

4 Ways to Kill a Church

In the book of Revelation, we find Jesus addressing 7 churches. For each one, He has a specific message. Each one had different circumstances. For most, except Laodicea, He has some words of commendation. For most, except Smyrna and Philadelphia, He has some words of condemnation or caution. For each one He reveals a different part of Himself to them in His title or description, which in fact turns out to be the solution to their problems upon closer inspection. What is disturbing is this: none of those churches stand today. All of those churches were actual local churches in Asia Minor, or modern day Turkey. Today Christianity struggles to survive there, and none of those churches remain. That's disturbing. It's disturbing because Jesus warned them of the consequences of not heeding His commands. He told Ephesus that He would 'remove their candlestick' if they did not repent. Clearly, they did not, and He did exactly what He warned He would. These churches were seven actual churches, but at the same time they represent churches and problems in churches that have existed since John's time. Jesus spoke these words to the church and the Spirit included them I believe as a warning to any church anytime anywhere to beware of these things. Too often we think that we are cast in stone as a particular local church but these churches in Asia Minor serve as a perpetual reminder that a church which does not take Jesus' words seriously can be removed.

There really were four main cautions that Jesus gave. There are others, but four really grab our attention as we seek to avoid the sins that these churches fell into. We could call them 'The four ways to kill a church' because that's exactly what they did.

The first is:

1) Replace the Relationship with a Ritual

It's interesting that this is God's first complaint, almost like He wanted it highlighted. Here is a church, Ephesus, that is doing great things, labouring, holy, doctrinally pure, standing on the truth.

But Jesus says, you've left your first love, your heart is not in it. When God's people are busy for Him, but there is no relationship in it, He is not pleased. He wants a heart relationship, not a robotic ritual. You have replaced the relationship with a routine.

The things you do are good, but you do not do them for Me.

Notice these words: Remember from when you have *fallen*..." Notice to serve God with no love, is in God's eyes to have fallen. It is a sin to be repented of.

Why? Because God does not want workers, He wants a bride. He has the power to do the work Himself. He does not need us, nor does the work depend upon us. He chooses to use us so that we can experience Him more! For the purpose of enhancing the relationship, As Paul says Philippians 3:10: "That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death". That speaks of a living relationship borne out of real service and suffering for Christ. Serving Him should draw us deeper in love with Him. When we just do His work with no love, we have missed the entire point of doing His work, to fall in love with Him.

Throughout the OT, God told Israel, 'tear your hearts, not your garments. He told them the circumcision He wanted was of the heart, not of the flesh. He told them a

broken and a contrite heart is what he wants above sacrifice. God wants a love relationship with His people. He is to be our first love. Our Number One love. The greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God. Question, what is then the greatest sin?

Because Christ did not die for you and me out of a business-like heart, He did so out of a heart of love, He has every right to expect us to behave back to Him in love. To live our lives as acts of love to the one we now belong to. When we do God's work without love for God empowering and motivating us, that's like a separated couple still doing nice things for each other. No, 2 Corinthians 5:14, the love of Christ constraineth us.

He says 'repent'. Remember where we were. God starts with this one because it's the foundation. Perhaps Ephesus thought, "Oh, love, nice, but not necessary, but God thought differently, He removed the church at Ephesus' candlestick. Question, do you love the Lord Jesus more or less than when you first met Him?

2) Use the ministry to enrich yourself

We find Jesus next caution is to a church at Pergamum.

Balaam was the false prophet who had a donkey speak to him. Now Balaam loved money, and used his prophetic office as an opportunity to enrich himself. Balak the king wanted Balaam to curse Israel. God didn't allow him to. Nevertheless, Balaam greedily went after Balak's offer of money by finding a back door; he received money in exchange for information on how to destroy Israel. He told Balak that if Balak would send his girls to Israel and seduce them to fornication and idolatry, God would destroy His own people with a plague. That's exactly what happened, and if you recall, it was only a man by the name of Phineas who stopped the death in Israel's camp that day. The point is, Balaam used ministry to enrich himself. 2 Peter 2:15 and Jude 11 warn of false teachers who confuse ministry with money, and both Jude and Peter compare these false teachers to Balaam. Jesus warns the church at Pergamos that there are those in the church who are following his doctrine, thinking that they can use ministry to get rich. There is so much false teaching today on this point, and we have dealt with it on previous occasions. But Jesus is clear, be like Balaam, tolerate the doctrine of Balaam in your church, and I'll remove you.

Is being rich a sin? No. Is it a sin if God blesses me or others with a lot of money? No. Is it a sin to covet a lot of money? Yes. Lusting what is not yours is a sin. Paul told us it is 'the love of money' that is the root of all evil. You don't have to buy this baloney about fantasizing about million dollar figures. You dream big for the work of God, and God will meet the needs. Through twisted Scripture, false teachers will tell you about the blank cheque you can write yourself with God. We don't have the time to look at all the relevant Scriptures to counter that but just to refer to the incident with Elisha and Naaman the leper. When Naaman offered to pay Elisha for his healing, Elisha refused. But, his servant, Gehazi, secretly ran after Naaman, lied and said, "My master actually would like some payment". Naaman paid him, but upon his return, he was questioned by Elisha. Listen to Elisha's question and answer with Gehazi 2 Kings 5:25-26: "But he went in, and stood before his master. And Elisha said unto him, Whence *comest thou*, Gehazi? And he said, Thy servant went no whither. ²⁶And he said unto him, Went not mine heart *with thee*, when the man turned again from his chariot to meet thee? *Is it* a time to receive money, and to receive garments, and oliveyards, and vineyards, and sheep, and oxen, and menservants, and maidservants?"

Is it our time? No unless God entrusts you with it for ministry sake. Our true mansions and streets of gold are not in this world or this life, we are strangers and pilgrims. Pergamum probably thought, no harm in a bit of extra money here and there! After all, it makes us looked blessed and the world will want to be like us. But the church at Pergamum is no more, God removed their candlestick. Ask, am I in ministry for ministry or for money? Is it a job or a calling?

The third caution comes to the next church, the church at Thyatira. V20

3) Allow False Doctrine

Here Jesus warns the church about a lady called Jezebel. Now who was Jezebel? In the Old Testament, we remember her as the ruthless queen of Israel, the wife of Ahab. A passionate Baal worshipper, she killed without remorse or conscience, hunted down God's prophets and caused Israel to worship Baal too. There's the key, she was in a place of authority, but she used it to lead Israel astray. The church at Thyatira had a false teacher whom God calls Jezebel to explain her nature. She was called a prophetess, and therefore it's safe to assume she (or even he if it is all a metaphor) was in a place of authority as a teacher. Whoever this was, she or he was using this place of authority to teach what was false and lead people astray.

The real problem was what the church at Thyatira was doing: they 'suffered' her, they allowed her! They did not rebuke her, warn her or set her straight! Instead, they allowed her to continue to seduce people into false doctrine. God takes this extremely seriously. Jesus had amongst his harshest words for those who cause His people to stumble: "it is better that a millstone be hanged around his neck and he be cast into the sea". Listen to God's warning to the teachers in the Old Testament who taught false doctrine and did not care to teach correctly. Mal 2:7-8 "For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he *is* the messenger of the LORD of hosts. ⁸But ye are departed out of the way; ye have caused many to stumble at the law; ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi, saith the LORD of hosts." Ezekiel 34:8-10 "*As* I live, saith the Lord GOD, surely because my flock became a prey, and my flock became meat to every beast of the field, because *there was* no shepherd, neither did my shepherds search for my flock, but the shepherds fed themselves, and fed not my flock; ⁹Therefore, O ye shepherds, hear the word of the LORD; ¹⁰Thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, I *am* against the shepherds; and I will require my flock at their hand, and cause them to cease from feeding the flock; neither shall the shepherds feed themselves any more; for I will deliver my flock from their mouth, that they may not be meat for them." How seriously God takes it when the teachers lead people astray. James 3:1 warns against rushing into being a teacher, for teachers will receive a stricter judgement. God will not indefinitely allow a church to teach false doctrine. One of two things will happen. He will either remove the church, or He will remove His hand from the church, and write 'Ichabod' on the doors, the glory has departed.

Notice what Jesus says to this church in v 25, Hold fast that which you have. Preach the doctrine already given to you. "earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" Jude 3. The problem with many Christians today is that they are allowing every new wind of doctrine to sway them. Jesus says, Hold fast that which you already have! Eph 4:14 "That we *henceforth* be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, *and* cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive" - Preach the Word.

Perhaps the church at Thyatira felt, ‘we don’t want controversy in our midst! Let’s just agree to disagree with Jezebel! She can teach her thing, and we’ll teach ours! We need unity, not divisions!’ Well, that sounds very charitable on the surface. But in fact, it is only charitable to those who don’t want controversy. It saves them the effort of contending for the faith. It’s not charitable for the church. But God commands in Titus 1:13 regarding false teachers “Wherefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith”. The word *sharp* in the Greek means severely, curtly. You don’t dilly-dally with false doctrine. Don’t suffer a Jezebel in your midst, be it in the pulpit, in your library, in your media section, in your Sunday School, even in your pews! Rebuke them! Notice also the commendation to church members: Romans 16:17 “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine.”

Yes, maybe Thyatira liked unity and not divisions. All of us like unity. But unity is based on purity, purity of doctrine. The word *unity* appears twice in the N.T., the word ‘doctrine’ appears 45 times, showing where God would have us place our emphasis. The church at Thyatira is no more, they allowed false doctrine. Ask, can I tolerate false teaching in my local church?

The final, very arresting warning is to the last church, the church at Laodicea.

4) Compromise

This church was wealthy, they were based in a wealthy area. We see Jesus exposing what was in their hearts, ‘I am rich, and increased with goods and have need of nothing’. Their physical wealth and materialism blinded them to their spiritual poverty. They had become so attached to luxury and wealth, so used to depending on their big bank balances, that they had locked Jesus outside of the church. They were a church in compromise. They had one foot in the church, and one foot in the world.

They said a prayer now and then, but depended on their own means ultimately. Compromise is any time a child of God allows one of the enemies of his soul to settle where only God belongs. What are the believer’s enemies? Sin, Satan, false doctrine and the world. Compromise is when you are neither holy nor filthy. You are not completely for the world, but you are not entirely separate from it either. You are a double-minded man, half in the world, sin and self and half in the church, living for God. A compromising Christian is trying to get the best of both worlds.

Compromisers generally don’t like conflict or real self-disciplined effort, and are therefore content to let things be, like the Israelites. They were commanded to drive out the Canaanites completely. Instead, they let many of them live in the land. Those they allowed to remain became a constant thorn in their sides; they attacked them, influenced them to idolatry and many other grievous things all because Israel compromised with the enemy. So with a church that allows false doctrine, that allows loose living, that allows selfish believers, that indulges lazy service for God, that molycoddles rebellious members: it’s a compromise. The amazing thing is that Jesus is not impressed with their lukewarmness. He prefers cold churches to lukewarm ones. We can understand that when we think of how we like our drinks ourselves. Again, that can only be because the people tolerate such things amongst them!

Why do people live lukewarm lives? Why do churches become lukewarm? Most often, a fear of losing. The individual who lives a double life does so because he is afraid that if he lives 100% in one, he will miss out on the fun of the other life. So he is endlessly going back and forth from both, and like James says, he is unstable in all his ways. We are afraid that we will miss out on fun if we live 100% for God, so we

go back to the world. There we are afraid we will reap discipline and judgement from God and so come back to Him, always going back and forth. Likewise a church does so because it is scared of losing members. We're afraid if we preach on sin, people will get offended and leave. We're afraid if we set false doctrine straight we'll lose some long time members. We're afraid if we take a stand on holy living we'll be accused of being legalistic. It's a compromise, a fear, and God doesn't bless it. Ultimately, the church at Laodicea no longer stands; it did not heed the warning get out of its compromise.

Elijah said to Israel, how long will you halt between two opinions, if Baal be God , serve him, and if the Lord be God, then serve Him! Same with us, if our God is the true God, then stop serving self! If our God is the true God then stop serving the world! If our God is the true God then stop serving man, being a man-pleaser, a crowd-puller, a popularity seeker!

Ask yourself, if there was a line, with being cold and far from God on the far left , and being hot and fiery for God on the other end, where would you place yourself on that line? Why? Where would you place your church? Why?

Maybe we simply need to cast down idols in our lives. For the Laodiceans it was their money and materialism. We need to open the door up to Christ.

Isn't it encouraging that even though Jesus has given over four very stern warnings, He still remains outside knocking? He is a gentleman, He won't force the door open , but He also won't stand there indefinitely. He didn't for these churches in Asia Minor. May we open the door to Him and repent. Repent of routines without relationships. Repent of enriching ourselves through ministry. Repent of allowing false doctrine in our midst. Repent of compromise, with sin, Satan, self, the world and false teaching. Let us take Christ's warning seriously. Let us also take His invitation seriously, that if we will open the door, He will come in and sup with us, and we with Him.