

Herald

ANTIPAS

"Antipas, My faithful witness" (Rev 2:13)

No 9

THE LOCAL CHURCH AS A LAMPSTAND

A few perspectives on the letters of Revelation 2-3

Nico van der Walt

IT IS STAGGERING to see how many Christians pay little or no attention to the New Testament revelation concerning the church. How few really understand what the local church¹ is all about. How few grasp the role she is playing in the outworking of God's eternal plan. O, what has happened to the passion for the church truly to be the church?

There must be few passages of Scripture that are both more well-known and more neglected than the seven letters in Revelation 2-3. Each letter justifies an in-depth study, but there is also value in an overall approach in order to examine the message of the letters as a whole – as we will now undertake.

The truths which this study deals with have made an indelible and life-changing impression on the author, and he believes that many thoughtful readers will experience the same.

SEVEN FACETS OF THE CHURCH

The theme of *The Revelation* is Jesus Christ's war against, and ultimate triumph over the Evil One. This war rages on in the struggle between the church and the anti-God world system. The book therefore contains abiding lessons

¹ The Greek word *ekklesia* is translated as "church" in English. It may refer either to the local church or to the universal church.

for the church through the ages. This holds *par excellence* for chapters 1-3.

□ The book is a revelation of the glorified Jesus Christ to the Apostle John towards the end of the first century. It is addressed to seven specific local churches in Asia Minor (1:4) and deals, in the first instance, with their situations.

Nevertheless, the number of completion - seven - is meaningful. It indicates that these churches represent, as it were, the entire church of the dispensation between the first coming of Christ and His return. We have here seven facets of the universal church. Time and time again, each facet has to a greater or lesser extent been visible in the world-wide church through the ages.

□ Thus one finds in these letters the weal and woe of the church's history in embryonic form. On the one hand there is the tragic, the scandalous, the sin and the failure. On the other hand, there are the triumphs, the heroic faithfulness, the unswerving perseverance. The warnings are therefore directed against typical dangers – which really haven't changed much through the ages. Here is counsel for every crisis, comfort in every trial, encouragement for every desperate moment. They are love-letters, these – from the heart of the Heavenly Bridegroom to His

beloved bride, His pilgrim church through the ages.

☐ If there is one thing that these letters bring home, it is that every local church is of the utmost importance to the Lord Jesus Christ. After all, every letter is a pointed analysis of each one's condition.

THE PRIORITIES OF THE KING

☐ It is a simple exercise to read through the letters in order to determine those things on which the Lord Jesus places a high premium – what He regards as important:

- Christian love – towards the Triune God and one's fellow-man, especially brothers and sisters in the faith.
- Servanthood and good works.
- Faith, patience and perseverance in a hostile environment.
- Uncompromising purity of doctrine and rejection of false teachers.
- Hatred, avoidance and eradication of sin.
- Zeal for the purity of the local church, as well as the

discipline and correction which serve this purity.

• Faithfulness in the congregation's calling to proclaim the gospel of truth.

☐ Let there be no illusions: this is what being a church is all about; this is what the Lord seeks in His churches. And this holds non-negotiably for every congregation, irrespective of time, culture or circumstances.

☐ It is equally obvious in these letters what the Lord despises and judges in His churches – and what we must guard against with everything in our power:

- Lovelessness towards God and man.
- Tolerating false teaching and those who proclaim it.
- Laxity in the congregation's discipline, and acceptance of both sin and sinners in its own midst.
- Religious formalism and spiritual lukewarmness.
- Self-satisfaction and a sense of having arrived in a religious sense.
- ☐ It is very meaningful to note the things to which the Lord Jesus makes no reference whatsoever in these letters. Surely it is reasonable

to conclude that He does not regard them as of *primary* importance:

- Membership figures and growth.
- The congregation's budget and facilities.
- Qualifications and giftedness of staff and ministers.
- Organization, programmes, activities, authority structure.
- Involvement in local or national politics and culture.

EVALUATION BY GOD AND MAN

☐ Two of the churches receive only positive appreciation from the Lord. *Smyrna* (2:8-11) and *Philadelphia* (3:7-13) receive, as it were, A symbols.

On the other hand, two of the churches receive only criticism and rebuke. *Sardis* (3:1-6) and *Laodicea* (3:14-22) get F symbols. At least Sardis still has a few people who lead holy lives (3:4). Laodicea, however, is so far gone that one wonders whether it still has any left (3:20).

☐ A study of these four letters reveals a few issues that make anyone with a grasp of the church's high calling and with the Lord's honour at heart, to stop and take notice.

• The two A-churches are both struggling. Smyrna is poor and oppressed (2:9-10). Philadelphia has little power (3:8). *In terms of today's ideas both are really failures – but from the Head of the church they receive only praise.*

On the face of it, the two F-churches are models. Even outside her own circle Sardis has a reputation for being alive (3:1). This probably indicates all kinds of activities. Laodicea is very rich and thinks that she has everything that a church could need (3:17). *Today these two would be viewed as successful churches – but Jesus Christ has not a single good word for either of them!*

Do we realize how much today's ideas about the success or failure of a church differ from Biblical norms? It is vitally important for every church to evaluate herself continuously in the light of Scripture. Some "failures" might come out very encouraged; and some "successes" will certainly be shaken to their foundations! Say your church were today to receive such a letter from the Head of the church – what would the contents be? What would your symbol be?

• And let's be careful not to form an opinion too quickly. A further observation shows how terribly easy it is to miss the ball completely when you evaluate a church. *Twice we see in these letters how human evaluation is directly in conflict with Christ's.*

Outsiders reckon that Sardis is alive, but the Lord Jesus declares her dead! (3:1). The church in Laodicea pats herself on the back, but the Lord delivers devastating criticism: she is wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked!

It is grace indeed when a church refuses to lend her ear to the praises of others, because she knows how completely unreliable human opinion is. And very, very wise is the local church which, deeply conscious of her tendency towards self-deception, looks at herself again and again with ruthless honesty in the mirror of God's word.

The Reformational fathers understood these things. Hence their clarion call: *Semper Reformanda!* (Ongoing Reformation). But, take careful note, *reformation is not the discovery of new things; it is the fresh discovery of age-old things.* He who does not regularly thank God for the eternally steadfast, universally authoritative, ever reliable Word, understands but little of God's complete otherness and of human depravity!

THE LAMPSTAND

□ In these first three chapters of Revelation a very telling symbol is used for the local church², namely

² Note that it is not the church in general which is here described as a lampstand, but *each local church or*

the lampstand (1:12, 13, 20; 2:1,5). Notice also the Lord's intimate involvement with each congregation: He walks among the churches (1:13; 2:1).

□ It is of decisive importance that the Greek word translated as "lampstand" (NIV) is properly understood and translated. The original word is *luchnia*, and is used twelve times in the New Testament (Matt 5:15; Mark 4:21; Luke 8:16; 11:33; Heb 9:2; Rev 1:12, 13, 20 (2x); 2:1, 5; 11:4).

Authoritative lexicons³ agree: *the word signifies a stand on which one or more lamps were placed, so that the light could shine as far as possible.* It does not refer to the lamp itself – there are other Greek words for that. The first four verses mentioned above highlight the distinction between the lamp (*luchnos*) and the stand (*luchnia*).

The best English translation, therefore, is *lampstand*, which is the word used throughout by nearly all the modern English translations.

□ What is the point? *In this last and exalted piece of revelation which the glorified Christ gives to His people, it is said of the local church that her essential task is to be a lampstand.* Here the question

congregation. Indeed, it is repeatedly emphasized that there are seven lampstands (1:12, 13, 20; 2:1).

³ Cf. Bauer, Arndt & Gingrich, p.484; also Louw & Nida, 6.105.

necessarily arises: what, then, is the lamp, the light? *Christ is the light of the world (John 8:12)!*

What can be meant here other than that proclamation of the Christ-centred gospel is the central calling of every church! This deduction is completely in step with the rest of the New Testament. Philippians 2:15-16 spells out the same calling: "... you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life" (NIV). And Paul wants to do nothing but proclaim Christ, the Crucified (1 Cor 2:2).

□ Now someone might say that he has always been taught that the "lampstand" stands for the Holy Spirit. That might be the case elsewhere, but here, clearly, it refers to the local church. It makes little difference anyway, because the Holy Spirit came precisely to glorify Christ (John 15:26; 16:8-11; 16:14).

REMOVAL OF THE LAMPSTAND

□ The church in Ephesus is warned that the Lord will remove her lampstand if she does not repent (2:5).

What does this mean? How does Christ remove the lampstand? What precisely happens in a congregation when the lampstand is removed?

□ The Bible does not answer these questions explicitly. But

experience has taught us many lessons. Church history is full of examples of what happens when a congregation's lampstand is removed.

- Spiritual blindness slowly sets in. Members gradually begin to lose sight of the wonder of their salvation. The consequence is that Christ's radiant glory dims progressively in their hearts. And, unavoidably, their testimony about His Name and great acts of redemption gradually dies away.

- There is a shift in emphasis. People and their affairs start becoming the primary concern. There is an ever increasing obsession with making the church more enjoyable and social, and the world a better place.

□ The tragic consequence is that "the Light of the world" no longer shines out of such a congregation. Christ is no longer held out to a dying world. And He is no longer the members' wisdom, righteousness, holiness and redemption. There is just no more boasting in Him – at least not from the heart and with wet cheeks (1 Cor 1:30-31, NIV).

- Christ is no longer preached as God's *Great Prophet*. Proper exposition of the Word is replaced by all kinds of man-centred and "practical" topics in the preaching. God's Law is in the background, as

well as its unfolding by Christ and the apostles in the New Testament.

- Christ is no longer preached as God's *Great High Priest*. The gospel, the true gospel, is seldom heard from the pulpit. And even when an attempt is made to present the gospel, the emphasis differs from that of the Bible: it is man-centred and sentimental. Because the members have become strangers to God's righteousness and holy standards, the cross and its true meaning no longer matter so much anyway. God's free grace in Christ towards sinners has made way for the self-merit of moralism.

- Christ is no longer preached as God's *Great King*. You will go in vain to such a church to hear of His sovereign authority and rule in the lives of Christians. The necessity of self-denial and of cross-bearing in His footsteps is replaced with an emphasis on all the here-and-now benefits of being a Christian. Of His power to equip sinners supernaturally for a holy life, precious little is said; still less of Him as coming Judge.

❑ Normally such a church now becomes popular. Why? 1 Corinthians 1:23 gives the answer. The "stumbling block" (NIV) has been removed and hypocrites feel at home. The preaching no longer contains "foolishness" – with the result that fleshly unbelievers don't take offence.

Self-satisfaction soon follows. When God's Law and holy standards are not preached, what is there to keep people humble? Add popularity to this – and a sense of having arrived is unavoidable.

❑ The absence of Christ-centredness in a church is not the *cause* of its losing the lampstand – *it is the proof that the lampstand has already been removed!*

It is tragic, but a church can exist lampstand-less like this for centuries. All that is necessary is to build in enough institutional props and it will stand by itself – a ruin dressed up with pomp and splendour. *And nobody inside the walls realizes it, because everyone who walks in the light has long since left. Where the Lord Jesus is, His servants will necessarily be there with Him (John 12:26).*

A DESTINY-DETERMINING CHOICE

❑ Through all the ages there has always been a razor-sharp choice before every local church (as well as every preacher and member): *Do you choose faithfulness, or do you choose success?*

What is faithfulness? It is living according to *God's* standards. What is success? It is measuring up to *man's* standards.

Of course one can choose faithfulness and also impress men (in the grace of God). And one can choose success and still fail in the eyes of men. *But it is impossible to*

choose success – and at the same time to succeed in God's eyes.

❑ Oh, if we could only remember: there are two paths before each congregation. And this demands a quality decision. A choice is unavoidable – a radical, intensely conscious, and destiny-determining choice. *Either we choose the honour of man (so that we can be glorified), or we choose the honour of God (so that He may be glorified).*



The purpose of Antipas Herald is to make available, free of charge and as widely as possible, Scriptural teaching in the form of brief, intelligible studies, aimed at promoting understanding of and faith in the God-centred principles of the Bible.

These vital truths are succinctly and excellently formulated in the great confessions of faith and trumpet calls of the 16th century Reformation: Scripture Alone, Grace Alone, Christ Alone, Faith Alone, Glory to God Alone.

Should you wish to receive future issues of the Herald free of charge, please forward your name and postal address to our distribution and editorial office:
Antipas Herald, P.O. Box 12371, Queenswood, 0121, South Africa
Tel & Fax: +27 (0)12 329 3012

All our literature, as well as other information, is available on our web site
<http://www.reformed.org.za>

PUBLISHERS
Antipas Literature
P.O. Box 263435, Three Rivers, 1935, South Africa
Tel: +27 (0)16 423 3639 or +27 (0)16 423 3391; Fax: +27 (0)16 429 3033

Nico van der Walt is a congregational pastor and teacher in Pretoria. He subscribes to the historically respected and internationally recognized 1689 Baptist Confession – like most Reformed Baptists worldwide.

Anyone is at liberty to use material from this Antipas Herald with or without recognition. In preparing it the author has himself received help from many sources. He believes its content to be a true statement of Scripture teaching, and his desire is to further, not to restrict, its use.

We would like to develop as wide a readership as possible for the Herald. If you have found the contents of benefit, you could help us by introducing the Herald to others and encouraging them to subscribe. Names are only added to our mailing list at the specific request of the individuals concerned.