

## Letters To Seven Churches (Part Ten): The Church

Vessels of Gold, Vessels of Clay

Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Given 09-Jun-19; Sermon #1492-AM

Some people tend to have a rose colored glasses/pie in the sky view of the church of God, especially the early church right after Christ ascended and the day of Pentecost dawned and the church was created there. I mean, it was the golden age of the church, was it not? Right there, those few weeks or months, right after the day of Pentecost. Hey, the twelve apostles were there. I mean, would that not be great to be able to talk to them? Most of the church had seen Jesus in the flesh! There He was and then He was gone. But they had known Him. They had heard Him speak. Maybe some of them had been around for the Sermon on the Mount. Or, maybe others had heard Him preach in the Temple. It does say in I Corinthians 15 that 500 of them had seen Him after His resurrection. So it was not just before His crucifixion, some of them, a good number of them, had seen Him afterward.

Everyone in the church of that time was in their first love. It was great. They had all things in common. They were willing to share and to give to one another. Those who had gave to those who did not have. They had meals and fellowship from house to house, it tells us there. What a grand time that would have been to have been alive in the church at that time. Then we ask, "Well, why can't it be like that today?"

Let us go to Acts 2. We are going to read a bit of this chapter, and hop, skip, and jump through to the end just to get the background of what was going on here in the first four verses. Then we will jump down to verse 22.

**Acts 2:1-4** Now, when the day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. [What unity!] And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

So here are the the Twelve and 120. They are receiving the Holy Spirit and you know, everything is just great. They could see the Holy Spirit actually working with their eyes.

**Acts 2:22-24** [This is in the midst of Peter's sermon that he gives just after this.] "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know—Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it."

**Acts 2:32-47** [Still within his sermon] "This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses. Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear. [Christ is alive. He is up in heaven and He is giving us His Spirit, he is saying.] For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says himself: 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool.'" "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call." And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation." Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear [which we heard about in the offering sermonette here] came upon every soul, and many wonders and

signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common [Have you noticed how many times that word "all" keeps popping up?], and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

This sounds idyllic. It would have been, like I said, great to have lived at that time when the church was so united, the church was off to a wonderful, and as we see here, Spirit-filled start. The Spirit was flowing and people were responding to it properly and everybody was just happy and things were moving forward. They were growing. They were learning a lot of stuff. They were fellowshiping. It was just great. The shiny new members sat at the apostles' feet and learned the doctrines. They prayed fervently. They feared God and God responded by working many signs and wonders in their presence. They were just full of joy and praise for God. It was wonderful.

New conversions were happening—every time you turned around, somebody was coming to the truth. The church was just exploding. It went from 120 there at the beginning of the day to 3,000 at the end of the day. And then by chapter 4, we are adding another 5,000. So, within, I do not know, a week or two or whatever it was in that time, there were now 8,000 people in the church—from nothing, virtually.

It was a heady time. Hard to wrap your head around what was going on there. We do not have any experience with something like that. This was the beginning of the apostles—and the church behind them—turning the world upside down. But we know that it did not last. Actually, it did not even last very long. Let us go to chapter 4.

**Acts 4:1-3** Now, as they [the apostles] spoke to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came upon them, being greatly disturbed that they taught the people and

preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they laid hands on them, and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening.

So here is the first sign that things are not going to go the way that it had been going in chapters 2 and 3. Let us go down to verse 15.

**Acts 4:15-18** But when they had commanded them [this is after the apostles were being talked to by the Sanhedrin, and they actually addressed the Sanhedrin. But this is kind of the conclusion of the matter there.] to go aside out of the council, they conferred among themselves, saying, "What shall we do to these men? For indeed, that a notable miracle has been done through them is evident [This is the one in chapter 3] to all who dwell in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. But so that it spreads no further among the people, let us severely threaten them, that from now on they speak to no man in this name." So they called them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus.

Here we have the conclusion of it, that they were severely reprimanded and were told, "Don't teach anymore like this or else something bad is going to happen." But they were reminded that even though God had called them out and given them His Holy Spirit and everything seemed to be going so well, the church still lived in the world, and the world was not going to take this lying down. So the world struck back in the form of the Jews persecuting the Christians.

Here, early on, the apostles were only reprimanded, and the apostles receiving this reprimand got back together with the church. And after praying and receiving encouragement from the Holy Spirit, they shrugged it off and continued preaching in Christ's name. They were not going to let the Jews slow them down. But similar things and much worse persecution would happen repeatedly. Let us go to chapter 5. We will read the first 11 verses here.

**Acts 5:1-11** But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession. And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at

the apostles' feet. But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? While it remained [that is, while it was still in your hand], was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have lied not to men but to God." Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last. So great fear came upon all those who heard these things. And the young men arose and wrapped him up, and carried him out, and buried him. Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter answered her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?" She said, "Yes, for so much." Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." Then immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. And the young men came in and found her dead, and carrying her out, buried her by her husband. So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things.

Now this is different. The church, for the most part, was continuing to thrive in its first love. Before this, at the end of chapter 4, it talked about Barnabas and how he was the son of encouragement and how he was just really a paragon of virtue and set a good example for the whole church. But here in chapter 5, another chink in the armor was revealed. It is the corrupt human heart. Because even though those people had been called out and given the Holy Spirit and they were enjoying all this wonderful fellowship and learning so much and hopefully growing, they still had human nature. Human nature was still in them and selfishness and self-centeredness was causing them to sin.

We see it in a big way here with Ananias and Sapphira. God chose to make a huge lesson through this situation, showing the church that, "Hey, this kind of deceit, this lying to God, lying to men, hypocrisy, fraud, if you will, that leads to death because it's sin and all sin leads to death. And if you go down that road, those young men are going to come in and carry you out the door and bury you. That's the end. That's the end of your road on this earth."

Here we have in chapter 5, the first evidence of corruption within the church, problems *inside* the church. The first one we saw in chapter 4 was from outside, persecution from the Jews, from the world, instigated by Satan, I am sure. But here in chapter 5, we get corruption from the inside, the corrupt human heart reaching out and causing trouble in the church. Here it is hypocrisy and deceit. "Lying to God," Peter says. They tested Him. That sounds a lot like the Israelites in the wilderness.

But here in chapter 5 and in chapter 4, Luke lays out, interspersed with comments about their growth and encouragement and stuff like that, the two main stumbling blocks for the church. One occurs in chapter 4, one occurs in chapter 5, and that is, persecution or problems from without, and corruption from within. Those are the two major stumbling blocks, two big headings of what can cause the church to have problems. So the exterior one and the interior one.

We see this throughout the book of Acts. It appears likely to me, I am not going to say that this was actually in his mind, maybe God inspired it this way, that Luke *purposely* juxtaposed the positive and the negative in his early history of the church. And he did this to instruct us about the reality of life within the church. There is nothing better than being given a dose of reality to help us to understand the way things are.

What we find out from early, early on, <sup>AD</sup> 31 (this time of the year), that the church is not a bed of roses. We will have our highs. There will be good times, and we will enjoy them very much. But we will also have our lows, and we will rue that we ever got to that point. There will be peace in the church for certain periods of time, and great advances in knowledge and understanding and growth. And right on their heels will come apostasy, betrayal, hypocrisy, and persecution. That is the way it is in the church. I hate to burst anybody's balloon if they think it is otherwise, but this is just the way it is.

Look at our own history. Go back to Mr. Armstrong, starting in the church of God at that point, in those tumultuous years, all the way up through our own. That is how it has been. It has never been steady-Eddie. You know, it has always been highs and lows like a roller coaster. Sometimes on the way down, it has *felt* like a roller coaster.

Just look at what happens next in the book of Acts. The apostles are imprisoned again and then freed by an angel, and they were put on trial and they are admonished and beaten this time. See, it is increasing—this time they are beaten with rods, and then you find them afterwards rejoicing, because they are allowed to suffer in Christ's name. And then we get to chapter 6, and we have the dispute between the Hebrews and the Hellenists over the care of the widows. And they must come up with a solution to the problem because there is infighting in the church now, so they have to ordain the seven deacons.

And what do you know, the Word of God spreads. God uses this low point of this dispute to cause a good thing to happen, to make a change, to add deacons to the church, and it actually turns out very good. The Word of God spreads, but because the Word of God spreads, you have Stephen being hauled in and accused of blasphemy. He has to speak before the Sanhedrin and his words that he says makes them angry, because he is accusing them, point on, that they were the ones that killed their own Messiah. And so what did they do? They gnashed their teeth, they pick up rocks, and they stone him. Stephen dies, the first of the martyrs, as far as we understand, and those who stone Stephen laid their coats at the feet of one named Saul. And Saul at that point stokes up the fires of persecution and the church of God is scattered from Jerusalem.

And what do you know, that scattering God uses now that the gospel is preached in Samaria. Later on we find Philip speaking to the Ethiopian eunuch and now the gospel through that man heads to Ethiopia. But in the middle of all that, we have Simon Magus wanting to buy the Holy Spirit so he can be a magician, an even greater power than he was before.

And then you know what? The great persecutor, Saul, is converted. God is really working here trying to show the church what He could do and how He can turn things around. All the bad things could turn into good things, but they still have to go through all those bad things because they keep having persecution from without and they keep being corrupt from within. It is just the way it works. But immediately upon Paul's conversion, he has got a price on his head and he has to flee.

You see how it works? There is one good thing, one bad thing, one good thing, one bad thing, one good thing, one bad thing. It is up, it is down. It is up, it is down. It is up, it is down. We never seem to hit the level where we can all take a breath. No, it just keeps on going. There are always things happening in the church and it is never easy. It is stressful to live in the church because we are always battling something, it seems, but we have the record from the book of Acts that this is how it is.

The obvious conclusion is that a Christian's life, and life in general within the church, is no picnic. We will experience enough good times to keep most of us coming back. Some of us have had enough and they leave. They cannot take it. But we know that with those good times, we are going to get our fair share of troubles, of trials, temptations, tribulations to test our faith, our patience, our love, our commitment, and our endurance. Anyone who comes into the church thinking that the church and its members are all rainbows and unicorns is in for a rude awakening.

I remember two ladies, one was the mother of the other. A mother and daughter came into the church many years ago. This was about 30 or more years ago. I was only a teenager at the time, but I knew them well enough to know what was going on. And they were like all new people in the church, they are big-eyed and learning all kinds of things and growing. After a time, they decided to move to Pasadena, California, because they thought they needed to be right there at the center of the work. They thought that would be the best situation for them, to be right there in the heart of the church of God, the Worldwide Church of God at the time.

They got there and they settled in and they were shocked. Are not these people members of the church of God? Are not these ministers of the church of God? Are not these evangelists in the church of God? Why are they doing these things? Why do they do that on the Sabbath? What gives them the right to do this on the Sabbath and on and on it went. Now I do not know exactly what happened to them. I have not seen either of them in the church for many years. I have the impression, though, that they may even have left before the all the splitting up happened because they were so offended by how people in the church acted, because when they went to Pasadena they expected people to be perfect.



Why were they in the headquarters church if they were not mature Christians and did not sin, ever? Whereas the fact is that a lot of those people in Pasadena were the most corrupt people in the church. Maybe that is a bit of a judgment. But I lived it for many years, and I know that a good many of those people did not come out of the apostasy but remained in it. Many of them headed it up.

I am going to be continuing my series on the letters to the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3 in this sermon. And as I did during the spring holy days or the Days of Unleavened Bread, I am going to be discussing a tangential matter, a more doctrinal matter that appears in the letters. And obviously I think you probably figured out what it is. This time it is the subject of the church itself.

Each letter contains at least two uses of the word *ecclesia*. First is when it says to the "to the angel of the church in. . ." There is one. And then, at the end, usually it says "he who has an ear, hear what the Spirit says to the churches." One time, it is singular. One time it is plural. The church is very much on Jesus Christ's mind as He writes these letters, and we need to understand what He is trying to tell us in the seven letters in terms of what the church is. It also fits very well under the theme of Pentecost, because the church is a primary theme of the Day of Pentecost with the beginning of the church happening on this day.

Let us go back to Leviticus 23 and touch base with the holy day so we do not let that get too far from our minds. This is ground that we have gone over before, but I think it is necessary to repeat it so that we can understand that this theme that I am talking about in terms of the church is found all the way back here. It is what you might call a universal theme of human beings whom God has called out to be among His people.

**Leviticus 23:15-21** 'And you shall count for yourselves from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering: seven Sabbaths shall be completed. [The seventh Sabbath was completed yesterday. Here we are on the 50th day.] Count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath; then you shall offer a new grain offering to the Lord. You shall bring from your dwellings two wave loaves of two-tenths of an ephah. They shall be

a fine flour, they shall be baked with leaven. They are firstfruits to the Lord. And you shall offer with the bread seven lambs of the first year, without blemish, one young bull, and two rams. They shall be as a burnt offering to the Lord, with their grain offering and their drink offerings, an offering made by fire for a sweet aroma to the Lord. Then you shall sacrifice one kid of the goats as a sin offering, and two male lambs of the first year as a sacrifice of a peace offering. The priest shall wave them with the bread of the firstfruits as a wave offering before the Lord, with the two lambs. They shall be holy to the Lord for the priests. And you shall proclaim on the same day that it is a holy convocation to you. [Which we are doing right now.] You shall do no customary work on it. It shall be a statute forever in all your dwellings throughout your generations.'

We have probably gone over that just about every time, every Pentecost for many, many years. Of note to us today, though, are the wave loaves. They are the kind of centerpiece of this particular holy day. They are kind of what makes it different (other than the fact that we counted) that we have wave loaves. They are different. They are they are unusual in the whole scheme of all the offerings to the Lord, particularly because they are made with *leaven*. They are of fine flour, meaning that it is highly sifted. It is the best flour that you could get from the grain. It is baked and baked with leaven and God says specifically there at the end of verse 17, they, meaning the wave loaves, represent, or are, the firstfruits to the Lord. He makes a clear identification that these wave loaves represent the firstfruits.

Now biblical symbolism, as we have understood it, indicates that these loaves represent people. He is not talking about the firstfruits of the grain anymore. He is talking about *His* firstfruits, firstfruits to the Lord. They are His, and they have, in the process of being made into these wave loaves, been put through the paces of many tests and trials, and we understand fire to be a symbol of these trials. This heat that they have been put under is what has made them what they are. And so at a certain point they reach a special quality, let us say, a maturity, a completion that is acceptable to God, and that it goes on further to say that they are holy to the priests suggests that they have been specially prepared for priesthood to the Lord. It is an indication of the direction of their use. If they are to be given to the priests,

these loaves, then the priests are going to use them. Right? Priests are going to eat them, as it were. They are going to be involved in the work of the priesthood. That is all way in the future. But that is their ultimate destiny.

So the wave loaves, then, represent people who have been redeemed from their lives of sin and then trained and repurposed for acceptable service to God.

The waving of the loaves that is done here as part of the offering mimics the waving of the Chief of the firstfruits, which, if we would go back to earlier in the chapter, we would see was done there at the time of the wavesheaf offering during the time of the Days of Unleavened Bread. So they go through a very similar process. Jesus Christ, who is the ultimate wavesheaf offering, was raised and waved for acceptance before God. And these wave loaves, though they have been baked and made with leaven, are going to experience something very similar. They also are raised and waved before the Lord for acceptance, and they are accepted along with all of these offerings. As we figured out over the years, these wave loaves represent His bride, the firstfruits, and says very clearly here that they are the firstfruits.

In Revelation 19, notice how the Bible itself says that the firstfruits, those who comprise the bride, end up.

**Revelation 19:6-9** And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunderings, saying, "Alleluia! For the Lord God omnipotent reigns! [So we are given the time element here.] Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready." [Now this is the other part of it. Not only does God prepare them, but they themselves prepare themselves to be ready.] And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Then he said to me, "Write: Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!" And he said to me, "These are the true sayings of God."

These people—the bride—made up of the firstfruits, three descriptions are made here of this entity of the bride: One, that she has made herself ready.

She is prepared for what comes next. Two, she is granted to be arrayed in fine linen, symbolizing her righteous acts. So not only is she ready, but she has shown by righteous acts that she is holy. And three, that those who make up the bride are especially blessed. They are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb. They are a special blessed people, and God has every reason to bless them because of what they have done to make themselves ready.

Now notice back in Leviticus 23 that these loaves are offered with burnt offerings, meaning complete dedication to God and man, because it is not only the meat offering, but also the grain offering is made with it. So they have complete dedication to God and to man. There is also a sin offering involved showing that they are forgiven. They are under the blood of Jesus Christ. And there is also a peace offering given with them, meaning that they have harmonious relationships with God and the priest and amongst its own. So these are quite special people, superlatives in the biblical sense of people. Not many people are like this.

Together all of this illustrates the quality of person whom God will consider a firstfruit, a very high level of praise from God. And, of course, they meet an extremely high standard with the grace of God. But they have to put in their own efforts to make this happen. It is no wonder that so few actually reach to this level among humanity. If we understand it correctly, only 144,000 make up the firstfruits of God. Pretty clear there in Revelation 14. Let us go there but first we will stop off at Revelation 12 because I want to show something else. Here God gives us in prophetic terms, a kind of formula for how to overcome.

**Revelation 12:9-11** So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world. He was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, "Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down and they [meaning those who do overcome] overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death.

**Revelation 14:1-5** Then I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His Father's name written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven, like the voice of many waters, and like the voice of loud thunder. And I heard the sound of harpists playing their harps. They sang as it were a new song before the throne, before the four living creatures, and the elders; and no one could learn that song except the one hundred and forty-four thousand who were redeemed from the earth. These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb. And in their mouth was found no deceit, for they are without fault before the throne of God.

Here we have a short history of the firstfruits, as it were, going all the way from their trials and tribulations in the church to their ultimate glorification with Christ. And as I mentioned before, God gives here a formula for how they did it, how they overcame Satan, the accuser of the brethren, whose primary purpose is to derail the growth and preparation of the firstfruits. That is what He is concentrating on most. It is a strenuous struggle in which we are overmatched by a great deal—on our own. But we have Christ living in us by His Spirit, and if we follow the formula that He gives us here, we can overcome, we can prevail. We can be victorious over this great demon.

In essence (I do not want to go into this too much), we have this three-part formula: The first part, that God and Christ, they do their part. They give us grace. They give us forgiveness. They give us justification. They are the Ones that provide salvation. They do most of the work, but there is more that has to be done, which is our part. The second part, living righteously, making a witness by our lives in this world. And the third part, which is also our part, is that we are willing to sacrifice our lives. We are willing to love God more than ourselves and throw ourselves wholeheartedly into what He asks us to do. As Paul put it, we are living sacrifices. Our whole lives are dedicated to sacrificing in order to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ.

It is this cooperative process of maturation that sticks a finger in Satan's eye and produces the undefiled, faultless firstfruits pictured in chapter 14. God,

working with us and our being willing to sacrifice ourselves, to give ourselves to His work, the work of producing firstfruits. We realize that these firstfruits, this bride, are the church, and individually they are members of the church, just as we are. And hopefully we are among *them*, the firstfruits.

Our word church, of course, is used to translate the secular Greek word *ecclesia*, which literally means "called-out ones." More generally, it means "an assembly." That is why I said it is a *secular* Greek word. It is mostly used in Greek in terms of calling an assembly of the city or the town to discuss matters relating to the town or what have you. But the apostles took this word out of secular Greek and applied it to the church—that it is an assembly of those who have been called out. That is exactly what we have been. We are the elect. We have been called by God to come together and discuss Him and His way of life.

So we are a summoned gathering, and often in the Bible it is said "of God." We are the *ecclesia of God*. We are not an *ecclesia* of the city of Ephesus, which we see in Acts 19. That is where it is used in a secular way. No, we are a summoned gathering or assembly of God. He is the one that has called it, the assembly, and us to the assembly. *Ecclesia* has similarities in sense to our word "convocation," which we saw back in Leviticus 23. Convocation is a Latinate word. We get it from the Latin—*con*, meaning "together" and *voc* (vocation) meaning "to call together." That is this very similar idea of being called out to an assembly.

Convocation, in our day and age, generally means that a body is called together for a formal purpose, much like a religious ceremony or service, convocation. And, of course, we come to church services. That is our formal convocation, but we are the calling together. We are the assembly, as individuals and as a body. And *ecclesia* is used both of the universal body of the people of God, as well as the singular individual who has been called out. It can also actually be used for local congregations as opposed to the whole universal body. We see that in the letters to the seven churches. In the one sense, it is the church at a specific city, and in the other sense, it is all the churches. It is everyone. It has a very wide usage in the Bible, in the New Testament.

But we need to understand that what sets apart this *ecclesia* is God. It is the assembly of God. He sets it apart, Christ is its Head, Christ directs its works. So from the top, it is perfect. And that is where things start breaking down. Because underneath Them is us. Let us go to I Corinthians 12. I do not mean to be offensive, but *we* are the problem. That is just the way it is. We are going to start in verse 12. This is clearly the section on the individual gifts given to the church, to the body. Actually, I should say Paul's expansion or expression of the church as a body. We will go all the way down through verse 31.

**I Corinthians 12:12-31** For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that body being many, are one body, so also is Christ. [Before we get any further into this, I want you to consider why Paul is writing this. Remember, this is to the Corinthians. That should give you a big hint.] For by one Spirit, we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. For in fact the body is not one member, but many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He pleased. And if they were all one member, where would the body be? But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. And those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor; and our unpresentable parts have greater modesty, but our presentable parts have no need. But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it, that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. And God has appointed these in

the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way. [And then he talks about agape love.]

Were you thinking about why Paul had to mention this? Why he had to stick this in to a letter to Corinth? Well, the immediate situation in Corinth was their misunderstanding, or ignorance maybe is a better term, about the gifts God gives to the people in the church. They did not understand it. They were judging each other based upon the gifts they seemed to have. Some were envious of other people's gifts, and other people were feeling superior about their gifts. "Oh, I can heal. I'm better than all the rest of you. I'm more whatever." Paul had to explain to these people in very simple terms, what is more simple than the body? We all have one. We have all seen it. We all know pretty much how it works. He had to explain to these people just how things work in the church.

God calls. He gives gifts as *He* sees fit and puts people in places just where *He* pleases. Not because of anything they did but because of what He has determined, what He has judged to be good. Gifts, position, they do not indicate status or righteousness. It indicates what God has in mind, what He is trying to do. It indicates where He is trying to go and what He wants to happen.

Paul also shows in this section that our judgment about what is going on is often *wrong*, not just skewed but dead wrong. We have no idea what God is trying to do and why He placed that person there and why He gave this gift there and why He has not given any of those gifts, maybe, to those we know. Or maybe those people have not found them yet or have not figured out that God has actually given it to them and that it needs to be used. Or maybe they are suppressing those gifts or what have you. We do not see very well about what is going on, and we have our own motives, and our own attitudes, and our own problems that make us miss a great deal or misinterpret a great deal about what is going on in the church. Paul keeps coming back to this idea that God is working and we just need to cooperate with Him. And even



though it may seem like the worst people get the best gifts, well, we have to deal.

As is very evident, what I have been trying to get across here, is that the visible church, those we see right here, the ones we deal with week in and week out, is human. Church brethren may be holy and set apart by God but they are still under the influence of human nature. They still sin. They still get things wrong. They still make very bad decisions. They still offend. They still take offense. They hold grudges. They gossip, some commit fornication. Some do this, some do that. And there are some who are truly righteous people. We are all human. We all make mistakes.

In other words, the members of the church of God, despite God being the One who has called us, despite Christ being the One who directs us, we are not perfect. Sorry to hit you with that.

Actually, we are not perfect by a long shot. Many of us have been in the church for decades, and we are not even close to perfection despite that being the goal. We know this. I am not telling you anything new because you know that you are not perfect. And you can easily say that the person next to you is not perfect either. Actually we are very quick to say that. But we, even knowing it, are very slow or often fail to recognize that fact and to make it part of our reasoning process, our judgment. We expect perfection. Just like those ladies I mentioned in my illustration going to Pasadena, they expected perfection from the church of God and saw nothing but sin.

And when our brethren are not perfect, oh, are we disappointed at them. "If I were in that situation, I would *never* have done that." Or, often our first reaction is actually condemning them for what they have done rather than trying to restore them in a spirit of gentleness like Paul says in Galatians 6:1. We often fail to bear one another's burdens. We often fail to be forbearing with other people, even knowing that they are probably less perfect than we are. (I say that tongue in cheek.)

I want to show you that the church of God, through the epistles of Paul, at time of the epistles of Paul, was just as problematic as our own day. We are going to go through many of his epistles here, flying through them, and show you that there were problems everywhere. I am starting in I Corinthians. We

should be there right now. I am just going to read these and not give too much commentary. But I want you to see how frequently Paul and some of the other apostles had to deal with problems in the church within imperfect people.

**I Corinthians 5:1-2** It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles [We are starting off with a big one here.] —that a man has his father's wife! [And it is not just his problem.] You are puffed up, and have not rather mourned that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you.

So not only was the sin bad, the reaction was bad from the congregation.

**I Corinthians 6:5-7** I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you, not even one, who will be able to judge between his brethren? But brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers! Now therefore, it is already an utter failure for you that you go to law against one another. Why do you not rather except wrong? Why do you not rather let yourselves be defrauded?

Why are you not acting like Christians? Chapter 11 now. I hate to pick on the Corinthians, but there is just so much there.

**I Corinthians 11:17-22** Now in giving these instructions, I do not praise you, since you come together not for the better but for the worse. First of all, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you. Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper. [Or probably better, it is not to eat a lordly supper or a great feast.] For in eating, each one takes his own supper ahead of others; and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink

in? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you in this? I do not praise you.

**II Corinthians 11:3-4** But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted—you may well put up with it!

He was a little concerned about their ability to understand and detect false doctrine. Let us go to the Galatians, one of the earliest written epistles.

**Galatians 1:6** I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.

And they were falling for it. I mean, this went up to the very top.

**Galatians 2:11-13** When Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy.

Let us go to Philippians chapter 4. Generally, the Philippians were pretty good church, but they had a problem and it was two ladies who had some sort of a dispute. We do not know what it was, but these two could not get over this grudge they had against one another.

**Philippians 4:2-3** I implore Euodia and I implore Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. And I urge you also, true companion, help these women who labored with me in the gospel, with

Clement also, and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the Book of Life.

These were pretty significant mature members of the church. But they still had this problem. They had not worked it out. Let us go to II Thessalonians, another early letter.

**II Thessalonians 2:1-3** Now, brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him, we ask you not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come. Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition.

These people were being talked into the "fact," and I put that in quotes, that Christ had already come. In another place they were thinking that the resurrection had already happened. So they were very susceptible to false teaching because people were sending around deceptive letters or teaching deceptive things.

**II Thessalonians 3:6** But we command, you brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us. . . .

**II Thessalonians 3:10-11** For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies. Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread.

Make your own money to buy your own food. Do not mooch off of everybody. And do not sit there in their kitchen and gossip and be a busybody about what is going on in the church.

**I Timothy 1:18** This charge I commit to you, son Timothy, according to the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you may wage the good warfare, having faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck, of whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.

I get the impression that Hymenaeus and Alexander were ministers, leaders in the church, and they had to be very badly reprimanded and put out of the church by Paul because they were teaching blasphemy.

**II Timothy 2:14-18** Remind them of these things, charging them before the Lord not strive about words to no profit, to the ruin of the hearers. Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. But shun profane and vain babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness. And their message will spread like cancer. Hymenaeus and Philetus are of this sort.

**II Timothy 4:9-10** Be diligent to come to me quickly; for Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world, and has departed for Thessalonica—Crescens for Galatia, Titus for Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. . . .

**II Timothy 4:16** At my first defense, no one stood with me, but all forsook me. May it not be charged against them.

**James 4:1-4** Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures. Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

**III John 9-10** I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us. Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words. And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting them out of the church.

**Jude 3-4** Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the collection of just the most obvious problems and controversies in the church in the early New Testament times. There were many, many more that either were not written about or are under the surface that we do not have time to dig into.

But this is the reality of the church of God. There are people in it that just do not do right, and whole churches can be made to go off on a tangent for some reason, or to believe something that has not been really truly proved, but they latch on to it and go with it. There are people who have the grosser sins that are among us, and those need to be dealt with.

But what we find is the church of God is a testing ground. It is a proving ground, if you will, for the elect. It is the lab, to use another metaphor, where we learn to be like God. We have all kinds of experiments that are being done with us, to us, around us, and we have to learn to react to them properly. God wants to see how we react, how we maintain our faith. Will we thrive even though there is sin around us? Will we grow in our fellowship, even though the people whom we fellowship with are not perfect like we are? No, that is not the way it is supposed to be. Even though those people are as imperfect as we are.

Will we grow despite all the problems? Despite the trials, despite the false teachers and their false teachings, despite even persecution, and perhaps

someday even martyrdom. God is using these situations and our reactions to them to prepare us, to shape us for the work that is going to be before us in the Kingdom of God. And so we are going to have to face problems because we are going to be called upon to solve problems, to react properly, respond properly to problems and set things right. That will be our job, our first job in the Kingdom of God.

I am sure God would love for our fellowship to be completely righteous and our lives problem-free. Would that not be great? But He knows that is not the case when dealing with human people, human nature. We are human and we are in all stages of spiritually maturity—from the very raw and rough among us to the mature and godly and every stage in between. No one is like you. No one is exactly at the same point in their conversion as you. We are all on the same road but strung out on different parts of that road. This reality that we live in provides the conditions under which we are being trained, and God is training some of us very vigorously. So we have to rise above the current situation and overcome and produce spiritual fruit to God's glory no matter what it is.

It is right here that we come back to the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3. Jesus Christ, in preparing this book for us through John, looked into the future and chose to point out these seven situations so those at the time of the end will be warned, exhorted, and encouraged to overcome and endure to the end. These seven churches that we see in Revelation 2 and 3 are the situations that we are most likely to find ourselves in just before Christ's return. The whole book is oriented toward the Day of the Lord and that end time. There is nothing extravagant about the book. There is nothing that He just threw in. It all means something, that these churches are the ones that we are most likely to find right at the end.

And what we have found is they will present the church members of the end time a challenge, because Satan and false brethren and false teachers and the world and our own human nature will be stirring up trouble to derail us so close to the goal line. Everything will be amped up.

So what are the situations of the church of God at the end that we will find ourselves in?

If we find ourselves in Ephesian's situation, life is a battlefield. These Christian soldiers are always ready to defend the truth. But many of those churches are battle weary, they are old soldiers and they loved to sit around and reminisce about the fray that they got in back in the day when they defended the truth. In fact, the whole bit of the church, everything about the church to them is about defending the truth, so much so that they have left their first love, which Christ says is a fall from a great height. They are so much into fighting, they have become so hardened that they no longer have any of the softer virtues like love and kindness and joy and forbearance. Christ says they need to repent. Yeah, sure, it is good to defend the truth, but He wants them to develop character.

If you find yourself in a situation like Smyrna, it is a good situation, but very, very challenging. They are a strong and zealous church. Poor economically but rich spiritually. They receive persecution as a matter of course from those who say they are Jews and are not, meaning false brethren or false Christians. And the danger, the specter, you may say, of martyrdom hangs over them every day. They are model Christians and God is with them. But to live as a Smyrnan is very challenging.

If you find yourself in a Pergamos situation, well, that is not easy either, because Pergamos sits where Satan actively rules. They are in a bad place. But the Pergamenes continue to hold fast to Christ's name even amid martyrdom. But they have an external problem with allowing false doctrine in. It is starting to trickle in, and its effects are beginning to show in the form of compromise with idolatry and sexual immorality.

They have an external problem as opposed to Thyatira. These members are full of good works and tend to be loving and serving and loyal and enduring, but they have a massive internal problem, especially in their leadership. First of all, the leaders allowed a prophetess to teach the church, and secondly, they allowed her, not only to teach, but to deceive the church about sexual immorality and idolatry. This invasion from the outside is a satanic plot to steer the church into disobedience so that they lose their salvation. So God promises these people great tribulation.

Sardis. This church's works are almost non-existent. They all show and no substance in their works. They have a reputation for being spiritual, but in



reality they are dead, or nearly so. There is no growth happening in this church, no spiritual fruit being produced. When Jesus looked at them, He sees a comatose body on the verge of death. He is getting one little beat every once in a while on their instrumentation. They are barely hanging on to their conversion.

And then there is Philadelphia. A faithful, spiritually maturing church that has made the most of their calling. Their one weakness is weakness. They are not, individually or collectively, very powerful so they must rely on Christ for their strength against those who say they are Jews and are not. That is, again, false brethren, false Christians. Jesus tells them they just need to hold fast and watch out for those who would take their crown. So even in Philadelphia the people are not safe. They are not safe but they have responded well so far.

And then there is Laodicea. You always end with Laodicea. These brethren have a couple of major problems. One, they are lukewarm. They are neither on fire for God like the Smyrnans, nor are they cold and dead like the Sardians. They are somewhere in the middle, and God has no idea where because they are just so blah. Christ says they are about to make Him sick with their apathy. They are, secondly, very poor in evaluating their own spiritual condition. They think that they are spiritually rich, but they are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked spiritually, so they need to amp up their zeal, repent of their spiritual laxity, and strengthen their relationship with Christ.

Are there any situations there you want to be? Maybe Philadelphia. I do not know. But do you see what Christ is telling people of the church. Wherever you land it is no bed of roses. There are going to be problems. There is going to be things to overcome. You need to be at the top of your game. Let us finish in II Timothy 2 where we were before. Hopefully, this is encouraging.

**II Timothy 2:19-21** Nevertheless, the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: "The Lord knows those who are His," [Hurray, that is great. I mean, it is great! I am not being facetious, God knows.] and [then this other one], "Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity." [That is our part. Hurray, let us do it!] But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold

and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor. Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter [dishonor], he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work.

The apostle Paul here sums up what I have been saying today. God knows His elect and He is working intimately and very hard with them to prepare them for His Kingdom. Our part, put in simple terms here, is to depart from iniquity, clean up our character, make sure that we are like Jesus Christ.

We must realize that the church contains people all over the character spectrum—from gold to clay, as he puts it here. And a true Christian can thrive in any environment if he or she applies the teaching and wisdom of Christ. The environment does not matter as much as God working in you and you responding properly. If you are in a situation that is terrible, if you are in a church that is bad, that you think is bad, live like Christ in it. And perhaps you will inspire others in the church that is bad to begin to live righteously and godly in this age. That person will be ready to do whatever God requires of him when Christ returns.

So he who has ears to hear, let him hear!