the leftover meat was then either of two things happening: 1) Sold in the marketplace; or 2) Taken to either a dining room in the pagan temple or another building devoted to that particular god or goddess and then eaten there; and it is the second thing that the text is addressing. When you sit in a building devoted to a pagan god or goddess, and you have a meal there that isn't a regular lunch or dinner anymore, suddenly it is a religious meal...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

JEFF WEIMA

And you become guilty of idolatry. So, this seems to have been a huge temptation, as I have suggested, throughout the early Church. Paul has to deal with it with not one, not two, but three whole chapters; and the first synod in Jerusalem addressed it in the letter they sent out to Gentiles; and so, I guess it is not surprising that two of the seven sermons to the seven churches also deals with this problem of idolatrous compromise.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Is there any evidence, Jeff, that this was also some of what we call syncretism, that they kind of incorporated this into their worship of Jesus. I mean, we know that happened in Israel, right? That they still thought they were worshipping Yahweh *and* the golden calf or Yahweh *through* the golden calf, or Yahweh *and* Baal and Asherah. Was that going on here, do we think?

JEFF WEIMA

I don't think it was so much syncretism as a false theology. If we look to Paul, because Paul seems to give a better explanation of what the Corinthians were thinking when they participated in the same thing that the Christians in Pergamum and Thyatira did, because there Paul says, you know, that we know that an idol is nothing, that there is no God but one; and so, it looks like, for instance, the Thyatira sermon refers to Jezebel, and it looks like some spiritual leader is saying to the Christians there: You know, it's not so bad going to these pagan temples and enjoying these gods and goddesses. They are not real anyway, and because you know that already, it doesn't really harm you; and so, you know, go and eat. No big deal. And so, this, I think, false justification for doing something which they clearly shouldn't is what is going on; and that is why I said they are compromising their faith in a way that makes them guilty of idolatry.

DARRELL DELANEY

Well, in just a moment, we are going to wrap up the program with a quick look at the other four letters. Stay tuned.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I am Darrell Delaney.

Jeff Weima: And I am Jeff Weima.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we have a ways to go yet in this program as we conclude a look at the seven sermons to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3. We have four to go; so, yes; let's get right to it, Darrell. There are two very positive letters. The first one is to Smyrna:

^{2:8}These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. ^{9a}“I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! ¹⁰Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you [life as your] victor's crown.”

So, that is Smyrna.

DARRELL DELANEY

And then this is Philadelphia. It says: ^{3:7}These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. ⁸“I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

And now two more negative ones. The first one goes to Sardis: ^{3:1}These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. “I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. ²Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God.”

DARRELL DELANEY

And finally there is Laodicea; and it says: ^{3:15}“I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! ¹⁶So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷You 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.”

Dr. Weima, where I am from, you say “amen” or you say “ouch”; and it is really crazy how the pattern that you mentioned earlier, it switches at these last two; and I wanted to make sure that you got a chance to speak into these, and what can we learn from these sermons?

JEFF WEIMA

Well, first, I guess we better deal with the healthy churches, and then we will turn to these “ouch” letters at the end. So, the two healthy letters are Smyrna and Philadelphia. They are number two and number seven; and they are the only ones where Jesus doesn't have a complaint; and so they stand out from the remaining five. I refer to these as the church of the persevering persecuted. By the second or third generation, Christianity, which had enjoyed some safety privileges because they were confused with Judaism...that wasn't the case anymore; and so, there was more open opposition to the Christians; and so, the Christians in Smyrna and Philadelphia face that persecution, and yet, they persevered; and so, Jesus only gives them the thumbs up and says: Way to go; but...

SCOTT HOEZEE

But...

JEFF WEIMA

Unfortunately, we have Sardis and Laodicea. So, Sardis I call the church of deadly complacency. Deadly because Jesus says that you are dead, but apparently, I guess there still is life. He says: You are dying; and he hasn't given up on them. But the problem is, is they become complacent. They are not aware of the dangers that they face, they are not really thinking consciously about what it means to be a Jesus follower. They are just kind of going along naively through life, and that describes a lot of, I am afraid, North American

Christians today.

DARRELL DELANEY

Oh, watch out!

JEFF WEIMA

There is a warning here, right? That in Jesus' eyes you might be considered dying, if not dead; but the seventh sermon is the biggest ouch of all. It is in the last and climactic...not best...but unfortunately worst position. Brace yourselves; I don't want to offend anyone, but I call this the church of vomit and vanity.

DARRELL DELANEY

Oh...

JEFF WEIMA

Now, before you get upset with me about using a word like "vomit," I have to tell you that this comes right out of the text...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

JEFF WEIMA

Where we read: (3:16) I am about to spit you out of my mouth; in the original Greek, there is a separate verb that means: I am about to vomit you out of my mouth; and so, this is pretty striking when Jesus looks at the church and says: Spiritually speaking, you guys are so bad you make me want to up-chuck...

DARRELL DELANEY

Sick to my stomach!

JEFF WEIMA

Yes; that is the first problem; and then secondly, vanity; because it is not really the money that is the problem, it is the attitude, the smugness that seems to go along with it. Jesus says: 3:17 [You say] 'I am wealthy—I am rich'—he is describing them. You know, I don't need a thing. And again, I see often, I am afraid, North American Christians who are maybe just a little too well off and a little too comfortable...a little too smug. So, there is a strong message of warning to Christians today. But nevertheless, there is also a word of grace because to the worst of the worst churches, Jesus ends with: [verse 20 paraphrased) I am knocking at the door; I want to come in and have dinner with you. So, there is also, importantly, to see the note of grace that Jesus still has for even Laodicea, the worst of the seven churches.

DARRELL DELANEY

Revelation 3:20.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I think, Jeff, maybe a bottom line...we only have a few moments left...but you know, Jesus is watching his church; he is caring for his church; and we need to be mindful on a constant basis of how closely we are following the example of Christ.

JEFF WEIMA

That is exactly right; don't think of these as idealized Christians who are persecuted and somehow that doesn't relate to me and our situation today. As we have seen, five of the seven are unhealthy; and typically speaking, you know, there is a kind of comfortableness...a complacency...all of which, again, I see temptations that are very real for Christians here in North America. So, there is a word of warning for the Church today to kind of wake up and to recommit themselves to Christ, and by his Spirit to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches, not only of Asia Minor but to the Church today.

DARRELL DELANEY

And we are part of that Church. I just wanted to say before we close, thank you so much, Dr. Weima, professor at Calvin Theological Seminary, and we wanted to make sure you got a chance to say anything else before we close.

JEFF WEIMA

Well, it is my pleasure to be with you and to think with you and others about the important message that Jesus had for the churches then and there, but also the churches here and now.

SCOTT HOEZEE

For our Lord's care for the Church we say thanks be to God.

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Darrell Delaney and Scott Hoezee; and today we have been joined by Dr. Jeff Weima. We hope you will join us again next time as we study John's heavenly visions in Revelation Chapters 4 and 5.

Connect with us at groundworkonline.com to share what *Groundwork* means to you, or what you would like to hear discussed next on *Groundwork*.

DARRELL DELANEY

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