

## 581 Commendations and Criticisms

In our first Weekly Reflection of 2024, (570, in the Subfolder “Practical Discipleship”), we came across the “overcoming” messages given by the Lord Jesus to the seven young churches, as given to us in Revelation Chapters 2 and 3.

As we now come once again to mark the events at the heart of the Christian Faith and Gospel - the suffering, sacrificial death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ - it is timely for us to return to those seven church messages. These will already be familiar to many of us, but we will focus on this occasion only on what these “ekklesias” were getting right, bringing the Lord’s commendations, and what they were getting wrong, bringing His criticisms. This can serve as a check-list for how our own local fellowships are faring in Gospel terms in these difficult days. For in the midst of the growing chaos now around us, how vital it is that “the Church”, terribly splintered as she is, (yet still “the body of Christ” and “the Bride of Christ” (I Corinthians 12.27 / Ephesians 5.25-27), should be found faithful in the Lord’s sight in her proclaiming the unique, vital Good News of Jesus Christ to “the multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision” (Joel 3.14a). This proclaiming is all the more vital at “the high points” of the Christian year, when “irregular worshippers” may well be present also.

When John, “in the Spirit on the Lord’s day” first saw the Figure “like unto the Son of man” (Revelation 1.10a, 13a, KJV), he tells us, “I fell at his feet as dead (1.17a). But the Lord immediately reassured him, “Fear not: I am the first and the last: [I am] he that liveth, and was dead: and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and I have the keys of hell and of death” (from 1.17-18). Here is great “Fear not” reassurance for us as well, for, like John, we too are in the hands of “Jesus Christ, the same, yesterday, today and for ever” (Hebrews 13.8).

To Ephesus, Jesus commends their works, labour and patience, their testing for truth and their “fainting not” (from Revelation 2.2-3,6). To Smyrna, where life is particularly tough, He commends their “works, and tribulation, and (material) poverty” – yet spiritually they are “rich” because they are remaining faithful in the midst of persecution (from 2.9-10). Those at Pergamos, “where Satan’s seat is”, are commended for their works, their holding fast to Jesus’ Name, with no denial of “the Faith” despite suffering martyrdom (from 2.13). To Thyatira, Jesus commends their growing works, and their charity, service, faith and

patience (from 2.19). The Lord's commendations for both Sardis and Laodicea are distinctly "thin on the ground" (3.1,15)! – but Philadelphia receives the most praise of them all – "I know thy works .... Thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name" (from 3.8).

From these commendations we note the Lord's full knowledge of all that is going on in each local "ekklesia". He praises faithfulness, truthfulness, courage, standing fast and firm, perseverance, and "works". In our day such "works" can involve practical and pastoral care for those in and beyond the fellowship (egs., Ephesians 2.10 / James 2.14-26). However the supreme work of a local "ekklesia" remains the "holding forth the world of life to those who are without" (Philippians 2.16a / I Corinthians 5.12-13a): a clear, courteous, relevant explanation of the spiritual realities underlying all human existence, namely sin and its consequences, and God's merciful Escape-Route by faith in His Son Jesus Christ.

Then we come to the Lord's criticisms regarding these seven "ekklesias". At Ephesus they have "left their first love" (2.4, with a telling cross-reference to Jeremiah 2.2 regarding Jerusalem). The Lord grieves when the Ephesians, and probably we too at times, become tired and stale. If so, they and we are to "remember and repent, and do the first works" (from v.5). Suffering Smyrna and faithful Philadelphia attract no divine criticism (2.8-11; 3.7-13). Jesus warns those at Pergamos and Thyatira over their tolerating false doctrines of Balaam, the Nicolaitans and Jezebel (by allowing falsehood, idolatry, fornication, and licentiousness to enter these fellowships, 2.14-15,20-21). Finally both Sardis and Laodicea are severely criticised by the Lord, Sardis for their spiritual deadness, despite appearances to the contrary (3.1), and Laodicea for their being simply "lukewarm, neither cold nor hot" (3.16).

We see afresh from these commendations and criticisms how the members of any "ekklesia", of then or now, who are "found wanting" under Jesus' gaze, are told to repent and hold fast to the basic Gospel truths and conduct, whatever their outward circumstances may be; otherwise unpleasant, divinely-wrought consequences will come! (Eph 2.5b, Per 2.16, Thy 2.21-23; Sar 3.3b, Lao 3.16). Such an occasional "spiritual check-up" for us will never go amiss.

Let us now gratefully join with those Palm Sunday crowds once again, "Blessed [is] the King of Israel that cometh in the name of the Lord!"

(John 12.12-13), with our praises all the more fervent in view of the extraordinary divine mercies that were so soon to follow.

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