

“State of the Church: 2019” (part 2)

Revelation 1-3

Take your Bible and be finding your place in the first chapter of the very last book of the New Testament, the book of Revelation. I have wanted to take a couple of weeks and sort of outline where I believe we are as a church, what we need to give our attention to, and where we're headed. I'm calling it a “State of the Church” address where we just take some time and refocus as we begin a new year. (Review...)

If the Lord Jesus Christ were to show up in our church unannounced, if He were to evaluate our worship, if He were to carefully investigate all of the interpersonal relationships in our congregation, what might He find? If He were to sit down with our leadership, would He offer words of commendation or words of criticism? And what if He were to write down His evaluation in an open letter and send it to me as your pastor, and I was given the task of having to stand up and read it this morning?

Let me tell you something right now—it is a frightening thought to know that you're being evaluated by One who knows every dark secret, concealed fact, longstanding grudge, embarrassing mistake, and less than pure motive. And yet this is exactly what Jesus Christ did, according to the first three chapters of the book of Revelation, and the apostle John describes it for us in vivid detail.

It had been more than 60 years since John, who had once been a young fisherman, dropped his nets to follow Christ. For three and one half years, he had a front row seat and witnessed Jesus do the miraculous—healings, power over the demonic, walking on water, and raising the dead. He witnessed the remarkable transfiguration of Jesus as He was instantaneously enrobed in white

shimmering light. He was at the foot of the cross as Jesus took His final breaths, and he was witness to the resurrection. Yes, he had seen it all and had stories to tell. As remarkable as all of that was, nothing was so breathtaking as this vision he saw that he recorded right here in the chapters that make up the book of Revelation. At this point in his life, he was in his nineties. He had been exiled for his faith by the emperor Domitian to a prison colony on the isle of Patmos which was out in Aegean Sea, some 60 miles southwest of Ephesus where he had once been pastor.

Verse 10 says that as he was in the Spirit on the Lord's day the veil between heaven and earth was torn, and he was invited into the presence of Christ in all of His power and glory. The Lord then commissions John to write down what he saw, and the result of that supernatural encounter is the book of Revelation.

To have an effective ministry, we need an enlarged vision and an embraced strategy.

1. ENLARGED Vision

It is not coincidental that Revelation begins with an exalted view of Jesus Christ as He is now. As far as background goes, the apostle John had been banished to the island of Patmos which was a Roman prison colony. While there, he receives a vision of Christ in all of His glory and is given the book that we know as Revelation, which means unveiling. It is the unveiling of Christ as He is now in all of His glory and what will happen at the end of the age.

John receives an exalted picture of the Lord of the church and records what he saw right here in the first chapter.

He received a vision of Christ as the:

- Faithful One who purchased the church with His own blood (1:4-6)
- Coming One who promises the church that He will return (1:7-8)
- Authoritative One who provides the church with instructions (1:9-11)
- Glorious One who positions the church around Himself (1:12-20)

Let me tell you right now, before we can ever truly be effective as a local church in making disciples, we need to possess an enlarged vision of Jesus Christ as the risen and exalted Lord of the church. We need to know who He is and worship Him. We're His representatives on earth. We carry His name with wherever we go. We are subject to Him and must be surrendered to do His will. Without a passion for Him and an informed perspective as to who He is and what He expects from us, we are dead in the water.

The churches that make the most impact are those that are made up men and women who are surrendered to Christ lock, stock, and barrel.

2. EFFECTIVE Ministry

You can rest assured that Jesus wants His church to have an effective ministry right where He's placed her. It no doubt pains His heart to see a church lose sight of why it exists. If you want evidence of that, read chapters 2-3 right here in Revelation. Jesus Himself addresses seven local churches in different geographical regions. He sends personal correspondence to them in the form of seven letters.

Think of them as sort of a 'performance' review. (Those of you who work in the corporate world, do you ever have to go before your boss for a performance review?)

Charles Swindoll—*“These messages count as Christ’s ‘performance evaluations,’ His reviews of their faith and works, including points of encouragement and rebuke. As we read through each of the seven letters, we’ll notice certain similarities. Each opens with an address to the representative of each church (the ‘angel’), which includes an initial identification of Christ. Then the content of the message that follows (what Christ observes about each church). This includes any commendation, concern, correction, or counsel He may have. Finally, Christ ends with a call to action for those who have their ears attuned to hear what the Spirit of God is saying to the churches.”*

At the beginning of His message in chapter 2, notice very carefully that Jesus describes Himself as the One ‘who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands.’ It is the same thing that John saw back in chapter 1. The stars represent the ‘angels’ of the church, or her leaders, and the lamp stands are symbolic of the churches themselves. It is very fitting that the church is described as a lamp stand. Our purpose is to hold forth the light of Jesus Christ.

John’s description here shows us how Jesus Christ knows absolutely everything there is to know about these seven churches. And notice that Christ doesn’t merely stand in the midst of the churches. Instead, 2:1 says that He walks among them, scrutinizing them with a keen eye, examining them from every possible angle. Whether it is a praiseworthy quality or some embarrassing imperfection, nothing can escape His notice. He’s fully aware of their every thought, intention, and motive, and He cares deeply for each one. His eye is on the church because He loves the church. Let’s quickly look at what He observes.

To the church in Ephesus...

Ephesus was the church that had everything but had lost the main thing. If we were to go there today, we would find nothing but ruins. In the first century, the city of Ephesus was the most important city in Asia Minor. It was a bustling hub of commerce and trade and had a large and diverse population. Paul planted the church at Ephesus sometime around 52 AD. Timothy then became its pastor, as did the Apostle John.

With a pastoral lineup like that, what more could a church want in faithful leaders? Paul, Timothy, and John! And yet notice that even Ephesus had its problems. To be sure, Jesus had some compliments to give to the church. He says, “I know your works!” He compliments them for works such as their:

- tireless effort in good deeds
- patient endurance through various trials
- commitment to sound orthodoxy

Jesus has more positive to say about the church at Ephesus than He does negative, but He does have one serious concern—the church had left its first love.

2:4—“But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.”

When love for Christ begins to slip, it doesn’t matter how busy you are. You’ll always go backward.

To the church in Smyrna...

Smyrna was the church that had experienced pain for the cause of Christ. Of all the churches mentioned here, only the one in Smyrna and the one in

Philadelphia receive no words of rebuke from Jesus. Everything that He has to say about them is positive and encouraging.

When Jesus looked into the ministry there at Smyrna, He found a faithful band of disciples who were suffering for His sake. They were poor in the world's goods, but they were rich where it really mattered.

Don't think that you have to have a lot of 'stuff' to really make an impact for Christ in the world. Ironically, when the church has been poor, it has been the most powerful.

To the church in Pergamum...

Pergamum was the church that had compromised with the world. The city of Pergamum had an acropolis that was crowned with a forty foot tall altar to Zeus, which made it the most visible part of the city. Perhaps this is what Jesus refers to when He says 'Satan's throne.'

Even in such a place, for the most part the church had held fast to His name. They didn't deny the faith. But He does have a few things against them, not the least of which are some in their ranks who comprised the truth. They needed to get back on track.

Jesus takes the preaching/teaching ministry of the local church very seriously. It doesn't matter how many good things we have going on—if we forfeit truth, we're in trouble.

To the church in Thyatira...

Thyatira was the church that became known for its tolerance. Now that's a major buzzword in our day. Its the only 'virtue' that people seem to unite around. To speak of right and wrong in black and white terms, as absolutes, is seen in our

culture as being intolerant. Which ironically, the only absolute in our culture today is tolerance, which means something very different than it did just a few decades ago. It used to mean that we respect those who hold to different views, while maintaining our freedom to disagree and articulate our own. Nowadays, the ‘new tolerance’ that is being preached says that if you express any form of disagreement, you are intolerant. The new tolerance says that we are to recognize and respect that every individual’s values, truth claims, beliefs, and practices as equally valid. It demands that we approve of others’ beliefs as being equally valid because personal autonomy is king. You are to be celebrated for being you, which means all that you believe must also be celebrated.

This propagates the notion that all truth claims are equal.

Josh McDowell & Sean McDowell, (The Beauty of Intolerance)—*“But what many fail to realize may surprise you. Traditional tolerance is truly a virtue, and intolerance can sometimes be beautiful—that is, when you understand it from God’s point of view...God is both our definer and our model for true tolerance and intolerance.”*

Jesus was intolerant of what Thyatira tolerated!

To the church in Sardis...

Sardis was the church that was dead even though it had a reputation of being alive. Have you ever been to a dead church before? It really is a contradiction in terms.

Charles Swindoll—*“Maybe it means their sanctuary is a morgue with a steeple. It’s a congregation of corpses with undertakers for ushers, embalmers for elders, and morticians for ministers. Their pastor graduated from a theological cemetery.*

The choir director is the local coroner. They sing “Embalmed in Gilead” and “Amazing Grave, How Sweet the Sound.” At the rapture, they’ll be the first church taken up, because the Bible says, ‘The dead in Christ shall rise first.’ They drive to church in one long line with their headlights on. Whenever someone joins their membership, the church immediately notifies the next of kin. Each week they put an ad in the obituaries. The church van is a hearse and the sign is a tombstone. Their motto is, ‘Many are cold and a few are frozen.’”

A dead church is one that has become a monument and ceased to be a movement.

Preserving the past becomes more important than pursuing the future. The ministry at Sardis was on life support.

To the church in Philadelphia...

Philadelphia was the church that had an open door of opportunity. Like the church at Smyrna, there are no words of rebuke from Jesus, only words of commendation. He tells them that they had a wide open door of opportunity that no one could shut.

If you want to know why they had opportunity, notice what Jesus says in 3:8. They had a ‘little’ power and had kept His word and had not denied His name. Faithful and bold!

To the church in Laodicea...

Laodicea was the church that became known for its indifference. Of all the seven churches, this is the only one that receives no word of commendation. Jesus has nothing but rebuke for this church best described as being ‘lukewarm.’

How did their lukewarm attitude manifest itself?

- through self-sufficiency
- self-righteousness
- self-service

They had a wealth of resources that became the proud source of their confidence, but in reality they were poor and to be pitied. They had no power and effectiveness.

3. EMBRACED Strategy

To be effective in ministry, we need an enlarged vision and a mutually embraced strategy. As Jesus evaluated the ministry of each church, He also had some prescriptive measures that each church was to take.

For Ephesus, the church that had everything but lost sight of the main thing, they were to remember from where they had fallen, repent, and return to their first love.

For Smyrna, the church that had experienced pain for the cause of Christ, they were to move forward in faith and courage without fear of what they were about to face.

For Pergamum, the church that had compromised with the world, they were to rid themselves of the false teaching that had infiltrated their ranks.

For Thyatira, the church that was known for tolerance, they were to repent and hold fast to the truth.

For Sardis, the church that was dead, they needed to wake up and strengthen the things which remained and were about to die.

For Philadelphia, the church that had an open door of opportunity, they were to forge ahead in the strength and power of the risen Christ.

For Laodicea, the church of indifference, they were realize their need and prostrate themselves before the One who was standing at the door and knocking.

Let's bring all of this close to home. What about us? *To have an effective ministry, we need an enlarged vision and an embraced strategy.*

Our Purpose:

“To glorify God by making disciples of all nations.”

It is very easy for us to forget our purpose. Sometimes we can get so caught up in the details of everyday living that we lose sight of the purpose behind our existence. That's not just true for us as individuals—it is true for the church. Without a real sense of purpose, we drift.

Steve Callahan is an author, naval architect, inventor, and sailor who is most notable for having survived 76 days adrift on the Atlantic Ocean in a small life raft. He retells his ordeal in his book, “Adrift: 76 Days Lost at Sea,” which was on the New York Times best-seller list for more than 36 weeks.

According to his account, he departed Penzance, England, on the Napoleon Solo, a 21-foot sail boat that he designed and built himself. He set out bound for Antigua as part of a sail boat race but dropped out just off the coast of Spain. Bad weather had sunk several boats in the fleet and had damaged his. Callahan made repairs and continued the voyage by himself down the coast of Spain and Portugal, out to Madeira and the Canary Islands, just off the coast of North Africa. As he left the Canaries, seven days into his journey his vessel was badly holed by an unknown object during a storm and began to take on water. Unable to stay

aboard, he escaped via a small inflatable life raft that measured no more than six feet across. He had only enough time to collect a small emergency kit that he had put together, a few navigation charts, a spear gun, and solar stills for producing drinking water.

After exhausting the meager food supplies he had, he learned to survive by “living like an aquatic caveman.” He ate fish which he speared, and this was his sole means of survival as he drifted 1,800 nautical miles across the ocean. He was able to collect rainwater, leaving him no more than a pint per day. All told, he spent 76 days in a 6 foot life raft before finally being rescued by a fishing vessel.

Without an anchor, without a sail, and without a compass, a sailor is doomed to drift at open sea.

“Drift” — *a gradual shift in position; an aimless course; to become carried along with no guidance or control*

It is imperative that we remain focused on our purpose at all times, lest we drift away. Let’s break it down:

To Glorify God

The reason that we exist is for the glory of God. This is the most basic and fundamental understanding of the Christian life. We don’t exist for ourselves.

You and I were made for the purpose of worship! With every breath that you take, with every ounce of energy that you have, you are to live for the glory of God.

Ephesians 3:20-21 — **“Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to**

Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

Above and beyond anything else, the glory of God is to be our primary concern as the church.

By Making Disciples

Reaching people for Christ and teaching them to obey and follow Him is the only reason a church exists. A church without disciples would be like an automotive industry without cars, a restaurant without food, Krispi Kreme without donuts. Without a passion for Jesus Christ and for seeing people come to know and follow Him, we might as well close our doors. If we're not making disciples, then it is obvious that the problem at Ephesus is our problem—we have left our first love. Or, perhaps we're like Sardis—we have an appearance of life, but its an illusion.

Of All Nations

The world is our mission field! The worship of the church happens when we are gathered, the witness of the church happens when we are scattered. We are to reach our neighbors for Christ, but our eyes must always be to the ends of the earth. The heart of our God beats with missionary passion, and so must ours.

Our Values: “Convictions of a Disciple-Making Church”

1—Corporate Prayer

2—Biblical Teaching

3—Personal Evangelism

4—Relational Discipleship

5—Gospel-Driven Ministry

6—Global Mission

Our core convictions are what we value as most important and serve as a grid through which we view our ministry.

Our Strategy: “The Four Spheres”

Sphere #1—Worship Together

God is glorified through:

- biblical preaching
- gospel-centered music and singing
- corporate prayer
- Lord’s Supper and baptism

Christians participate by:

- attending and engaging in worship
- serving during worship times

Sphere #2—Grow in a Group

God is glorified through:

- studying and obeying God’s Word together
- bearing burdens with prayer and care
- accountability in personal holiness and discipleship

Christians participate by:

- regularly attending group gatherings
- faithfully serving fellow group members

Sphere #3—**Multiply**

God is glorified through:

- people far from God hearing the gospel
- believers being disciplined to obey Jesus

Christians participate by:

- building relationships with people far from God
- gospel conversations
- discipling others to obey Jesus

Sphere #4—**Reach the Nations**

God is glorified through:

- going to make disciples in every Acts 1:8 context
- partnering in global missions (pray, go, give)

Christians participate by:

- praying for God's work among the nations
- giving to support mission efforts
- going on a short term mission trip

Just this week, I read the story of Daniel Draper, an English Methodist in the tradition of John Wesley who went as a missionary to south Australia in 1836.

While he was there, he witnessed the building of more than 30 new churches that under his leadership saw membership grow more than tenfold.

Draper and his wife made their first visit back to England 29 years later. On January 5, 1866, they left Plymouth, England, on their return trip to Australia aboard the *SS London*. As they sailed out at midnight, the sea was calm. Two days later the winds began to increase. By the third day, the wind became so violent that the rigging was blown away. The winds continued to strength until they became a full blown hurricane. By Wednesday, January 10, 1866, the captain of the ship tried to turn around and make their way back to Plymouth. but late that night, a mountain of water fell on the main deck and filled the engine room and extinguished the engine fires. The captain called on the crew to say their prayers.

At midnight, Daniel Draper began a prayer meeting in the ship's saloon. He exhorted all on board to come to Christ for salvation. At dawn, the captain told the passengers that all hope was lost and the ship was soon to sink. Draper broke the silence by standing up to address the crowd. With tears flowing down his face, he said in a clear, strong voice, "The captain tells us there is no hope; that we shall all perish. But I tell you that there is hope for all. Although we must die and shall never again see land, we may all make the port of heaven."

Out of 239 passengers, all but 19 in a single lifeboat perished when the *SS London* went down in the Bay of Biscay. Those who survived reported that from the beginning of the prayer meeting at midnight until the ship sank the next afternoon, Daniel Draper was ceaseless in his prayers, admonitions, and invitations for people to receive Christ. Among his last heard words were these:

“In a few moments we must all appear before our Great Judge. Let us prepare now to meet Him.”

One of the survivors said that as he left the ship, he even heard people singing,

*Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in thee;
Let the water and the blood,
From thy wounded side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure,
Save from wrath and make me pure!
While I draw this fleeting breath,
When my eyes shall close in death,
When I rise to worlds unknown,
And behold thee on thy throne,
Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in thee.*

All of humanity is on a sinking ship. Death looms on the horizon. Will we make it our sole concern as a church that everyone knows the way of salvation?