

Challenges in the Church

Week 49: December 3-9 — 3 John; Jude; Revelation 1-3

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Helpful Resources

The Dangers of Gnosticism (p.67), Map of the Seven Churches (p.69)

Making Sense of It All

- The Big Picture

Before Jesus left His followers and ascended into heaven, He gave them a great commission. "Go and make disciples of all the nations," He said, "baptizing... and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you..." (*Matt. 28:19, 20*). Thus, Christians had their marching orders — to share the gospel with the lost and disciple the saved. Shortly after Christ returned to heaven, His followers established the first local church in Jerusalem (*Acts 2*). Their activities included "devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching (doctrine), to fellowship, to breaking of bread (Lord's Supper), and to prayer" (*v.42*). They also "sold their possessions and gave to anyone who had need" (*v.44, 45*). Finally, "they were together with one mind in the temple (worship), breaking bread from house to house..., praising God and having favor with all men" (*v.46*).

Because churches are agents of Christ, doing the things that Christ did, Satan despises them. He wants to distract them, discourage them, derail them, and even destroy them, anything to keep them from fulfilling their mission. Therefore, our enemy has unleashed his forces to infiltrate and frustrate every local church, including yours. Thus, every church faces many challenges, all meant to hinder the gospel and its effectiveness. Since the Lord has placed us in our churches, it is our responsibility to confront these challenges, "contend for the faith" (*Jude 1:3*), protect and grow God's people, and fulfill our mission. Every member of the body of Christ has a role to play to deal with the challenges in the church.

- The Challenges in the Church

In *Revelation 1-3*, Christ sent a letter to the seven churches of Asia Minor (see the map), commending and challenging them. We can learn a lot from their good and bad examples.

1. **Ephesus** (*Rev. 2:1-7*): The Ephesians worked hard to do good. They demonstrated perseverance, tested teachers, and did not tolerate evil men. But they were going through the motions. They lost their first love, the motive for their actions. Churches can often do what they are supposed to do but forget why they are supposed to do them.
2. **Smyrna** (*Rev. 2:8-11*): The Smyrnans suffered from trials and persecution. The Lord encouraged them not to fear, but to be faithful. To be suffering as they were, the Smyrnans must have been outspoken about their faith, willing to take enemy fire.
3. **Pergamum** (*Rev. 2:12-17*): The Christians in Pergamum were courageous under attack, willing to stand for Christ despite persecution. However, they opened their doors to godless influences, who led God's people away from purity in Christ.

4. **Thyatira** (*Rev. 2:18-28*): The Thyatirans looked good on the outside (doing good things), but they were rotten on the inside. They tolerated false teaching, which led to many unbiblical activities. Those who were faithful did not defend the church from the faithless.
5. **Sardis** (*Rev. 3:1-6*): Though the church in Sardis was alive, it was dead or asleep. The people had been lulled to slumber by worldliness. They were unfocused. They had good intentions but did nothing. Those who were awake were overcome by the sleeping dead.
6. **Philadelphia** (*Rev. 3:7-13*): The Philadelphians were faithful to keep God's Word and did not deny His name. As a result, they were given "an open door that no one could shut," an opportunity for ministry on Christ's behalf. Their enemies surrendered to them, and they were protected from tribulation. The challenge here is to stand on God's Word at all costs, which He will reward in due time.
7. **Laodicea** (*Rev. 3:14-22*): The Laodiceans had become lukewarm. They were Christians who had been dulled by prosperity. They were rich in the world, but they did not see their poverty. They were well-dressed, but they were naked before God. They were healthy in their eyes but sick in God's eyes. They were blind to their own condition. While we all pray for health and wealth, neither of these are necessarily what we need. Both can hurt us.

- The Charge of the Church

While we have a great mission from God, the enemy has placed obstacles in our way. Thus, John, Jude, and Jesus provided ways to navigate through these barriers and overcome them.

1. **Pay Attention to Your Walk** (*3 John 1:1-15; Jude 1:17-25*): Each local church is comprised of individuals. Therefore, each person is responsible for his relationship with God. Many of the challenges in the church could be avoided if individuals paid attention to their walk with the Lord. John highlighted two good examples in Gaius and Demetrius, and Jude listed several preventive measures that we each should practice.
2. **Contend for the Faith** (*3 John 1:9-11; Jude 1:1-16*): Though each person must pay attention to his or her walk with the Lord, our responsibilities do not stop there. Each of us is charged with contending for the faith, protecting it from those who would distort or defame it (like Diotrephes, Jezebel, the Gnostics, and the Nicolaitans). Protecting the faith also includes propagating the true gospel and its right doctrines.
3. **Remember the Lord of the Lamps** (*Rev. 1:1-20; 3:7-22*): While a church can do so many great things, it must never forget why they do them or for whom they do them. Apart from Christ, our lampstand has no light. We must not be guilty of losing of our first love and locking Him outside. What is the church of Christ without Christ in the church?

The Bottom Line

Because the church plays an important role in the world, we must address the enemy's obstacles.

Questions to Consider

1. What happens when a church forgets why it does what it does? What's the solution?
2. What are some worldly influences that, if allowed into the church, can compromise it?
3. A quiet majority readily yields to a bold minority. True or false? Explain why.
4. How do we avoid falling asleep or dying as a church? Evaluate your church's health.
5. Re-read *Revelation 3:20*. Is Christ allowed into your church? What will happen if He isn't?