

The Church Of The True Emperor and The True God

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[0 : 00] I do not know where I would be without the last book of the Bible. In the midst of all that the world is going through right now, in the midst of all that I am going through, in the midst of all that you are all facing, I do not know where I would be without the last book of the Bible.

No other book puts things into perspective the way the apocalypse of Jesus Christ does. As I have been emphasizing over the past two weeks, apocalyptic literature, like the kind we just read, has two practical purposes.

Two very practical pastoral purposes. The first is to set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the future.

To set the present moment in all of its turmoil and uncertainty and cataclysmic change in light of the unseen realities of the future.

There is a future. It is good and beautiful and just. Jesus Christ, who died for the sins of the world and who the Father raised from the dead, is coming.

[1 : 21] He's coming and he's bringing with him a new city. A city that actually works. A city that cannot be destroyed.

A city where there is no pain or tears or death anymore. And if we can just get a glimpse of that city, if only for a nanosecond, it will change the way we see our cities.

So the first practical purpose is to set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the future. But the second practical purpose is to set the present moment in light of the unseen realities of the present.

There's more to the present moment than we can know with our unaided ears and eyes. The purpose of apocalyptic literature is to set the present moment in all of its uncertainty and turmoil and cataclysmic change in light of that more.

to open up what is ordinarily hidden so that the unseen realities of the present can somehow be known to us. And as we discover from the last book of the Bible, the greatest unseen reality of the present is a person.

[2 : 44] Oh, how I wish the world knew that today. How I wish the people of New Jersey and New York could know that today. How I wish the people of Haiti and Nigeria and Syria and the Sudan could know this today.

Things are not as they seem. Things are not just as they seem. There is more to the present moment. There's more to the present moment than we can know with our unaided intellect and emotions and imaginations.

And that more is a person in the midst of it all. A person who knows human suffering. A person who makes our suffering his own.

Standing in our midst. Walking in our midst. In this very room as the song of the 20th century used to put it. The incarnate crucified risen ascended and coming Jesus of Nazareth is in this very room. The glorified son of man the beloved son of God the great I am is in this very room very close at hand behind a very thin permeable veil.

[4 : 04] How I wish the whole world could know this truth about the present moment. And to know that he is speaking. As Francis Schaeffer used to say he is there and he is not silent.

The greatest unseen reality of the present moment is speaking to you and to me to the churches and to all the cities of the world. And from the last book of the Bible we know what he is saying. We know that he is saying look and we know that he is saying listen. Look. Look at me. I was dead but I am alive forevermore and I hold the keys.

I am the living one. And listen. Especially listen. For it turns out that we obey the command to look by obeying the command to listen.

We look by listening. We see by hearing. Yes, as they say a picture is worth a thousand words and sometimes only a picture will do.

[5 : 19] But often the picture really doesn't speak to us until someone tells us what the picture is picturing. This table before us this morning is a beautiful picture of the love of Jesus Christ.

But we only know that because we heard somebody tell us that. If someone walked off the street today and had never been in the church maybe someone might have viewed today and looked at the table you would see bread and cup but that's all we'd see is bread and cup until they you and I hear Jesus speak about the bread and cup and say this is my body given for you this cup is the new covenant in my blood.

We finally see when we hear. Which is why then in each of the seven messages Jesus sends to the seven churches of Asia we have the one common exhortation hear hear what the spirit is saying to the churches seven times hear hear hear hear hear hear hear because it is when we hear Jesus that we finally see Jesus I like the title of the Christmas CD by Canadian singer Matt Day do you see what I hear hear you got to think about that for a moment don't you do you see what I hear this morning we heard read the first and seventh of the seven messages that message to the church in Ephesus and the message to the church in

Laodicea next week we're going to hear the fourth message the message to Thyatira now many of you know that I have written extensively on each of the seven messages to the seven churches in the seven cities and I have a chapter in my book entitled Discipleship on the Edge on each one of those and I'm just going to commend that to you so you can get some of the background data because what I want to do this morning is step back from any single one of those messages and look at the package as a whole I want to look at the whole of these seven messages and what I want you to see is that the form of the seven messages itself is making a statement about who Jesus Christ is and about what he thinks his church is in and for the world

I'll say that again I want to show you how the form of the messages itself is making a statement about who Jesus Christ is and about what he understands his church to be in and for the world we're going to make an amazing discovery I'll put it more bluntly Jesus is going to blow the circuit boards on who we think he is and what the church is he's definitely going to blow all the politically correct circuit boards in our time it's just going to go cattywampus but first just a few observations about revelation two and three as a package seven cities seven churches seven messages why seven well in the last book of the bible the number seven is the number for completeness and so in addressing seven congregations Jesus is addressing the complete church the whole church and I think addressing the church in every place in every age now why these seven these particular seven there were other churches gathered on Asia

[9 : 23] Minor Heropolis Colossi Miletus we know about those churches why doesn't he address them why these seven I think it is that these seven churches embody the issues that the church faces in every era in every place of the globe somehow we're going to see ourselves in those seven churches throughout church history now as you heard the first and seventh messages read I think you could discern that they followed a similar pattern a similar flow all seven of them do Jesus begins by introducing himself with some kind of self designation he uses the images from the initial apocalypse recorded in Revelation 1 but he uses different images for different churches in different cities because he's tying into unique cultural religious and political dynamics in each of those places

Jesus then goes on to tell them what he knows about the church he tells him what he likes I know that and he tells him what he does not like I have this against you he has something positive to say to every one of the churches except the seventh nothing positive to say to the last one the church at Laodicea he has words of criticism for most of the churches except numbers two and six Smyrna and Philadelphia interestingly those are the two cities that were under overt persecution and churches under persecution he has no critical word for interesting he then tells each church what they need to do repent remember do what you used to do wake up open the door a variety of things he calls the churches to do and then he makes incredible promises to those who overcome we know from the rest of the last book of the

Bible that to overcome means to remain loyal to who Jesus Christ is under pressure a really meaningful exercise for you sometimes is to take out a piece of paper and write down all of the promises to the overcomers it will stir your soul and then Jesus says hear hear what the spirit is

saying to the churches although you may have noticed that in the first letter the letter to Ephesus the order is here and then to those who overcome whereas in the seventh letter to the Laodicea it's to those who overcome and then here it's switched and this order switched in the fourth letter the letter to Thyatira which has huge implications and what I want to work with next week okay now to what I want us to focus on this morning you may have noticed that

I have been calling the content of revelation two and three the messages the seven messages that is I have not been calling them letters they're traditionally called the seven letters but I'm not calling them letters and I'm not calling them letters for the simple reason that they are not written in letter form the whole of the last book of the Bible is one long letter the apocalypse of Jesus Christ is the longest letter in the Bible the longest pastoral letter in the Bible John to the seven churches in Asia grace to you and peace so the whole book is a letter but the messages of revelation two and three are not in letter form and it was new testament scholar David Own who helped me see this in his massive commentary on the last book of the Bible he writes this the seven proclamations exhibit not a single characteristic feature of early

Christian letter writing tradition not a single characteristic of letter writing tradition which says own must have been the result of a deliberate choice what we have in revelation two and three is a new form of communication it didn't exist before it's a unique form of communication a form of communication which itself is making a statement a form of communication which is making a statement about who Jesus Christ thinks he is the messages to the seven churches are working with a new unique genre we know this word genre because we're aware of all kinds of different genre for speaking and for communicating newspapers magazines tabloids novels poetry medical journals financial reports philosophical treaties variety of genres where the different genre musically classical baroque rock country and my favorite rap the scene if you're there although

[15:03] I am trying to write a rap of these seven messages but it's not coming very well right now the genre of the seven messages is a combination of two other genres and these two genres the first hearers of the book would have been familiar with them and here I'm going to show you something about Jesus Christ I don't think we've seen before the genre of the seven messages is a mix of the so called prophetic oracle on the one hand and the so called imperial edict on the other hand prophetic oracle and imperial edict the prophetic oracle we get primarily from the Jewish world and the imperial edict we get primarily from the Gentile world particularly

Persia and Rome now how do we know this combination in each of the seven messages we hear the phrase says this the one who Jesus then describes himself says this seven times the one who says this says this says this says this now in the original it is Tade Legge Tade Legge the one who Tade Legge the one who says this the one who says this the one who seven times says this the one who says this the one who now why am I bringing up this detail well get this Tade Legge was used on the one hand to introduce royal and imperial edicts in Persia and Rome in all kinds of documents that say says this the governor of the territory of says this so and so the magnificent the benefactor of says this the one who holds the sword over the city and

Tade Legge is used on the other hand to introduce the word of God the prophetic word of God in the Jewish world in the Greek Old Testament the phrase ko amer Yahweh which we render thus says the Lord in the Greek Old Testament it's rendered Tade Legge says this the Lord says this the Lord says this Yahweh says this Yahweh Tade Legge Yahweh so the genre the form of communication of these seven messages is a unique mix this has never happened before this mix a mix of the imperial edict of the Gentile world and the prophetic oracle of the Jewish world and this new genre this new form of communication is itself making a statement in this case the medium is the message the genre is making an enormous claim about who

Jesus is or to be more accurate Jesus himself has created this new genre to make an enormous claim about who he thinks he is on the one hand he is a king addressing his subjects imperial edict on the other hand he is a god addressing his worshippers prophetic oracle Jesus is speaking as the royal emperor issuing decrees that are worthy of his status as the king as the ruler of the kings of the earth and he is speaking as the living god issuing warnings and blessings befitting his status as the glorified son of man the beloved son of God the great I am the genre of the seven messages itself proclaims Jesus as the true emperor and the true God no wonder the early Christians were in trouble Jesus of Nazareth is the true emperor and the true God and are not emperor and God the two meanings of the word kurios Lord we say the confession Jesus is Lord a lot but do we know what we are saying in the Gentile world kurios Lord is the title given to the sovereign Caesar in the Jewish

world kurios lord is the substitute the circumlocution for the sacred name of yahweh and the genre of revelation two and three is itself saying jesus is lord he is emperor of emperors he is god of gods well we had better listen when this jesus speaks we had better listen i mean to whom else are we going to listen only he has the keys to life and to death pade loge says this the one who says this the one who says this the one who says this the one who says this the one who seven times says this the one who to the church of seven times to the church of ephesus thy tyra laodicea the word that we translate church here the word that jesus uses is the word ecclesia we've heard it before it comes into the english language in the word ecclesiastic but do we realize what it means in his book at the origin of christian worship larry her who used to teach at region college and now is at university of edinburgh and scotland says that ecclesia is an interesting choice of words it's an interesting choice of words to designate a gathering of christian believers interesting because in the first century ecclesia had no religious connotation i pointed that out at some of our congregational meetings in the first century ecclesia had no religious connotation oh everything century involved the gods and goddesses in one way or another but ecclesia had no intentional religious nuances there were a host of other words that jesus could have picked that had all kinds of religious connotations so here's the scoop on ecclesia as larry her puts it ecclesia listen to this ecclesia designated the gathering of citizens of a city to conduct civic business the gathering of citizens to conduct civic business yes the gods were involved nothing happened in the Greek and Roman world without reference to the gods and the goddesses but ecclesia was not involved with the gods per se it was involved with the business of the city now what's important to note is that in the Greek Old Testament the phrase the congregation of the Lord is rendered by ecclesia when God would gather his people together for some new active obedience some new teaching the word was ecclesia and interestingly and the Jews as they were scattered throughout the

[23 : 21] Greek and Roman world did not use this word for their gatherings they used the word synagogue so writes her taco it appears that the early Christians deliberately adopted deliberately adopted and deliberately preferred a distinctive self designation a term not used by pagan or Jewish religious groups to refer to their gatherings because the term was clear the ecclesia happens when the emperor summons the citizens the ecclesia takes place when God summons the worshipers to gather to do the business of the city is that how we view our gatherings is this how we understand what it means to be church in our time gathering to conduct the business of the city if

Jesus is emperor of emperors and God of gods then you know he cares for the business of every city to the angel of the ecclesia in Ephesus to the angel of the ecclesia in Laodicea the seven messages are spoken to people summoned by the true emperor and the true God to get on with the business of the true emperor and the true God to conduct the business of the kingdom of God in the midst of the other kingdoms to conduct the business of the only lasting empire in the midst of all the other crumbling empires to conduct the business of the city of God in the city of man Or, as we later discover when we read the last book of the Bible, to conduct the business of New Jerusalem the bride, right in the midst of Babylon the harlot.

Now, this is why you've heard me say often that the welfare of the city is directly related to the welfare of the church in the city.

The health of the city is directly related to this ekklesia in the city. Or, to put it differently, a city is as holy and therefore healthy as the ekklesia in the city.

And what we do when we gather in the name of the emperor and God has profound implications for the city, even if the city is not aware of it.

[25 : 59] In light of Jesus then calling gatherings of believers the ekklesia, I propose this definition of church.

We are ordinary broken people. Do I have a witness about that part? Anybody join me in the ordinary and the broken? Come on, a few more.

We are ordinary broken people. Summoned by, gathered around, the incarnate, crucified, risen, ascended, and coming Jesus of Nazareth.

To share in the life of Jesus, and to be engaged in the business of Jesus in the city. Isn't that thrilling?

You see, as the emperor Caesar expanded his reign in the world, his basileia kingdom in the world, he would set up ekklesia in all the cities, these administrative outposts of his rule.

[27 : 30] So too, the emperor Jesus, as he expands his reign in the world, his basileia kingdom in the world, he sets up these ekklesia in every city of the world, as administrative outposts of his rule. He gathers us together to become another city within the city. To have a vision and value system, and behaviors of a radically alternative empire.

Now, what does all of this mean? Well, read the rest of the revelation of Jesus Christ.

But in the meantime, first things first. You may have noticed, when we read the first and seventh message, that the emperor has invited us to dinner.

He does it a lot. You may have noticed that God has set a table. He does it a lot. Look, he says, I'm standing at the door knocking.

[28 : 49] What? Wait a minute. We've been emphasizing that he is very present with us. He's in this very room. Why speak of standing at the door and knocking? Because, when we do not look and listen, he goes to the front door and knocks again.

And says, Open the door. Open the door, and I will come in and eat with you, and you with me. The first business of the true emperor and true God in the city is hospitality, feeding his people.

Come, says Jesus. Let us have supper together. . .

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