

Letters to seven representative churches

- *Not an outline of church history*

- *Each letter has seven sections*

Letter 1 to Ephesus

(i) *The command – write...*

(ii) *The description of Jesus*

(iii) A word of commendation

- *Jesus sees our good points as well as our bad points*

- *Many things about the Ephesian church pleased Lord Jesus Christ*

1. *They were energetic for the Lord Jesus Christ*

- *Their hard work*

Jesus sends seven letters to seven churches. The first letter is to go to Ephesus. I ought to say that there is nothing in the text that suggests the different churches stand for ages of the church. It refers to actual churches that were there in John's day. There were more than seven churches in the area; seven are chosen to represent the whole church. Seven is the number for completeness. But Revelation never suggests that the seven churches give an outline of church history. This is reading into the text something that is not there. The seven churches have their equivalents among the congregations of each age of the church. All seven have their equivalents today.

The letters to the churches generally have seven sections to them. With some minor variations, they have (i) a command that the letter should be written, (ii) a description of Jesus taken from 1:9–20, (iii) a word of commendation, (iv) a word of criticism, (v) an exhortation to repentance, (vi) an appeal that the message should be heard, (vii) a promise to those who conquer. Consider the church at Ephesus. Here we have (i) and (ii), the command and the description. ¹*'To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.'* The description comes from 1:9–20. Jesus' right hand holds the stars. He protects his churches by speaking to them. The churches are 'lampstands'; they are people who radiate the light of the gospel. Jesus watches over them and guides them to see that their light is ever bright.

Next there is (iii) a word of commendation. ²*'I know your works, your hard work and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people. You have tested those who claimed to be apostles but are not, and you have found them to be false. ³I know also that you are enduring patiently and you have suffered troubles for the sake of my name and you have not grown weary.'*

It is wonderful to know that Jesus sees our good points as well as our bad points. Often when we consider other people, their weaknesses fill our minds and we have nothing good to say about them! Jesus is not like that. Even when he sees weaknesses in us, he also sees that which is good and which is to be commended. He has no plans to abandon us. He 'holds' the churches (the word in 2:1 is different from the word in 1:16, but it shows what 1:16 means). He has plans to care for them. The reason why he speaks to them is because he protects them.

There were many things about the Ephesian church that pleased our Lord Jesus Christ: their toil, their endurance, their concern to be loyal to the word of God.

1. They were **energetic** for the Lord Jesus Christ. We are to enjoy working for the Lord Jesus Christ. 'I know your works, your hard work . . .', says Jesus to his church at Ephesus. It is not that the Christian life is a slavery or a drudgery. It is joyful, thrilling, deeply satisfying work for the Lord Jesus Christ. Men and women were never intended to be lazy, and they can never be very happy when they are lazy. Spending our time looking for pleasures and entertainment will do us no good. God gave Adam work to do in the Garden of Eden. Working for God was part of paradise – and it can be part of paradise restored. When we find God's will for our lives and start serving him we shall be a happy people.

• *Happy in serving God*

For God gives us work to do that fits the way in which we are made. We shall also find that happiness in serving God gives us power over sin. We do not work in a way that damages our bodies or brings too great a strain into our lives, but we are to become a people who are happy in serving God.

2. *Stood firm despite immense pressures*

2. These Christians in Ephesus stood **firm despite immense pressures** upon them. 'I know . . . your patient endurance', Jesus said to them.

3. *Careful to maintain godliness*

3. They were **careful to maintain godliness**. There are always people around who have plenty of religious ideas but no concern for practical Christian godliness. They talk and act as if the Christian faith is nothing but a philosophy. There were people like that in John's day and there are people like that still. John says, 'you cannot tolerate wicked people'. He is thinking mainly of false teachers whose ministry has no impact upon the practical living of the people.

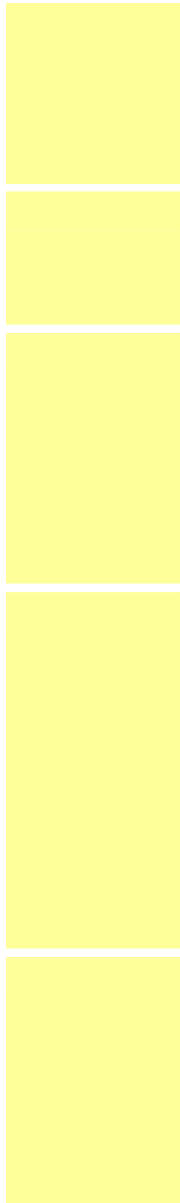
4. *Open but cautious about apostolic ministry*

4. These Ephesians were **open but cautious about apostolic ministry**. They carefully tested the preaching of those who claimed to be apostles. (We note that newly arising apostles were recognized in the church as late as the days of the book of Revelation. There would be no need to test apostles if **all** claims were false.) It is not that we are to expect eyewitnesses of the resurrection and writers of the Bible. Not at all! That kind of apostle was to be found only in the very earliest days of the church. But even some years later there were men who were founders of churches. In this sense there were still apostles arising even towards the end of the first century

• *Carefully tested the preaching of those who claimed to be apostles*

• *If we are zealous, patient, loyal to God's word, Jesus will commend us*

Jesus is quite sincere in his praise. Churches need to be busy and zealous in the things of God. When they are serving God actively they must expect to find that they receive quite fearful opposition. They need apostolic ministry but must be careful to test every ministry since deviations from God's gospel arise very easily, even among those who are our friends. If we are zealous, patient, loyal to God's word, Jesus will commend us.



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