

10

Listening as Ears of the Church

Revelation 1:19–3:21

At the very end of the Bible stands a mysterious book titled Revelation. Who wrote it? When? Why? And perhaps most importantly, What does it mean? Possible answers to these questions have filled books, dissertations and conferences. They have created a few church and denominational splits, and have spawned heretical groups. Revelation is high drama. Its author is a person named John, “who testifies to everything he saw” (Revelation 1:2). Was this John the now-aging disciple of Jesus who also wrote the Gospel of John and the three letters of John, and the “disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 13:23)? Or was this particular John some unknown later scribe who testified “to everything he saw”?

What John saw unveils some of the most graphic imagery in all of Scripture. At the outset we read that this book is “the revelation from Jesus Christ” (Revelation 1:1). This now risen and ascended Christ, when speaking to John, describes himself as “the Alpha and the Omega . . . who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty” (Revelation 1:8). At the outset we find a series of seven terse letters addressed to seven first-century churches located in what is now western Turkey.

GROUP DISCUSSION. If you were preparing a church evaluation form, what questions would you ask and why?

PERSONAL REFLECTION. Spend time praying for your own church—or the church closest to you. Ask God to reveal any needs there that might benefit from your participation.

Prepare to listen as ears of the church—the church then and the church now. *Read Revelation 1:19–3:21.*

1. Pretend that you are going first-century-church shopping. Which church on this list would you try out first? Why?

2. Which church would be last on your tryout list? Why?

3. Now take a cross-section look at Jesus Christ's message to these seven churches. What does Jesus reveal about himself (see vv. 2:2, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14)?

4. What is your impression of Jesus as he describes himself to these churches?

5. Read about the seven churches again. Look for all that Christ values in each church (see vv. 2:2, 6, 9, 13, 19, 24-25; 3:8, 10).

6. Again, read through the letters to these seven churches. Create a list of the criticisms that you find for each church (see vv. 2:4-5, 14-15, 20-23; 3:1-3, 15-17).

7. Place each of the seven church names on slips of paper and place them in a basket. Pair up with one other person and draw one of the church names from the basket. Assume that you are each a leader in this first-century church and that you must help your church through its future as described in the biblical text. Spend about ten minutes talking and making notes about how you might help your church prepare (as a church and as individuals) for the situation ahead. Consider sermons, programs, events, practices, study, prayer, classes, physical help, relationship building and appropriate Scripture teachings. An individual doing this study should focus on one church each day for the next week, doing an internal spiritual examination to see if you are tempted in some ways illustrated in this church.

8. Read through the seven letters one more time. Select one or more of the criticisms that might apply to today's churches. What might a similar kind of wrongdoing look like in a church today?

9. What reason for hope do you find for some of these churches?

10. Once again read through this text. This time listen with the ears of your church. What compliments in this text do you think Christ might also apply to your church?

What complaints might also apply to your church?

Pray for Christ's church in whatever spot around the world comes to mind.

Now or Later

Drive or walk through a town of your choice. Pause in front of each church you see and pray for the people there, for their leaders, for their ministries, for their community, for their spiritual and relational well-being and even their correction if needed. Ask God the Holy Spirit to direct your prayer.