DEFINING CHURCH HEALTH THROUGH BIBLICAL MODELING: AN EXPLORATION OF REV. 2:1–7

A Response Paper

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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to extend my gratitude to William H. Day, Jr. for his invitation and the opportunity to participate in the Ola Farmer Lenaz Lecture series. While the emphasis for this exercise undoubtedly is upon the main topic of discussion, a secondary level of emphasis can be perceived in the need for any discussion of church health to be biblically based. Dr. Day through his invitation has invited us all to seek biblical foundations for our on-going discussions. Toward this end, I hope to contribute a positive and affirming response that can stimulate further discussion and sharpen our thoughts on a timely topic in ways that help guide our reflections in dialogue with God's Word.

INTRODUCTION

One basic problem in coming up with a definition of a healthy church is that so very few churches are. It has been so long since we have seen one we have forgotten what they look like. Further, experientially, we constantly find ourselves thinking in the negative: we know what is *not* healthy—the church I currently am serving. Due to our skewed experiential perspective, we have a difficult time outlining the profile for which we are looking except in the negative.

That negative thinking actually might be the problem. A debilitating cynicism out of personal experience slowly but surely may creep into our thinking about the general state of the church. From that secret cynicism we may want to rain on anyone's parade of positive thinking.

On the other hand, we also might be participating in a biblical naïveté. From one perspective or another, for example, finding a Pauline church that meets a comprehensive definition of church health is nearly impossible. The revivalist imperative, "Let's get back to the New Testament church!" is not as clarion a call as one might presume.

Thus, on the one hand, we do not want to be overly cynical, though we might have every reason to be out of our own experience. On the other hand, we do not want to be overly optimistic about what a study of the New Testament might reveal.

I take as my point of departure for this response paper Dr. Day's suggestion, "A study of the letters to the churches in the book [*sic*] of The [*sic*] Revelation could provide

a picture of church disease from a more biblical perspective."[1] Now, we can acknowledge immediately that a study of all seven letters in Revelation 2–3 would exceed the bounds not only of a response paper, but even a main presentation itself. Further, the very task of plowing into the Book of Revelation is even more daunting, given that the most recent commentaries on Revelation are now numbering into the hundreds of pages, even thousands.[2]

Ah, yes, but fools rush in where wise men dare to tread. Therefore, I rush in. I propose to do some biblical modeling. Biblical modeling in regard to church health is exploring New Testament texts that profile church parameters of corporate existence commended or condemned in order to arrive at a composite sketch, both positively and negatively, of a typical New Testament church from which we might extrapolate an idealized healthy church suggestive for contemporary applications. The more texts explored, the more predicative the profile. Although a case for the most promising church in the New Testament for deriving a positive profile of a healthy church can be made for the church at Antioch,[3] for the purposes of this Lenaz lecture, we can take Dr. Day's

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[1]William H. Day, Jr., "The Development of a Comprehensive Definition of Church Health," The Fall 2002 Ola Farmer Lenaz Lecture, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, Dec. 19, 2002, p. 6.

[2]For example, the 1,539 pages in the three volumes by David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 52A, David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, gen. eds. (Dallas: Word Books, Publisher, 1997); *Revelation 6–16*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 52B, Bruce M. Metzger, gen. ed. (Nashville: Nelson Publishers, 1998); *Revelation 17–22*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 52C, Bruce M. Metzger, gen. ed. (Nashville: Nelson Publishers, 1998); the 1,245 pages in Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 1999); the 869 pages in Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Moisés Silva, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Co., 2002).

[3]Gerald L. Stevens, "Antioch: A Case Study in Corporate Ethos," a paper proposal for the regional meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Dallas, TX, March 2003.

suggestion and begin with one of the seven churches in Revelation 2–3. Practically, we have time to consider only one church. Exegetically, however, one church cannot be considered outside the unbroken circle of all seven letters.[4] For convenience we choose the first letter, that is, the letter to the church at Ephesus in Rev. 2:1–7.

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[4]For many obvious reasons: (1) no manuscript evidence indicates the letters ever circulated individually; (2) all the letters have the same formulaic structure; (3) the formulaic call concluding each letter is in the plural: τί τὸ πνεῦμα λέγει ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις. For an analysis of the formulaic structure, see Appendix 2.

CHAPTER 1

THE LETTER TO EPHESUS: NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

The traditional historical exegesis of the letters to the seven churches is fraught with frailties.[5] The traditional pattern has been to review each city's history in conjunction with what are assumed to be distinct characteristics of each locale, with the implication that these "distinct" characteristics have direct correspondence with particular elements in a given letter.[6] Evidence to the contrary is simply ignored.[7] Some connections to the locale or history might possibly elicit an intentional allusion, but for the most part, such assertions are well overplayed. Since the letters are intended to be

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[5]The classic treatment has been that of William M. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia and Their Place in the Plan of the Apocalypse* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904); popularized and made more easily accessible in the little book by William Barclay, *Letters to the Seven Churches* (London: SCM, 1957); seriously updated by Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in their Local Setting*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 11 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1986).

[6]This tradition is carried forth in the most recent commentary by Osborne, who asserted, "One of the amazing features of these letters is the extent to which each church is addressed through the history of the city in which it resides" (*Revelation*, p. 109).

[7]Beale cautioned, "Many proposals of background that have been suggested as having interpretive significance for the letters are intriguing but often hard to demonstrate as probable allusions," *Revelation*, p. 228. For example, arguing Laodicea was a "banking center" because Cicero cashed his letters of credit there conveniently ignores that this evidence is from the wrong century (51–50 B.C.). Further, Laodicea had no distinctiveness in this matter historically; Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum had even richer reserves. Aune analyzed the statement, "I am rich" in Rev. 3:17 as a "conventional excuse" on the pattern of a *hybris soliloquy* that could be paralleled in multiple layers of literature, such as Epictetus (Arrian *Epict. Diss.* 3.7.29), the Old Testament (Hos. 12:9), and the pseudepigrapha (*1 Enoch* 97:8–9), *Revelation 1–5*, p. 258. Aune then pointed to a metaphorical reading of "I am rich" as "pride in the possession of salvation, similar to 1 Cor. 4:8 . . . ," *Revelation 1–5*, p. 259.

read as a *literary unit*, we do better to follow the lead of narrative[8] and rhetorical[9] observations that are internally consistent from letter to letter. As Beale noted, the letters as a unit form a literary chiasm (abcccb′a′). Observing the chiastic pattern, Beale then concluded,

> The significance of this is that the Christian church as a whole is perceived as being in poor condition, since not only are the healthy churches in a minority but the literary pattern points to this emphasis because the churches in the worst condition form the literary boundaries of the letters and the churches with serious problems form the very core of the presentation. This is highlighted as we recognize that at the center of the middle letter stands a general statement that "all the churches will know" that Christ is the omniscient judge of his unfaithful followers (2:23). This statement is conspicuous as the only thing said in the letters about all "churches" other than at the conclusion of each letter.[10]

We will use the formulaic structure of the letters as the basis of our analysis. We do not intend a commentary; rather, we offer literary observations that hopefully will help to contextualize our exposition within the parameters of our discussion.

Address (Rev. 2:1a)

John began the seven letters, "To the angel of the church in Ephesus, write . . ." Each letter is addressed to the "angel" of the church. Fortunately, we have narrative indication of the significance of this figure. An important narrative observation can be made: *none of the angels has a distinct identity*. This lack of distinct identity is a literary signal that the angels have a unitary role. This unitary role is confirmed by the lack of any

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[8]Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 37–91.

[9]Addressed briefly by Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), pp. 187–203. A more rigorous methodological approach to move toward a rhetorical theory of apocalypse was presented by Stephen D. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[10]Beale, *Revelation*, pp. 226–7.

distinct function among them, except one: *they all have the one function of communicating a message from Jesus as agents of Jesus*. This unitary function equates the seven angels of the seven churches with an angel already encountered in the narrative, the angel of Jesus sent to John to communicate a message to John in 1:1: "and he signified and sent through his angel to his servant John."[11] The seven angels in Revelation 2–3 are the narrative equivalent of the one angel in Rev. 1:1.

This narrative equivalence is confirmed by the opening vision of the book in which the one like a son of man[12] holds seven stars in his right hand (1:16). The seven stars later are interpreted as the seven angels of the seven churches (1:20). Once again, their unitary role is confirmed by their corporate description and function in the opening vision. They are described as a unit. Their place is in the right hand of Jesus. That is, they function directly under the authority of Jesus.[13] Literarily they are the immediate and direct connection between the glorified Jesus and his servants on earth in the churches. Their literary function is to validate the authoritative source of John's communication to the churches, as an angel in Rev. 1:1 validated God's communication to John. Since seven letters will be sent to seven churches, the one hermeneutic angel of 1:1 becomes the corporate hermeneutic of the seven angels of chapters 2 and 3.[14]

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[11]καὶ ἐσήμανεν ἀποστείλας διὰ τοῦ ἀγγέλου αὐτοῦ τῷ δούλῳ αὐτοῦ Ἰωάννῃ.

[12]We will assume this figure to be equated with Jesus Christ and that the vision of 1:9–20 is the direct and immediate fulfillment of Revelation's opening verse that the book is to be characterized as an Ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (both objective and subjective genitive combined artfully).

[13]We cannot take the time to develop the image of the right hand as the authoritative ambassadorial agent of sovereignty, but the image lingers even today in the colloquial expression, "he's my right-hand man."

[14]We need not pursue their specific number other than the common observation that seven symbolically is the number of perfection or completeness. Narrative function, however, is not immediately addressed in such an observation.

We can make one other narrative observation. The seven angels of the seven letters establish a deliberate literary conjunction between the seven letters and the opening vision, showing thematic unity between the opening vision and literary elements of the seven letters. The seven letters are to be interpreted with a view to the opening vision. The churches stand under the sovereignty of the glorified Jesus. That sovereignty infers judgment, now and future. That judgment is expressed in the seven letters.

Identification (Rev. 2:1b)

The identification alludes back to the opening vision: "The One who holds the seven stars in his right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands."[15] This identification stands at the head of all the letters and ties all the letters to the direct, authoritative, validated communication of the glorified Jesus in heaven through his angel(s) to his servants on earth. The image of walking among the lampstands communicates not only ownership and oversight of the churches, but that intimate familiarity that informs the judgment executed upon the churches in the very act of reading the letters.

Account (Rev. 2:2–3)

The account is positive, focused on leadership issues, and how the church at Ephesus has rejected the asserted authority of "false" (ψευδεῖς) apostles. These false claimants were exposed, that is, "put to the test" (ἐπείρασας). The context includes a commended "perseverance" and "endurance" (vv. 2, 3) that is "for my Name" (διὰ τὸ ὄνομά μου). The "testing" that exposes the false apostles in such a context probably relates to public actions taken and advocated by certain leaders in the church that reveal

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[15]ὁ κρατῶν τοὺς ἑπτὰ ἀστέρας ἐν τῇ δεξιᾷ αὐτοῦ, ὁ περιπατῶν ἐν μέσῳ τῶν ἑπτὰ λυχνιῶν τῶν χρυσῶν.

an attempt to avoid social trouble along the gradient from social stigma to outright persecution. Their compromise with the existing social structures John has interpreted as abdication of the responsibility for witness. Such leaders are no leaders at all. The problem most likely occurred at the intersection of cult and commerce in Asia, with the rise of a distinct class of wealthy provincials in positions of power in collusion with mercantile Rome, the pervasive presence of a system of patronage that controlled all relationships, the Roman emperor cult, and the distinctly religious nature of all guilds.[16]

Assessment (Rev. 2:4)

The assessment is negative, short, and to the point: "you have left your first love."[17] As most commentators have noted, the adjective "first" (τὴν πρώτην) refers not to order of precedence or priority, but to an earlier condition in time.[18] The key term is "love" (τὴν ἀγάπην). Numerous commentators have assumed this love to be Christian love for one another.[19] More likely in the context of "my Name" and perseverance is the

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[16]For a good monograph on the subject, see J. Nelson Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John's Apocalypse*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 132 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, Ltd., 1996). John's perspective on redemption and salvation probably has political and socio-economic dimensions, but not so exclusively as argued by Schüssler Fiorenza, *Justice and Judgment*, pp. 68–81.

[17]τὴν ἀγάπην σου τὴν πρώτην ἀφῆκες.

[18]Cf. Frederick William Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature,* 3d ed., rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker, based on Walter Bauer's *Griechisch-deutsches Wöterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der frühchristlichen Literatur*, 6th ed., ed. Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, with Viktor Reichmann and on previous English editions by W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 893. Hereinafter referred to as BDAG.

[19]For example, George R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, New Century Bible Commentary, Ronald E. Clements and Matthew Black, gen. eds. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott Pub. Ltd., 1974), p. 75; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation, Revised Edition*, The New International

issue of witness.[20] Further, "love" should not be confused here with emotional, romantic love. "Love" here is more the sense of *definitive choice*, as in Mal. 1:2–3: "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated."[21] This understanding is confirmed by the use of the verb "hate" (μισέω) with this sense of choice in the following exhortation section regarding the Nicolaitans. The Ephesians have chosen definitively not to follow the Nicolaitans. However, in other terms not spelled out, the Ephesians have made the wrong choice, which is expressed as "you have left your first love." This wrong choice has seriously compromised the church's witness even in spite of the rejection of the Nicolaitans.

Thus, John has adroitly confronted the church at Ephesus with the accusation that, in her own way, she has succumbed to the very problem for which the false apostles have been castigated! Theirs was a failure of leadership. Hers was a failure of followship. John did not specify exactly how, but he has indicated the proverbial "pot calling the kettle black." This is not the slow evolution into cold, harsh zeal for orthodoxy so commonly assumed in the commentaries.[22] An analysis of the exhortation section immediately following confirms this critique.

Commentary on the New Testament, Gordon D. Fee, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1998), p. 69.

[20]Of recent commentators, Beale, *Revelation*, p. 230; Osborne, *Revelation*, p. 115. Surprisingly, Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, p. 146, passed by the entire phrase without a word of comment.

[21]LXX: ἠγάπησα τὸν Ιακωβ τὸν δὲ Ησαυ ἐμίσησα. Cf. BAGD, p. 653.

[22]Cf. Osborne, *Revelation*, p. 116.

Exhortation (Rev. 2:5–6)

Earlier in the account section Jesus had said to the Ephesians, "I know your deeds . . . that you cannot endure evil men."[23] Now, in the exhortation section, Jesus admonishes, "do the deeds you did at first."[24] These two expressions form a clear *inclusio* between the two sections of account and exhortation, which provide interpretation for the intervening assessment section.

This interpretive *inclusio* literarily indicates that the issue remains the same, though internal conditions within the church have changed. Earlier deeds of withstanding and exposing (false) apostles who tried to lead the church into a public stance that compromised Christian witness now have been abandoned. Apparently new leaders arose who really were not new but represented the reemergence of the earlier false apostles in new forms reiterating the old seduction toward cultural compromise. One might deduce from the Ephesians' new vulnerability to the seduction that the degree of external persecution of the church had progressed significantly along the social scale. The Ephesians are called upon to "remember" and "repent" along the lines of Old Testament prophetic calls for corporate memory with redemptive effect.[25]

The warning is: "but if not, I am coming and I will remove your lampstand from its place."[26] Two issues are involved: the nature of "coming" and of "remove." Commentators are evenly divided on whether the "coming" is temporal or eschatological. Osborne, echoing the sentiments of Beale, advised, "Scholars often find too great a

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[23]Rev. 2:2: Οἶδα τὰ ἔργα σου . . . ὅτι οὐ δύνῃ βαστάσαι κακούς.

[24]τὰ πρῶτα ἔργα ποίησον.

[25]Especially in Deuteronomy: Dt. 5:15; 8:2; 9:7 *et al.*; cf. Is. 46:8; Mic. 6:5.

[26]εἰ δὲ μή, ἔρχομαί σοι καὶ κινήσω τὴν λυχνίαν σου ἐκ τοῦ τόπου αὐτῆς.

dichotomy between present and future judgment in the book. There is an inaugurated force in passages such as this one. Christ's coming in judgment in the present is a harbinger of his final coming. In this context Christ's displeasure will be felt both in the present and at the final judgment."[27] Even so, the emphasis in the context of the seven letters seems to be on the temporal force. Otherwise, the very concept of addressing the churches of Asia Minor in particular concerning such specific local conditions looses its narrative force.

The other issue besides the nature of the "coming" is the nature of "remove." The lampstand stands for the church, and evokes the imagery of light, which alludes to the function of witness. What does "removal" of the lampstand signify? Some have said the loss of witness.[28] Others have said apostasy, or its equivalent.[29] Hemer's suggestion that "remove" here in the letter to Ephesus had particular relevance in the context of the history of Ephesus due to the city having been relocated three times, followed uncritically by Osborne, is one of those resounding examples of specious efforts to ground the exegesis of the seven letters in some concrete sense of historical background.[30] In fact, the connection is highly speculative and dubious.

A better indicator of the meaning of "remove" in Rev. 2:5 is the only other use of the verb "remove" in Revelation, that is, the eschatological events narrated in 6:14: "and the heavens were separated as a scroll which has been rolled up, and every mountain and

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[27]Osborne, *Revelation*, p. 118; similarly, Beale, *Revelation*, p. 233.

[28]Cf. Beale, *Revelation*, p. 232.

[29]Cf. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, p. 147; Mounce, *Revelation*, p. 70.

[30]Hemer, *Seven Letters*, p. 53. Cf. Osborne, Revelation, pp. 118–19.

island was removed from its place."[31] The "removal" in this eschatological context is the cataclysmic overturning of present earthly conditions as a metaphor of the results of God's action in final judgment. Thus, with the threat of "removal" in 2:5 having its intratextual echo in 6:14, the Ephesian church is threatened with eschatological judgment executed now as a proleptic anticipation of the reality awaiting all churches called into accountability before the reigning Jesus who "walks among the seven golden lampstands" (2:1).[32]

The exhortation concludes so as to show that the church at Ephesus is not entirely reprobate, so the threatened judgment does not have to be assumed inevitable. She does have one commendable deed in the current situation: opposition to the "Nicolaitans." This group cannot be identified.[33] The term is really not so much a name in the true sense

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[31]καὶ ὁ οὐρανὸς ἀπεχωρίσθη ὡς βιβλίον ἑλισσόμενον καὶ πᾶν ὄρος καὶ νῆσος ἐκ τῶν τόπων αὐτῶν ἐκινήθησαν.

[32]Commentators are fond of pointing to the statements of Ignatius (Ign. *Eph.* 1.1; 9.1) indicating that the church at Ephesus heeded this warning and once again became a thriving witness. Cf. Osborne, *Revelation*, p. 119; Beale, *Revelation*, p. 232; Mounce, *Revelation*, pp. 70–71.

[33]Some gravitate toward connecting the "Nicolaitans" in the letter to Ephesus with "those who hold the teaching of Balaam" in the letter to Pergamum who participate in eating idol food and in immorality (2:14; the connection seems implicit in the next verse, 2:15), as well as the Jezebel problem in the letter to Thyatira (2:20–23). Osborne connected all three situations as the same movement, *Revelation*, p. 120; even so, in his conclusion he acknowledged that "we know little about their beliefs . . . but can be confident regarding their practices, which involved immorality and a syncretistic participation in idolatry, especially emperor worship" (p. 121). Aune also connected followers of "Jezebel" at Thyatira with the Nicolaitans of Pergamum (*Revelation 1–5*, p. 149). One major obstacle to all such identifications, however, is that no explanation is then forthcoming of the narrative exigencies for such a lack of consistency either in nomenclature or description among the letters for the same group; this remains unexplored and unexplained. For this reason, Beale probably is more on target when he hesitated to identify all three situations in three different cities of Asia Minor as the same group. At a minimum, though, as Beale also observed, the evidence in the various letters "shows that the social situation and problem of compromise with idolatrous facets of society were the same in the churches of both Pergamum and Thyatira" (*Revelation*, p. 261).

as an "ethnic substantive."[34] While the historical origins of "Nicolaitans" are obscure, the rhetorical function in the letter is to offer the Ephesians a glimmer of hope that repentance, evidenced in exposure of false leaders and a return to earlier deeds of rejection of the seduction of cultural compromise, is possible even now. Therefore, the call to be issued in the next section is not vacuous of rhetorical and functional meaning.

Call (Rev. 2:7a)[35]

We make three observations, one on the Jesus tradition and two on the rhetoric of grammatical number. First, the entire phrase, "he who has an ear, let him hear," has close intertextual echoes with the Jesus tradition in the Synoptic Gospels.[36] As Aune stated, the formula "was closely associated with the traditions of the sayings of the earthly Jesus and probably originated with him."[37] This Jesus tradition echo gives the call section of the letters an added sense of authority and attaches the sense of accountability on the part of the listener directly to the royal and divine personage of the opening vision in chapter 1.

Second, as to grammar, we observe the singular number in the opening of the call section, "The one who .□□' This rhetoric individualizes the call, but to what effect? If the narrative movement established so far in the book is followed, this singular address continues the direct address of the glorified Jesus to John in chapter 1. In the opening

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[34]Indicating either actual members of an ethnic community, or, as here in Rev. 2:5, Νικολαϊτῶν, membership in other groups such as sectarians. Cf. G. Mussies, *The Morphology of Koine Greek as Used in the Apocalypse of St. John: A Study in Bilingualism*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum, vol. 27, W. C. van Unnik, gen. ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971), p. 151.

[35]In the typical mode of Revelation in breaking down units of 7 into 4/3 or 3/4 patterns, the call and promise sections are reversed in order in the first three letters.

[36]Cf. Mk. 4:9, 23; Mt. 11:15; 13:9, 43; Lk. 8:8; 14:35.

[37]Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, p. 155.

chapter, John reported that he was "in the Spirit" and "heard a loud voice" (1:10) and turned to "see" [*sic*] the voice (1:12). Upon turning, John entered into an apocalyptic revelation of Jesus (1:13–18), after which he was commanded to "write therefore" (1:19). This imperative to "write" in 1:19 following John's own apocalypse of Jesus is picked up in reverberating intratextual echoes in the seven imperatives inaugurating each of the seven letters to the seven churches that immediately follow, in which John is commanded to "write."

Thus, in each of the seven call sections concluding these letters, the "He who has an ear, let him hear" from a narrative point of view should be read as the continuing direct address of the Spirit to John, who began the entire narrative movement with his " I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day" in 1:10, and, subsequently, is commanded by that Spirit to write each of the seven letters. That is, John can write the seven letters precisely because he *had* an ear to hear (i.e., "I was in the Spirit" = "he who has an ear" = John).

This primary narrative flow is not to deny a secondary rhetorical echo that would sound out to the one who was hearing what John wrote as the book was read aloud. Each letter's call section invites evaluative spiritual reflection. Does the listener have the same spiritual sensitivity as did John? Is the Spirit able to communicate the commendation and condemnation of the letters as efficaciously through each church's own angel as was communicated to the one who originally auditioned the Spirit through angelic mediation (1:1; cf. the macro *inclusio* in 22:16)?

From a narrative point of view, such secondary individualization already has been established in the opening benediction to the book (1:3). This opening benediction then is actualized in real time in each letter's call section as Revelation first was read.

Third, as another grammatical observation, we note the pluralizing rhetoric in the closure to each call section: "says to the churches" (λέγει ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις). This

rhetoric joins all seven letters together as one rhetorical unit, addresses the church corporate, and forms an *inclusio* with the letter opening, with its address to a church in a particular locale, that signals the end of the letter.

Promise (Rev. 2:7b)[38]

The recipient of the promise is "the one who overcomes" (ὁ νικῶν). The semantic domain of the verb "conquer" (νικάω) is the subdomain of conquer in the main category of hostility and strife.[39] Further, of 28 occurrences of νικάω in the New Testament, 17 are in Revelation alone.[40] Thus, conquering is part of the special vocabulary of Revelation and is suited to the context of persecution. The vocabulary of conquering also has an eschatological nuance, as indicated in the conclusion to the vision of the new heaven and new earth in chapter 21, in the words, "the one who conquers will inherit these things" (21:7).[41] The reference of "these things" is to God's covenantal presence with his people.

This truth of God's covenantal presence is adumbrated already earlier in the book in the Ephesian letter's promise section using the imagery of eating "from the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God."[42] As noted by many, the language is evocative of the Genesis story of Adam and Eve and has numerous parallels in early Jewish texts with

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[38]The order of promise and call sections is reversed in the first three letters. See note 35.

[39]J. P. Louw and E. A. Nida, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2 vols. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 1:145.

[40]All grammatical statistics are compiled using *Accordance,* Ver. 5.1, OakTree Software Specialists, Altamonte Springs, FL, 2002.

[41]ὁ νικῶν κληρονομήσει ταῦτα.

[42]ἐκ τοῦ ξύλου τῆς ζωῆς, ὅ ἐστιν ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ τοῦ θεοῦ.

eschatological import.[43] With all these parallels so firmly entrenched in Jewish tradition, rendering the imagery stereotypical, the supposed connection of "tree" (ξύλου) here with the cross is tenuous at best.[44] Better within the narrative of Revelation is to connect the "tree" mentioned in the eschatological context of the letter to Ephesus to the "tree of life" (ξύλον ζωῆς) that is part of the arboretum of the New Jerusalem that descends from heaven to earth (22:2). Again, the emphasis is on God's covenantal presence with his people.

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[43]Aune gave the most extensive discussion and references, *Revelation 1–5*, pp. 151–54. A briefer compilation was offered by Beale, *Revelation*, pp. 234–35.

[44]So Osborne, as usual, following Hemer, as making a "convincing case" (*Revelation*, p. 124). Osborne then strangely included Beale as following Hemer here, but Beale explicitly and adamantly rejected the connection, asserting that "tree" here in Rev. 2:7 "does not refer to the cross" (*Revelation*, p. 235).

CHAPTER 2

THE LETTER TO EPHESUS: PROFILE ANALYSIS

Having established through narrative analysis a framework for understanding the letter to Ephesus in Rev. 2:1–7, we now turn our attention to establishing a profile of the church. This profile will play off the narrative analysis using the dual perspectives of positive and negative aspects. Since the letter to the church at Ephesus is brief, our results will be limited. This limited result is anticipated and reemphasizes the need to study all seven letters together to determine a composite sketch of the profile.

Positive Profile

Positive aspects can be derived both from those statements, which commend the church as contextualized in the previous part of this paper, as well as narrative observations that enhance our understanding of the relationship between the glorified Jesus and his churches on earth.

First, God takes initiative to interpret himself to his churches in authoritative self-revelation centered in the person of Jesus within the arena of the worshipful, contemplative life of church leaders. Thus, John was "in the Spirit on the Lord's day" when the authoritative christophanic apocalypse exploded on the horizons of his worship experience. From this contemplative experience, admittedly not serene but rather dramatic, God spoke to his churches in Asia Minor through the glorified Jesus with the voice "like the sound of many waters" (1:15). The letters that resulted were not casual e-mail or cute pastors' columns. They were casuistic eschatological judgments inaugurated now and anticipating that future consummation of God's will on earth as it is in heaven.

Second, God's divine revelatory activity is a crucial point for profiling church health. The church is not left to struggle for herself in the tensions of culture and society having not the foggiest notion of which way goes the truth historically encapsulated in the apostolic tradition. God always guides the leadership that guides the church. A contemplative life is the foundation of corporate spiritual vitality. The object of our contemplation is a vision of Jesus, risen, glorified, reigning—and ever present.

Third, in contradistinction, an unhealthy church will have leadership with a non-contemplative life out of communion with the living God, absent a life-changing vision of Jesus, and no prophetic voice. The result will be a siren seduction to a deadly spiritual compromise that has the appearance of pragmatic social accommodation but the reality of denial of the Name.

Fourth, Ephesus is commended for "testing" and exposing false leaders at one point in her church life. The true apostolic tradition must be preserved in each generation of believers. A healthy church has a clear grasp not only of foundational doctrine but also of *interpreting that apostolic tradition rightly within the context of the demands of culture and society*. This type of exposing of false teachers presently is manifested in the rejection ("hate" as choice) of the Nicolaitans.

Negative Profile

First, Ephesus eventually succumbed to the very verdict she earlier administered. She is called to "remember" and "repent," that is return to her "first love." That is, bluntly, the present rejection of the Nicolaitans does not mitigate the devastating effect of having left her "first love." She has made the wrong choice. The context of endurance and the sake of the Name seem to suggest a serious problem with her witness in the context of persecution, or at least severe social distress.

Second, the situation is not beyond repair. The rejection of the Nicolaitans indicates spiritual life is still left in the church at Ephesus. A healthy church should be ready to reevaluate its present condition with a view toward judgment and challenge. The choices to be made cannot be trivialized into optional lifestyle choices. The language John has chosen is the vocabulary of hostility and strife (νικάω, "conquer," "overcome"). Neither are the issues ephemeral; rather they conjure eschatological consequences. A healthy church can see the eschatological future in the choices of today. The very promise of God's eternal presence is at stake.

Assessment

I have appreciated the efforts Dr. Day has made to bring into a cohesive whole a disparate discussion on church health. The inundation of seemingly arbitrary lists in the literature is rather bewildering. The approaches are so varied as to almost defy species analysis. A significant amount of reading has been conducted in order to engage these discussions. Dr. Day has shown a wide knowledge of the literature, and his bibliography is illustrative of this research.

After surveying the discussions that have been conducted on the topic of church health to this point, Dr. Day has attempted to tame the savage beast by compiling a list of twenty-six church health characteristics.[45] These characteristics then were organized into seven broad categories. Finally, proposed definitions were provided in four stages of development.

What critiques can we offer that might help sharpen the discussion and advance the quest for definition? Dr. Day has insisted, "Certainly, Scripture [*sic*] must be the

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[45]These are summarized on p. 26.

primary reference for a definition of church health."[46] With this statement we certainly can agree. While this maxim has an intuitive sense of rightness, however, a number of hermeneutical issues remain unexplored. For example, how does one proceed to draw out the implications of a passage? Should effort be expended on historical contextualization? When Paul's use of the body metaphor for the church in 1 Cor. 12:12–27 is simply mentioned in one sentence and then "three important church health principles" are suddenly precipitated out one right after the other, what methodology is that? How is that historical exegesis, for example, without any exploration of the demographic profile of ancient Corinth's population that would be suggestive of the actual audience to whom Paul was writing or of the sociological realities of first-century patron/client relationships that impacted the social expectations for itinerant philosophers in Greek society? How is that literary exegesis that has followed carefully the surrounding context of what Paul has said to the Corinthians in the process of the production of the body metaphor?

In other words, we do not have a formal, functional proposal that puts teeth to the biblical sentiment. Hermeneutically, we should pick a passage, explore its genre for interpretive significance, and apply methodologies compatible with the genre in an informed way.

Second, the compilation of a list of church health characteristics did not attempt to demonstrate how these items in particular were "biblically" based. In the context of a verbal emphasis on being biblically based, this lack of demonstration seemed somewhat unexpected.

Third, the development of the broad categories was completely arbitrary. In fact, Dr. Day candidly admitted, "No particular methodology was used to develop the

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[46]"Lenaz Lecture," p. 16. Similarly, "the foundation of the definition must be centered in the Bible," p. 25.

categories."[47] This is a surprising admission. One would have thought that an effort as foundational as conjugating a definition that will shape the contours of thought on a subject would beg for more rigor.

Fourth, the connection between one proposed definition and the next was left unexplained, completely without comment or interpretation. As a reader, I was completely at a loss as to what I was expected to do with material. I poked around comparing and contrasting wording, noting minor transpositions of word order, meaningless synonym substitution, and addition of minor phrasing, but I was unable to know neither what observations were to be understood as significant nor what conclusions I was intended to draw. In this disoriented status, I found this final unit particularly anticlimactic and unsatisfying.

Lastly, my copy of the paper was in an unfinished state. In addition, I did not have the final summary, conclusions, or suggestions for further study. As a result, I beg forgiveness if my critique is completely off base due to the premature iteration of the paper from which I was attempting to develop my remarks.

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[47]"Lenaz Lecture," p. 27.

CONCLUSION

I have proposed a biblical modeling process targeted for developing corporate profiles of church characteristics that could be useful in various enterprises, such as developing a biblically based definition of church health. Biblical modeling in regard to church health is exploring New Testament texts that profile church parameters of corporate existence commended or condemned in order to arrive at a composite sketch, both positively and negatively, of a typical New Testament church from which we might extrapolate an idealized healthy church suggestive for contemporary applications. The more texts explored, the more predicative the profile.

I have attempted to demonstrate this biblical modeling process using the letter to the church at Ephesus in Rev. 2:1–7. We first conducted a narrative and rhetorical analysis, appropriate to the literary genre, from which an exegetical foundation was established. We then drew up a preliminary church profile on the basis of the exegetical foundation that illustrated positive and negative aspects of the church. Intimations of contemporary application were suggested along the way.

We may note that a number of elements of the discussion in this response paper find a corresponding analogue on one or other list that has been proposed regarding characteristics of a healthy church. Perhaps in that regard we have been able to provide some further biblical basis for exploring the scope and parameters of an adequate definition of church health.

Our results are only preliminary. To complete this initial stage, the other six letters would have to be analyzed and the results composited together. From that profile the implications for contemporary application could be sharpened further.

APPENDIX 1

ANTIOCH: A CASE STUDY IN CORPORATE ETHOS[48]

Narrative criticism has offered the tool of ethos analysis as contributing to an understanding of the text. Ethos development can be applied to groups and institutions as much as to individuals. I would like to propose that Luke's presentation of the ethos of the church at Antioch in the Acts narrative is configured to demonstrate how Antioch is the preeminent paradigm of a spiritually vital church. Further, Luke's foil in this approach will be the ethos of the church in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem church has its purpose in the narrative as representing the beginnings of the Christian movement, but Luke has given clear signals that this church is not the commended model of the spiritually dynamic church. Instead, the narrative burden for this corporate ethos falls to the church at Antioch. Four characteristics are used by Luke to develop this corporate ethos for the Antioch believers. The paper will explore these four characteristics.

At least four types of characteristics are perceivable in Luke's narrative strategy of presenting the ethos of the Antioch church. These four characteristics divide into two groups based on internal and external patterns of relationships. Internal patterns of relationship reveal these two characteristics of the Antioch church: (1) discipleship emphasis and (2) conflict management. External patterns of relationship reveal these two other characteristics of the Antioch church: (3) social responsibility and (4) mission initiative. For Luke the key issue in Antioch's spiritual vitality is not having one or all of

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[48]The following is a summary outline of the paper to be presented at the regional meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Dallas, TX, March 2003.

these characteristics but in the dynamic balance among them through the energizing activity of the Spirit.

The narrative that develops the first Antioch characteristic of discipleship emphasis is traced in the call of Saul of Tarsus and the subsequent threading together of this storyline with the ongoing story of Barnabas. Barnabas is first met at the conclusion to the story of Pentecost with the outpouring of God's Spirit as the fulfillment of the promise of Joel related to the last days and Jewish traditions surrounding Pentecost as a celebration of God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt and the subsequent entry into the Promise Land with its abundant harvest. In Luke's narrative in Acts, Barnabas becomes the symbolic bearer of Pentecost's promise fulfilled. That is, Barnabas's narrative character is developed as Pentecost facilitator. The full harvest to come, however, is not restricted to Israel. The Pentecost harvest includes the nations. Barnabas facilitates the key figure in that story, Saul of Tarsus, by introducing Saul to the Jerusalem church just when that church was about to reject the very one who was chosen by God for implementing the light to the nations theme of Simeon's prophecy about the Christ child out of Luke's nativity narrative in the Gospel. Barnabas then becomes Pentecost facilitator outside Jerusalem in his ambassadorial role in Antioch after the Spirit has begun moving there among Gentiles. Barnabas retrieves Saul from Cilicia for the work of discipleship in Antioch for a year and a half. That is, Luke has indicated that the first order of business for the spiritually vital church is a solid discipleship foundation. Mission then becomes the derivative *outflow* of good discipleship—hence, the first missionary journey's timing *after* the year and a half of discipleship among Gentiles in Antioch.

The second Antioch characteristic of conflict management is derived from the story of the Jerusalem Council. Volumes been written about this crucial event in the life

of the early church, much of which has been focused on the interrelationships with Paul's own narrative account in Galatians 2. Our focus, however, is not upon attempts to harmonize the Acts account with Paul's, nor upon the theological issues at stake. Our focus is on the *nature* of Antioch's *response to conflict* within the church and how they purposed to resolve the conflict. Conflict management principles for the early church become clear that Luke has advocated in the process of his narrative development of this incident.

The third Antioch characteristic is that of social responsibility, derived from the story of the famine relief visit of Barnabas and Saul. An interesting element of the story of the famine relief visit almost totally ignored by most commentators is that Luke has used this story in an *inclusio* technique that surrounds the story of Herod Agrippa I in Acts 12.[49] That is, the Herod Agrippa story is to be interpreted in light of the famine relief visit. With this in mind, we can tease out some important elements about the nature and meaning of the famine relief visit as an important signifier of the Antioch church's role in developing the Pentecost theme begun in Acts 2. That is, Pentecost fulfillment in all its ramifications takes place in Antioch, not Jerusalem.

The fourth Antioch characteristic is that of mission initiative. Once the foundation of discipleship has been laid, the inevitable outflow is mission. The first missionary journey is used by Luke to play out this reality in the life of the Antioch church. An important ingredient is the leadership of the Spirit in initiating this mission. This first mission's locus in the Antioch church is in stark contrast to the total lack of any such mission from the Jerusalem church. What about the Antioch church shows more spiritual

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[49]Polhill made observation of the *inclusio* style of the famine relief visit but did not develop this insight with any narrative analysis. John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary, vol. 26, David S. Dockery, gen. ed. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), pp. 276–77.

vitality here than the church in Jerusalem? In addition, Luke also has a narrative strategy of demonstrating the crucial element of the Spirit's direction in the mission activity of the church. The problem Luke addresses is that leadership within the church can play a negative role in the church's ability to be responsive to the Spirit. One important issue to explore is the nature of casting a vision for mission in terms of focus and direction. The argument between Paul and Barnabas is the focus here.

APPENDIX 2

FORMULAIC STRUCTURE OF THE SEVEN LETTERS

The letters to the seven churches of Revelation 2–3 have a formulaic structure, clearly seen even in English translation, but even more marked in the Greek text. This structure has seven parts:

(1) *address*—always dative case, singular number, hailing the ἄγγελος of the church addressed, not the church directly, followed by the second singular of the aorist active imperative, γράψον

(2) *identification*—always opening with the formulaic Τάδε λέγει, evocative of prophetic judgment contexts in the LXX (cf. Nathan's charge to David regarding Bathsheba, 2 Sam. 12:7: τάδε λέγει κύριος ὁ θεὸς Ισραηλ), followed by identifying characteristics either drawn from the figure described in the opening vision in chapter one or developing an amplified characteristic that will be immediately pertinent in the following assessment formula

(3) *account*—always beginning with the formulaic Οἶδά, regularly followed by the direct object σου τὰ ἔργα (five of seven times), appositively followed by descriptions of internal spiritual conditions of the church, sometimes further contextualized by knowledge of external conditions of locale and/or of recent or imminent persecution

(4) *assessment*—three times marked by the strong adversative conjunction ἀλλά, followed by the formulaic ἔχω κατὰ σοῦ, three times marked with a second singular imperative command (φοβοῦ, γίνου, ἰδού), once marked by the strong adverb οὕτως, in two sets, using the standard 4/3 pattern noted in many

other elements of Revelation, each set of cascading length that climaxes in the letters to Thyatira and Laodecia, marking these two churches as the focal points of the assessment section, each assessment giving negative and/or positive critique

(5) *exhortation*—four times with an imperative of μετανοέω, three times with an alternate imperative command (γίνου, κρατήσατε, κράτει), charging necessary remedial action to avoid imminent judgment or encouraging future steadfastness

(6) *promise*—five times the nominative phrase, ὁ νικῶν, two times in the dative, τῷ νικῶντι, regularly followed by the future tense in the first singular (four times δώσω, once ὁμολογήσω, once ποιήσω) or the aorist passive ἀδικηθῇ, each promise reflecting intertextual echoes of eschatological nuance

(7) *call*—the most unfailing formula of all: ὁ ἔχων οὖς ἀκουσάτω τί τὸ πνεῦμα λέγει ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις, which establishes the corporate point of all the letters and is the clear signal that: (1) the letters are to be understood as a unit, not individually, (2) the letters are intended for the church corporate in the readership, and (3) each letter concludes with an *inclusio* that ties the knot with the opening specifically addressed with an imperative to John that he "write" (γράψον, e.g., the singular number of each concluding ὁ ἔχων οὖς ἀκουσάτω = the singular number of each opening imperative γράψον, as well as the singular indirect object of each letter, τῷ ἀγγέλῳ)

The following table is a visual summary of the above observations on the formulaic structure of the seven letters in Revelation 2–3. The Greek text is given to illustrate the formulaic structure more obviously.