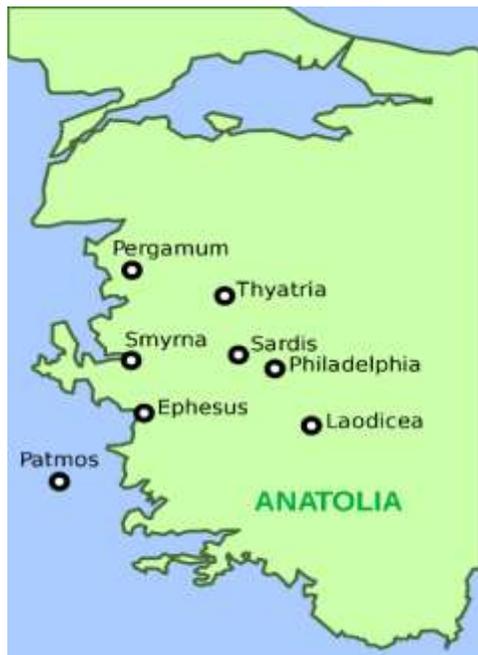


**“To the Churches”**  
**Revelation 2:1-7**

**1** “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:  
These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand  
and walks among the seven golden lampstands.  
**2** I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance.  
I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people,  
that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false.  
**3** You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.  
**4** Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first.  
**5** Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.  
If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.  
**6** But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.  
**7** Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.  
To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life,  
which is in the paradise of God.

**Introduction**

Last Sunday, Pastor Chris gave us an introduction to this unique book of the Bible, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*. It was written by the apostle John to churches he knew on and near the east coast of the Aegean Sea (present day Turkey). Here’s a map of the seven churches and the island of Patmos where John received this vision.



*Present Day Turkey on Aegean and Mediterranean Seas*

The Book of Revelation is actually in the form of a circular letter, perhaps a copy of chapters 4-22 with chapters 1, 2 and 3 as an insert specific to each church.

We just read what was sent especially for the church in Ephesus. Ephesus was an important center of early Christianity, a major city in the region. At the time, it was the greatest harbor along the coast. It served as a gateway to Asia Minor as several trade routes converged. A Roman writer called it “Lumen Asiae,” the Light of Asia. A famous amphitheater in Ephesus could hold 45,000 people (that’s a Rice-Eccles sell out and they didn’t need a multi-million-dollar LED screen and monster Dolby sound).

The apostle Paul lived there for a couple of years. In the book of Acts, we learn that he attended the Jewish synagogue where “a large number” came to believe in Jesus the Christ (*Christos* Greek word *Messiah*). It was there that Paul became embroiled in a dispute with some artisans whose livelihood depended on selling statues at the great Temple of Artemis, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Later, while in prison in Rome around 62 AD, he wrote the letter to the Ephesians that we so amazingly we have in the New Testament. Timothy, Apollos, Priscilla and Aquilla also show up in Ephesus in Book of Acts.

Then the apostle John lived and taught in Ephesus where his Gospel may have been written. Revelation was written and sent to the seven churches from John’s banishment to the island of Patmos off the coast.

### **I. The Churches in Revelation**

In the letter of Revelation, there’s a pattern that Christ spoke and John wrote to the churches. First, there’s the angel/messenger to describe the Lord Jesus in various ways. “These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands... the First and the Last, who died and came to life again... with the sharp, double-edged sword... whose eyes are like blazing fire... who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars... who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open... the Amen, the faithful and true witness.”

This is Jesus, of course, who speaks and is described. Jesus strongly and firmly holds each of the seven churches and even the whole church in his right hand. You and I are held closely in the hands of our Savior.

Then Jesus expresses appreciation for the church’s works along with criticism against them. “I know your deeds, your hard work and your courageous perseverance... I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich... you remain true to my name... your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first... you have kept my word and have not denied my name.” The Lord knows what it means to be a Christian in our fallen world. It isn’t easy.

“Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first (your enthusiasm in faith and love for one another has diminished)... you hate the practices of the Nicolaitans... but some among you hold to the teaching of Balaam (the Greek and Hebrew words that make up Nicolaitans and Balaam mean

‘to conquer the people; false teaching within the church can be devastating)... You tolerate that woman Jezebel. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality, leading a life of self-indulgence... Wake up! for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God... you are neither cold nor hot; because you are lukewarm, I am about to spit you out of my mouth.’”

In revelation chapter 3, verse 20, Jesus bids the church (it’s one of the small stained-glass windows): “Behold! Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me... Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

And lastly, Jesus offers encouragement for being victorious, for overcoming in the blessing of God’s grace. “To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life... I will give that person a white stone with a new name written on it... I will give that one the morning star... I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life... I will give the right to sit with me on my throne.”

It is human nature to begin on the right track and gradually over time get off track. The church in Ephesus had gotten off track, as did each of the churches in revelation 2 and 3 save Smyrna. The Risen Lord gave John the words and vision to bring correction and encouragement to the church. Throughout the Bible, God always does this for his people in Old and New Testaments.

## **II. The Message and Meaning**

Sometimes I wonder what the early pastors of 1<sup>st</sup> Pres would write if they knew what was happening here today. What would the Risen Lord have to say to me as pastor or to you as congregation? Josiah Welch was the organizing pastor with 11 members in 1871. Robert McNiece served as pastor for the next 20 years (1877-1897), and William Paden for 15. They “persevered and endured hardships for the name.” Perhaps we have grown weary.

Dr. McNiece wrote an article on “Mormonism: Its Origin, Characteristics, and Doctrine?” published in the famous volume *The Fundamentals* in 1917 by BIOLA University. Three million copies from the four-volume book were sent to ministers, missionaries, Sunday schools across the U.S. and Britain.

Rev. McNiece began the article like this: “The writer has lived in Salt Lake City for over thirty years. He has heard Mormonism expounded and defended by Presidents Brigham Young, John Taylor, and their successors, Wilford Woodruff, Lorenzo Snow, and Joseph F. Smith.” He says, “The standpoint of the writer is that of friendly sympathy and good-will toward the men and women among the common people in the Mormon ranks. Whose sincerity he has no desire to call in question.” Please, please don’t miss his expression and commitment of love toward the people of Utah. He was not attacking Mormon people. But he was evaluating Mormon-ism as promulgated by church authorities. “Christian people everywhere,” he

says, “need to have a clear idea of what Mormonism really is, so that they can help to protect their own communities.”

Citing numerous historical records and biblical theology, Dr. McNiece goes on in detail to carefully challenge Mormon doctrine and practice. Quote: *“Intended to deceive the ignorant... Mormonism tries to palm off on the world a counterfeit prophet... a counterfeit Bible... a counterfeit priesthood... a counterfeit group of apostles.”*

At the end of 17 pages, he writes, “The one important thing to be done is to double the Christian missionary forces in Utah, in order to bring deliverance to those who are in bondage.” You can Google “McNiece Mormonism” and read the entire article. It’s still relevant for our day.

In his book “Presbyterians in Zion,” Fred Burton tells of the early Presbyterian message in Utah, in both education and preaching. It was directed at releasing the Mormon people in Utah from what many Presbyterians viewed as supervision and oppression by their leaders.

Here we are a century later. How do you see things? What has your experience been? Does the pastor and the people of 1<sup>st</sup> Pres care about the many friends and neighbors who were converted to or raised in the Mormon church? Even though “the church” continues to alter its public image over the last few decades, its characteristics and doctrine have not changed.

In my time at 1<sup>st</sup> Pres here in Salt Lake City (2001-present), I’ve shied away from criticizing Mormon-ism in a public way. I have had cordial friendships with many LDS leaders, bishops, stake presidents, members of the Quorum of the Twelve. Under President Hinckley, there was an openness to dialogue and understanding between LDS and evangelical leaders. I participated in several public forums in the tabernacle, in the Church Office Building, and at BYU. That openness fluctuated under President Monson and under the current president Russell Nelson. Some of you have been or have family members who are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Please, please – This sermon is *not* meant to provoke anti-LDS sentiment. If it has, please take a copy of it and read it again. It *is* meant to challenge us in what it means to live a Christian life in this fallen, needy world, to love God and love neighbor.

How would pastors Welsh, McNiece, or Paden chastise me for not continuing the leadership of 1<sup>st</sup> Pres in trying to reach LDS people with the biblical gospel of grace? What would the Risen Christ say to us today? “I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance? you remain true to my name? you have kept my word? that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false?” Then, would our Lord say, “Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love? Wake up! for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God? You are neither cold nor hot; you are lukewarm?”

## Conclusion

So, what's the difference? What's the difference between the "restored gospel" and the biblical gospel, between trying to live the Mormon life and the Christian life? Although there are common words, they have very different meanings. The words "savior, atonement, righteousness, worthy, scripture" mean very different things.

I'll give it my best try. It's all about "grace." In a biblical equation, it looks something like this: Good Works = Salvation (heaven, nirvana, enlightenment, oneness with all things). That's not Christianity. We cannot save ourselves. Heaven cannot be earned.

Then, Faith in Jesus Christ = Salvation. There's more to it than that. The Bible says, "Faith without works is dead." Following God's commands is important.

Well, it must be: Faith + Works = Salvation. That's basic LDS theology and practice. Be a good person, choose the right, serve a mission, give a tithe. Sounds right, but it's not biblical. It means that Jesus didn't do enough to save us. Jesus plus anything isn't what God has in mind.

Here's the one that brings authentic grace into focus: Faith in Jesus Christ = Salvation + Good Works. Works belong on this side of the equation. Worthiness is not found in you or me in any way; my worthiness is in Jesus alone. I have no righteousness of my own doing; but I have received the righteousness of Jesus Christ as a gift. I could go on, but I hope you get the point, the critical difference.

As we read through portions of the Book of Revelation, our Lord Jesus continues to proclaim, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me... Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Let us pray together.