

PETER ROENNFELDT

# be the SEQUEL

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INSPIRATION FROM THE STORY  
OF THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF REVELATION

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## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO be the SEQUEL?

A **SEQUEL** is a story that continues and develops the storyline or theme of an earlier one. It is the next instalment or subsequent development, the consequence of the first event—another movie, televised program, musical, speech, book, or letter that takes things to a new level.

*First Sequel.* The letters to the *seven churches* in Revelation are a **sequel**. Written by the apostle John following or while incarcerated on the isle of Patmos, these letters and the Apocalypse from Jesus continues the story of these *seven churches* planted in the Roman province of Asia most likely during Paul's three year stay in Ephesus on his third missionary journey.

*Second Sequel.* The history of these *seven churches* over ensuing centuries—times of faithfulness and suffering, followed by pomp and notoriety—form a **second sequel**, which is largely forgotten and frequently overlooked. It is a history that is not part of western educational curriculum, or it is perhaps too confronting and painful. Sadly, neglecting this sequel distorts our understanding of God's disciple-making movement, for much that shapes how we approach mission today comes from that era—and not from the life, teachings, or commission of Jesus.

Just as a movie sequel does not always advance the story, with a box-office failure even undermining the life and memory of the original, so this historical second sequel devalued the original story of the *seven churches*—as well as the first sequel, the Revelation letters.

**be the SEQUEL** is a challenge to re-examine the story of how these churches were planted, with their widespread impact “so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:10 NIV)—with “the word of the Lord (continuing) to increase and prevail mightily” (Acts 19:20 ESV).

It is an opportunity to hear the Spirit speak in the first sequel—in the letters from Jesus to the *seven churches* 40 years after they were planted (Revelation 2 and 3). It was His intention that all hear “the word of the Lord” and, that it continues to “increase and prevail.”

It is an invitation to learn from the second sequel—the subsequent history of the *seven churches*—and take inspiration from the original story, to return to Jesus' idea of mission and to hear the voice of His Spirit.

The first apostles and early believers did not create their own mission statements and frame their own strategies. Their mission was defined by Jesus—He modelled mission—and they simply followed His example in disciple-making and movement-building. To them, Jesus' method was best-practice—for, after all, it was His kingdom movement, not theirs!

*be the SEQUEL* is a call to be part of the ongoing story—to respond to the voice of the Spirit, to see “the word of the Lord” ... “increase and prevail.” It is a challenge for you to participate in God's movement of multiplication, to take the story of the *seven churches* to the next level.

# #1

## THE SEVEN CHURCHES —AND HOW THEY BEGAN!

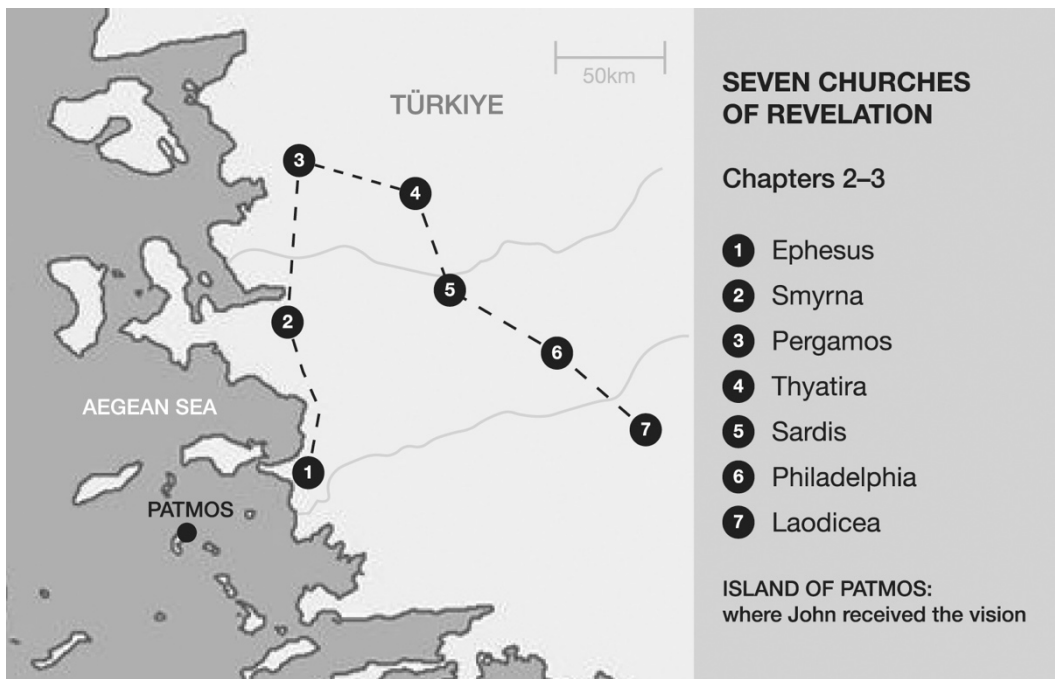
We learn of the *seven churches* in the Apocalypse (Revelation 1:11) They were planted in the mid-first century in seven cities in the Roman province of Asia, in Türkiye today.<sup>1</sup> Türkiye is a vast country straddling Asia and Europe, with a rich biblical history:

- The mountains of Ararat—on which Noah’s ark landed—form its eastern border.
- Near the southern border with Syria is Haran, where Abraham’s father was buried.
- The ruins of Hattusa, capital of the Hittite Empire, lie east of Türkiye’s capital, modern Ankara today, and near Boğazkale.
- Cappadocia, of Acts 2 and addressed in 1 Peter, became a major Christian centre.

With its complex of ancient and Roman roads passing through, connecting Europe with Asia and Africa, this country was central to the early spread of Christianity to the Gentiles:

- Paul’s hometown Tarsus was in Türkiye, and he spent 10 years planting churches in Cilicia.
- Antioch (Antakya today) was the sending mission hub for Paul’s three missionary journeys.

Two of these missionary journeys were made to regions in Türkiye, Galatia and Asia Minor; with Paul also working in the major coastal areas of Pamphylia. During his third journey he was based in Ephesus, with the *seven churches* planted between AD 52 and 55.



Four of Paul’s letters were sent to believers in Türkiye—to the Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, and to Philemon; and John’s Gospel and final letters, including Revelation, were also addressed to believers in Türkiye. And it is thought the apostle John died and was buried at Ephesus.

<sup>1</sup> Since June 2022 Türkiye has been the official name for the country previously called Turkey.

With this rich biblical and Christian heritage—and the knowledge that Christian faith had such a widespread impact across the Eastern Roman Empire during the ensuing centuries—it is distressing to find that only 0.2% of Türkiye’s population of 85 million today belong to any Christian denomination. Most of these are Orthodox and Roman Catholic, with may be less than 10,000 Protestants—and only a very few evangelicals. Most Turks today are Muslims, and their sacred writings the Koran (Quran).<sup>2</sup> However, many lessons are gained by going back to the original story of the planting of the Christian church in this eastern region.

## How did it begin?

***It began with Jesus’ life, teachings, and commission!*** Jesus came into this world to establish the kingdom of God, calling people into fellowship with Him. This was a radically counterintuitive move. By His life, death and resurrection Jesus defeated the evil one, breaking the power of sin and death for us. His righteous life is ours as a gift, His death the penalty for our sin—so that in Him we stand before God as if we have never sinned!

Jesus Christ was pronounced dead on Friday but alive on Sunday morning, and at the right hand of the Most Holy God on Pentecost day. When this good news message was proclaimed in Jerusalem the city was turned upside down. Within weeks the Jewish leaders accused the apostles Peter and John of filling the city with this message—that Jesus was physically alive.

And it was true! By then some 5,000 men plus women and children were believers (Acts 4:4). Perhaps 15,000+ of the total population of 20–25,000 in the old walled city of Jerusalem had become believers, with maybe 800 to 1,000 *households of faith*.

Tensions ran high. The religious establishment was furious. And with the martyrdom of Stephan violent persecution erupted, fostered by Saul of Tarsus. Many of Jesus’ followers fled to Antioch (Antakya today) in south-eastern Türkiye, where the roads from Africa met the Silk Road that stretched from the Orient to Europe.

In the cosmopolitan multicultural mix of that third largest city (in size and importance) in the Roman Empire (after Rome and Alexandria), Gentiles as well as Jews became believers. When word reached the Jerusalem apostles that people of diverse cultures and ethnicities were becoming believers in the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection, they sent Barnabas—a Jewish believer in Jesus, but also a citizen of Cyprus—to investigate. He encouraged (which is what his name meant!) this multi-cultural movement, and the numbers of believers multiplied (Acts 11:19-24).

Meanwhile Saul of Tarsus had also had his eyes opened, by Jesus Christ Himself. With this encounter on the road to Damascus, his life took a radical U-turn. He had been on a mission to eradicate the followers of Jesus, but he entered the city proclaiming Him!

Then, following three years in the Arabian desert and a further ten in his home province of Cilicia proclaiming the risen Christ—with a brief visit to Jerusalem between—Saul was called to Antioch to support Barnabas in sharing the gospel with the Jews and Gentiles of the city.

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<sup>2</sup> *Religion in Turkey*, “Islam is the largest religion in Turkey” with 99.8% registered Muslim, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion\\_in\\_Turkey#:~:text=As%20much%20as%2090%25%20of,officially%20recognised%20religions%20like%20Judaism.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Turkey#:~:text=As%20much%20as%2090%25%20of,officially%20recognised%20religions%20like%20Judaism.)

A year of shared ministry multiplied leaders and prophets among the growing communities of believers in Antioch, and then while they were fasting and praying, “the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them’” (Acts 13:2 NIV). They had equipped prophets and teachers, and it was time to move on! This is a key movement principle. Leaders equip—and leave, before becoming embedded and entitled (Acts 13:1-4)!

### *Teams, Ethne, Oikos and mission hubs.*

The twelve apostles were chosen by Jesus in Galilee, then equipped and sent to multiply what He had started. Calvary and Pentecost redefined His kingdom movement, and the apostle Paul—chosen to pioneer God’s mission to Gentile nations—patterned his service on that of Jesus’ life, teachings and commission.

Jesus formed His *teams from the harvest*—and taught His followers to do the same. He sent them out “two by two”; and in His church, the basic unit would be the “two or three gathered in (His) name”—representing the Triune community (Luke 10:1-9; Matthew 18:15-20).

He commissioned His followers to make disciples in all *ethne* or *relational streams* (Matthew 28:16-20); worked from *households* in Capernaum and Bethany; and from those centres reached into the regions of Judea, Samaria, Galilee, Decapolis, Gaulanitis, Phoenicia, and Perea.

These became key movement principles for the apostles following Jesus’ methods:

- Equipping their *teams* and leaders *from the harvest*.
- Multiplying disciples in their *ethne* or *relational streams*.
- Planting multiplying *households of faith* in the *oikos*, the basic units of society.
- Cultivating movements through multiplying *mission hubs*.

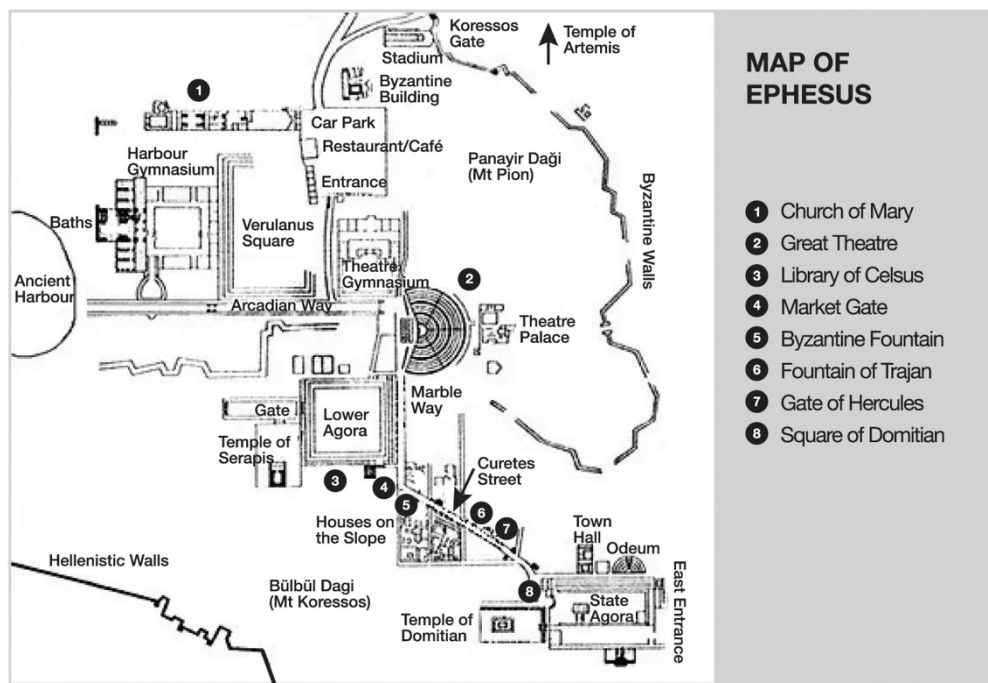
These were the principles that framed the mission journeys of Saul, “also known as Paul” (Acts 13:9). In recounting the story of Paul’s journeys, Luke seems to frame his reports around these principles. In each Luke writes of the **teams being formed from the harvest**, then:

- On Journey 1—Paul and Barnabas multiplied disciples in *relational streams*. They first went to Cyprus, the home territory of Barnabas. In the capital of Paphos the governor Sergius Paulus became a believer, and then the team left for Pisidian Antioch in Central Anatolia—the hometown of Sergius Paulus.
- On Journey 2—Luke joined Paul’s team, and his report is filled with multiplying church plants, all *households of faith*. The word *oikos*—household, family, and house—is repeated (Acts 16:15, 31-34; 17:5-7; 18:7, 8). Some of these churches were led by women, some by couples, and some by men. By planting into homes with the natural leaders of each *oikos*, the movement multiplied.
- On Journey 3—Paul planted the Ephesus church as a **mission hub**. Bringing together all four movement principles—choosing *teams* from the harvest, following *relational* connections, and multiplying *households of faith*—the impact of the Ephesus *mission hub* was exciting.

It resulted in “all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia” hearing “the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:10 NIV). And “the word of the Lord continued to **increase** and **prevail** mightily” (Acts 19:20 ESV)—in the towns and cities, and across the regions. This was no doubt when the *seven churches* of Revelation were planted—Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea (Revelation 1:11).

## Planting in Ephesus—the *mission hub*

Ephesus was already ten centuries old by Paul's time—the most important city in the Roman province of Asia, with a strategic harbor located near the mouth of the Cayster River and at the junction of several key trading routes on the main road from Rome to the Orient and Africa. One of the great cities of the Empire,<sup>3</sup> it was famous for its banking associations and temples. Its great temple of Artemis or Diana, constructed from marble, was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.<sup>4</sup>



Today the harbour is silted up, the temple of Artemis is but a few scattered stones—and this once affluent city that boasted a population of about 300,000 people in the second century AD, lies in ruins.

Thousands of tourists now visit the site each day:

- They are told of Domitian's persecutions, and the role of the Odeon.
- They view Trajan's Fountain and marvel at the luxury of the Apartment Houses.
- At the ruins of Hadrian's Temple, they are reminded of his command to rebuild Jerusalem in AD 135.
- And at the Library of Celsus, they pause for a picture!

However, few tourists are fully aware of who the apostle Paul was, or of his impact in this city in the mid-first century. He was there before the reign of Domitian (AD 81-96) or Trajan (AD 98-117), and before the Celsus Library was built in Ephesus (AD 114-117).

Tour groups are taken into the Great Theatre—a huge semicircular theatre on the western slopes of Mount Pion which could have seated 24,500 people. This was most likely the scene of the riot against the apostle Paul's preaching in the city recorded in Acts 19:23-41.

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3 See <https://www.thecollector.com/greatest-ancient-roman-cities/>.

4 This temple lies in total ruin, but important discoveries have been made at the site, including ancient coins and an ivory amulet with gold caps fastened with golden studs. See also [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G\\_1917-0601-1048](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1917-0601-1048) and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temple\\_of\\_Artemis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temple_of_Artemis).



Paul visited Ephesus for a short time at the end of his second missionary journey, possibly in early AD 52, leaving Aquila and Priscilla there to prepare for his return later that year—after 6-9 months visiting Caesarea Maritima, Jerusalem, and Antioch; and after the winter snows had melted on the high mountains of central Anatolia (Acts 18:19-21; 19:1). His third journey stay, when the *mission hub* was planted in Ephesus was in AD 52-55.<sup>5</sup>

**Preparation and team.** Paul had wanted to work in this city earlier, but “the Holy Spirit had prevented” that (Acts 16:6). Did the apostle still need more experience in multiplying *households of faith*—before establishing and multiplying from a *mission hub*? Was it important to meet Lydia in Philippi, who was from Thyatira—one of the cities of the future *seven churches*? Would his work in Corinth provide the ideal team in Aquila and Priscilla, to return to Ephesus with him to prepare for the planting of the *mission hub*? We do not know, but it is never wise to rush with our agendas.

Read and reflect on:

- Paul’s preparation for planting this mission hub—Acts 18:18-23

Insights: \_\_\_\_\_

- His equipping a Spirit-filled team from the harvest—Acts 19:1-10

Insights: \_\_\_\_\_

- And the dramatic impact of the Spirit’s anointing and miracles—Acts 19:11-20

Insights: \_\_\_\_\_

**Equipping—the twelve and others.** From the Ephesus *mission hub*, the whole Roman province of Asia was reached with the gospel in just two years (Acts 19:10). When Paul arrived in Ephesus, he “found several believers ... about twelve men in all” (Acts 19:1, 7). He started with them.

Who were they? Had they been instructed and baptised by Priscilla and Aquila? Perhaps not, for they had not even heard of the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:2). Had they been baptised by Apollos? Or were they at the Jordan some 25 years before when John the Baptist was baptizing—but left to return to Ephesus before Jesus was baptized, anointed by the Spirit, and introduced by John the Baptist?

Were the “twelve” the same “disciples” that Paul left the synagogue with, after “three months arguing persuasively about the Kingdom of God” (Acts 19:1 NIV: 19:8)? Those who left with Paul could certainly have included the “twelve,” but is there a suggestion that more joined? “Some” in the synagogue “became obstinate,” suggesting that perhaps there were others than the “twelve” who did not reject his message (Acts 19:8-10). They may have included the “twelve,” but maybe others as well!

**Paul “held daily discussions at the lecture hall of Tyrannus”!** There were no church buildings, institutions or headquarters offices, and Paul did not establish a mission station, but he was able to use a school or lecture room—perhaps during siesta times. As a result of discussions and equipping in that

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<sup>5</sup> John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, Inter-Varsity, 1990, pages 19-20, dates Paul’s second journey as in AD 50-52 and his third to AD 52-55. The proconsul of Corinth, Junius Gallio, dismissed the charges of Jews against Paul (Acts 18:12-17). He was proconsul in AD 51 <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Junius-Gallio>, and the apostle stayed on in Corinth after this (Acts 18:18), leaving in AD 52 and taking Priscilla and Aquila to Ephesus (Acts 18:18-22).

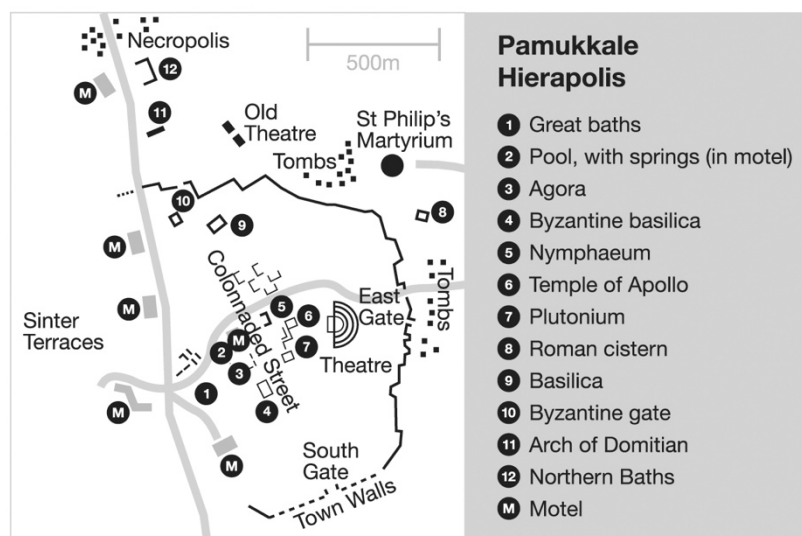
room, within two years all “throughout the province of Asia—both Jews and Greeks—heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:10).

Some see the “twelve” as the ones who were equipped and sent out to multiply disciples and plant churches across the Roman province of Asia, and they were no doubt involved. However, in his letter to the Colossians Paul names other key people connected to the church plants in the Lycus River valley—Tychicus, Onesimus and Epaphras (who were both “one of you”!), as well as Nympha and Archippus (Col. 4:7-18). Paul indicates these were not Jews, and therefore not of the “twelve” (Col. 4:11).

We can imagine that as he met the gentiles of Ephesus, together with those visiting the city for business or temple celebrations and sacrifices, that he shared the gospel, led them to Jesus, and invited them to the lecture rooms of Tyrannus for further discussions—and to equip them as disciple-makers and church-planters.

### From the *mission hub*—to the Lycus Valley

In his reports Luke says nothing of satellite churches or the *seven churches*, but simply that “all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:10 NIV)—and that this “word ... continued to increase and prevail mightily” (Acts 19:20 ESV).



However, in his letter to Colossi, Paul named several churches in the Lycus River valley. There is no record of him visiting them, but his letter implies Epaphras founded the churches in Colossi, Laodicea, and Hierapolis (Colossians 1:7-8; 4:12-13)—most likely from the *mission hub* in Ephesus.

**Hierapolis** or the “sacred city,” was believed by the ancients to have been founded by the god Apollo. It is famous for its hot springs and its vapours associated with Pluto and the underworld. The city had a significant Jewish community and was mentioned by Paul in his letter to Colossians (just the once in scripture), where he wrote that Epaphras “has worked hard for (believers in this city) and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis” (Colossians 4:12-13). Epaphras probably planted the Christian community in Hierapolis. Ancient tradition suggests Philip—either the apostle or the evangelist—may have been martyred here close to Pamukkale.

**Pamukkale** is the site of thermal water running off the plateau edge of the Lycus River valley, leaving beautiful unique formations from which Pamukkale or “cotton castle” gets its name. These thermal

springs which fed **Laodicea** across the valley with lukewarm water, have been a tourist attraction since Roman times.

### Paul's Final Instructions to the Lycus Valley Churches—Colossians 4:7-18

<sup>7</sup> “Tychicus will give you a full report about how I am getting along. He is a beloved brother and faithful helper who serves with me in the Lord’s work. <sup>8</sup> I have sent him to you for this very purpose—to let you know how we are doing and to encourage you. <sup>9</sup> I am also sending Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, one of your own people. He and Tychicus will tell you everything that’s happening here.

<sup>10</sup> “Aristarchus, who is in prison with me, sends you his greetings, and so does Mark, Barnabas’s cousin. As you were instructed before, make Mark welcome if he comes your way. <sup>11</sup> Jesus (the one we call Justus) also sends his greetings. These are the only Jewish believers among my co-workers; they are working with me here for the Kingdom of God. And what a comfort they have been!

<sup>12</sup> “Epaphras, a member of your own fellowship and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends you his greetings. He always prays earnestly for you, asking God to make you strong and perfect, fully confident that you are following the whole will of God. <sup>13</sup> I can assure you that he prays hard for you and also for the believers in **Laodicea** and **Hierapolis**.

<sup>14</sup> “Luke, the beloved doctor, sends his greetings, and so does Demas. <sup>15</sup> Please give my greetings to our brothers and sisters at Laodicea, and **to Nympha and the church that meets in her house**.

<sup>16</sup> “After you (at **Colossi**) have read this letter, pass it on to the church at Laodicea so they can read it, too. And you should read the letter I wrote to them.

<sup>17</sup> “And say to **Archippus**, “Be sure to carry out the ministry the Lord gave you.”

**And Paul sent greetings to Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus** in Colossi, and to “the church that meets in your house” (Philemon 1:1, 2 NLT).

### Identifying the four movement principles in the satellite churches!

Re-read these letters, and identify the impact of the movement principles used by the apostle in planting from the mission hub in Ephesus:

1. Teams from the harvest. \_\_\_\_\_
2. Following *relational streams*. \_\_\_\_\_
3. Planting *households of faith*. \_\_\_\_\_
4. Cultivating a multiplying *mission hub*. \_\_\_\_\_

These churches were part of the cluster around Laodicea, the seventh of the *seven churches*. Planted in the mid-first century (AD 52-55), they received the apocalyptic missionary messages from Jesus (in Revelation) about AD 96, forty years later. By that time these churches were being overwhelmed by the issues that threaten all faith movements as they transition from the founding believers to the next generations.

The letters from Jesus, and in fact the whole message of the Apocalypse, provides us with Sequel One of the *seven churches*!

## #2

# JESUS' LETTERS: SEQUEL ONE TAKING THE STORY TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Forty years after the Ephesus church was planted as a *mission hub*, the *seven churches* received the *Apocalypse* from the old apostle John in exile on Patmos. Boats travelling from there to the mainland province of Asia would have arrived first at Ephesus.

Imagine the excitement when the *Revelation of Jesus Christ* was received. Imagine the intense interest as it was read to them—its graphic biblical and cultural symbols familiar and understood by them. Its message was not secret or hidden, to be interpreted later through news reports or history. It addressed their life issues.

### **Their world had changed!**

It was 65 years since the events of Calvary and Pentecost, and 40 years since the gospel had been shared in their cities with their churches planted:

- They had not seen Jesus in the flesh, nor witnessed His death and resurrection—but He was alive and real, close to them and understood their situation and life issues.
- By this time many (if not all!) in those churches could not recall meeting the apostle Paul—executed in Emperor Nero's time—and other than for John, they had not met the apostles!
- They could not go to Jerusalem to see where Jesus was crucified and sit beside the empty tomb or walk the streets of the city to reflect upon the historic realities of Calvary and Pentecost—for Jerusalem was simply a heap of rubble! In the year 70—just over 15 years after their churches had been planted, and 25 years before receiving this *Revelation of Jesus Christ*—Jerusalem had been overthrown, with the Temple destroyed. The Roman armies and emperors had sought to obliterate all memory of the city—and of the Jews and Christians!

These believers, now living two and three generations since their churches were first planted could not return to the place where Christian faith began. There was no *mother church* or elders in Jerusalem to encourage them. They could not visit the apostles or talk face-to-face with Jesus. They were second and third generation believers.

### **But Jesus had a special message for them!**

Each message ended with the admonition, “Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches” (Revelation 2:7). Was this a profound reminder of God's call to engage in mission?

Almost half a century had passed since the time when “the prophets and teachers of the church in Antioch of Syria,” with Barnabas and Paul, “were worshipping the Lord and fasting” when “the Spirit said, ‘Dedicate Barnabas and Saul (Paul) for the special work to which I have called them.’” And “after more fasting and prayer” hands were laid on them, and they “were sent out by the Holy Spirit” (Acts 13:2-4).

Was Jesus now saying: the same Holy Spirit who launched the missionary journeys that birthed the *seven churches* is calling you to re-engage in mission—and, will speak again?

## 1. EPHESUS

Prevented from coming earlier (Acts 16:6), Paul arrived on his third major missionary journey from the *mission hub* church of Antioch—to plant another *mission hub* in Ephesus. Now 40 years later Jesus had a message for this church.

### Jesus' Message to the Church in Ephesus—Revelation 2:1-7

<sup>1</sup> “Write this letter to the angel of the church in Ephesus. This is the message from the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand, the one who walks among the seven gold lampstands:

<sup>2</sup> “I know all the things you do. I have seen your hard work and your patient endurance. I know you don’t tolerate evil people. You have examined the claims of those who say they are apostles but are not. You have discovered they are liars. <sup>3</sup> You have patiently suffered for me without quitting.

<sup>4</sup> “But I have this complaint against you. You don’t love me or each other as you did at first!

<sup>5</sup> Look how far you have fallen! Turn back to me and do the works you did at first. If you don’t repent, I will come and remove your lampstand from its place among the churches. <sup>6</sup> But this is in your favor: You hate the evil deeds of the Nicolaitans, just as I do.

<sup>7</sup> “Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches. To everyone who is victorious I will give fruit from the tree of life in the paradise of God.”

### Increase and prevail—in multiplying *mission-hubs*.

1. What indicators are there in this letter that the Ephesus church was struggling with second or third generation issues—perhaps growing weary or disillusioned?

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2. How was Jesus’ introduction of Himself to the Ephesians relevant to them as next generation believers?

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3. What encouragement is there in Jesus’ message for a *mission hub* church to re-energise its commitment to multiplying missional communities?

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## 2. SMYRNA

This is Izmir today. It was first founded close to the impressive harbor but destroyed by the Lydians over 500 years before Paul’s time. Alexander the Great ordered its rebuilding on Mount Pagos, around which the modern city sprawls today. It grew to be a rich coastal town, in 133 BC becoming part of the Roman Province of Asia and a major supporter of the emperor cult.

Believers in this city suffered severe persecution for they refused to worship any other than their Creator and Saviour. Polycarp, an Apostolic Church Father and local elder who knew the apostle John, was burnt at the stake near the city stadium for his faithfulness to Jesus. The city ruins from John’s

times are on the slopes of Mount Pagos, where Polycarp was martyred. In Revelation, Jesus had special messages of encouragement for the believers in this city.

### **Jesus' Message to the Church in Smyrna—Revelation 2:8-11**

<sup>8</sup> “Write this letter to the angel of the church in Smyrna. This is the message from the one who is the First and the Last, who was dead but is now alive:

<sup>9</sup> “I know about your suffering and your poverty—but you are rich! I know the blasphemy of those opposing you. They say they are Jews, but they are not, because their synagogue belongs to Satan. <sup>10</sup> Don’t be afraid of what you are about to suffer. The devil will throw some of you into prison to test you. You will suffer for ten days. But if you remain faithful even when facing death, I will give you the crown of life.

<sup>11</sup> “Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches. Whoever is victorious will not be harmed by the second death.”

### **Increase and prevail—in faithfulness to Jesus.**

Jesus reminded believers in Smyrna that He had suffered and died for them, but He was now alive! In the face of severe persecution, He urged them to prevail, encouraging them: “Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Revelation 2:10 NIV).

1. How would you describe prevailing faith for your context?

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2. How or why does prevailing faith—faithfulness and obedience to Jesus’ kingdom agenda as seen in His life, teachings, and commission—multiply disciples, churches, and ministries?

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## **3. PERGAMUM**

The city of Bergama lies in the Caicus River valley 106 km from Izmir and 25-30 km inland. Behind it rises the 330 metres high acropolis of Pergamum—with its temples, theatres, library, and homes dating back to the Hellenist period. It became the centre of a large city-state kingdom in the third century BC that retained its political and cultural status into the Byzantine period, the time of the Eastern Roman Empire and the dominance of Eastern Christianity.

In the late nineteenth century, the ruins of Pergamum were excavated by the German archaeologist Carl Humann. It was an affluent and influential city, boasting the altar of the Temple of Zeus now in the Pergamum Museum in East Berlin; many temples—of Athena, Trajan, Dionysius, and other cults; and the steepest theatre ever discovered—with 78 rows of seats, on the southwest slopes.

Pergamum was a major political, cultural, and educational centre. Parchment was developed and the city boasted of the Pergamene Library with its 200,000 scrolls, vying in size with Egypt’s Alexandrian Library. On the plains below was the Asklepion, the place of healing, constructed in the 4th century BC. Asclepius was worshipped in cultic centres around the Greek and Roman world, with the symbol of healing a snake-figure on a column.

One of the *seven churches* was planted in homes among the massive temples and civic buildings of this city. The Revelation was sent to these believers, with a special message warning of the influences about them. Jesus declared, “I know that you live in the city where Satan has his throne” (Revelation 2:13).

### Jesus’ Message to the Church in Pergamum—Revelation 2:12-17



<sup>12</sup> “Write this letter to the angel of the church in Pergamum. This is the message from the one with the sharp two-edged sword:

<sup>13</sup> “I know that you live in the city where Satan has his throne, yet you have remained loyal to me. You refused to deny me even when Antipas, my faithful witness, was martyred among you there in Satan’s city.

<sup>14</sup> “But I have a few complaints against you. You tolerate some among you whose teaching is like that of Balaam, who showed Balak how to trip up the people of Israel. He taught them to sin by eating food offered to idols and by committing sexual sin. <sup>15</sup> In a similar way, you have some Nicolaitans among you who follow the same teaching.

<sup>16</sup> Repent of your sin, or I will come to you suddenly and fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

<sup>17</sup> “Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches. To everyone who is victorious I will give some of the manna that has been hidden away in heaven. And I will give to each one a white stone, and on the stone will be engraved a new name that no one understands except the one who receives it.

### Increase and prevail—in reliance on the Word!

While believers in Smyrna were urged to prevail by remaining faithful to Jesus, believers in Pergamum were urged to prevail in their reliance on God’s Word.

1. What is the significance of Jesus introducing Himself as “one with the sharp two-edged sword,” as a weapon in a city “where Satan has his throne”?
- 

2. The Ephesus church had lost its first love and devotion to Christ and each other. What might indicate the Pergamum church was also struggling with second and third generation issues?
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3. **Holy Spirit P.O.W.E.R** is the foundation Jesus established for His disciple-making and movement-building—reliance on the **Holy Spirit, Prayer, Obedience** to the Father’s kingdom agenda, **Word** dependence, **Exalting** the Father, and **Relationships** intentionally cultivated.<sup>6</sup>

What is the significance of **Holy Spirit P.O.W.E.R** for churches and ministries facing spiritual challenges and warfare as endured by believers in Pergamum?

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## 4. THYATIRA

Modern Akhisar is the site of the old city of Thyatira. Very little now remains of this city once famous for its trade with pottery items, woollen and linen goods, and leather and copper products. Today there is just one block of ruins near the city centre. One of Paul's first converts at Philippi (in Macedonia, Europe) was Lydia, a merchant and seller of purple cloth from this city (Acts 16:9-40). Paul may have visited here when the seven churches were planted (Acts 19:10).

The Revelation was sent by John to the members of the Christian church in Thyatira. They were solemnly warned of coming judgements on members who followed pagan beliefs and practices (Revelation 2:20-23).

### Jesus’ Message to the Church in Thyatira—Revelation 2:18-29

<sup>18</sup> “Write this letter to the angel of the church in Thyatira. This is the message from the Son of God, whose eyes are like flames of fire, whose feet are like polished bronze:

<sup>19</sup> “I know all the things you do. I have seen your love, your faith, your service, and your patient endurance. And I can see your constant improvement in all these things.

<sup>20</sup> “But I have this complaint against you. You are permitting that woman—that Jezebel who calls herself a prophet—to lead my servants astray. She teaches them to commit sexual sin and to eat food offered to idols. <sup>21</sup> I gave her time to repent, but she does not want to turn away from her immorality.

<sup>22</sup> “Therefore, I will throw her on a bed of suffering<sup>[6]</sup> and those who commit adultery with her will suffer greatly unless they repent and turn away from her evil deeds. <sup>23</sup> I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am the one who searches out the thoughts and intentions of every person. And I will give to each of you whatever you deserve.

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<sup>6</sup> Acronym from Shift m2M, [www.movementbuilders.org.au](http://www.movementbuilders.org.au), used with permission from Moody Press and Dann Spader in their “Walk Like Jesus” study (2011).



<sup>24</sup> “But I also have a message for the rest of you in Thyatira who have not followed this false teaching (‘deeper truths,’ as they call them—depths of Satan, actually). I will ask nothing more of you <sup>25</sup> except that you hold tightly to what you have until I come. <sup>26</sup> To all who are victorious, who obey me to the very end,

To them I will give authority over all the nations.

<sup>27</sup> They will rule the nations with an iron rod and smash them like clay pots.

<sup>28</sup> They will have the same authority I received from my Father, and I will also give them the morning star!

<sup>29</sup> “Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches.”

### **Increase and prevail—in leadership.**

1. What dangers did the believers in Thyatira face?

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2. It was a mixed bag—Jesus complimented the church, but also had complaints. What do you think was happening in this church?

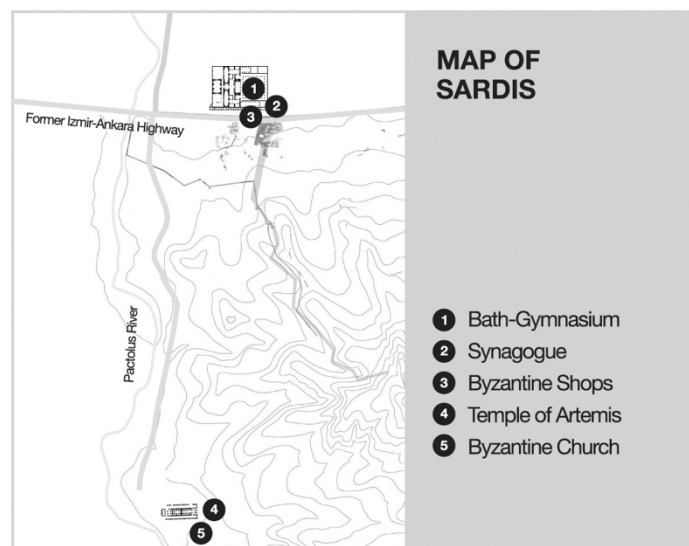
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3. What were they to “hold tightly”—and how important is perseverance?

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## **5. SARDIS**

Sardis (modern Sart) was the capital of the Lydian kingdom in the seventh century BC. The city was on the slopes of Mount Tmolus, 60 km south from Philadelphia or Alaşehir today.



At the site behind the modern village of Sart are the remains of a fourth century BC temple of Artemis that was never completed—with two massive 22 metre columns. If the building of this temple had not

been interrupted with earthquakes, it would have vied in size with the temple of Ephesus—one of the wonders of the world.

At a larger site near the highway, are the impressive remains of the Stadium, other civil buildings, as well as a large synagogue dating from the late Roman period—the fourth to fifth centuries AD.

A Christian church was planted in this wealthy religious and political city in the first century. In Revelation the believers there were urged to “wake up” to their backsliding and the spiritual opportunities that were theirs (Revelation 3:3).

### **Jesus’ Message to the Church in Sardis—Revelation 3:1-6**

<sup>1</sup> “Write this letter to the angel of the church in Sardis. This is the message from the one who has the sevenfold Spirit of God and the seven stars:

“I know all the things you do, and that you have a reputation for being alive—but you are dead. <sup>2</sup> Wake up! Strengthen what little remains, for even what is left is almost dead. I find that your actions do not meet the requirements of my God. <sup>3</sup> Go back to what you heard and believed at first; hold to it firmly. Repent and turn to me again. If you don’t wake up, I will come to you suddenly, as unexpected as a thief.

<sup>4</sup> “Yet there are some in the church in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes with evil. They will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. <sup>5</sup> All who are victorious will be clothed in white. I will never erase their names from the Book of Life, but I will announce before my Father and his angels that they are mine.

<sup>6</sup> “Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches.”

### **Increase and prevail—in listening to the Spirit!**

All letters to the seven churches conclude with the appeal, “Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches.” In the life, teachings, and commission of Jesus—as in the Revelation and all the records of Scripture—we have His inspired instruction with the principles for multiplying movements.

1. What specific movement principle is enunciated by this command to “listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches”?
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## **6. PHILADELPHIA**

Philadelphia was situated in a very fertile area where grains, olives and grapes are grown today. A few sections of the ancient city wall among the homes and gardens of Alaşehir are the only remains to be found today. Founded in 189 BC by King Eumenes II of Pergamum, it was apparently a very beautiful city, sometimes referred to as "little Athens." In Revelation Jesus Christ highly commended the Philadelphian Christians for their faith.

### **Jesus’ Message to the Church in Philadelphia—Revelation 3:7-14**

<sup>7</sup> “Write this letter to the angel of the church in Philadelphia.

This is the message from the one who is holy and true, the one who has the key of David.

What he opens, no one can close; and what he closes, no one can open:

<sup>8</sup> “I know all the things you do, and I have opened a door for you that no one can close. You have little strength, yet you obeyed my word and did not deny me. <sup>9</sup> Look, I will force those who belong to Satan’s synagogue—those liars who say they are Jews but are not—to come and bow down at your feet. They will acknowledge that you are the ones I love.

<sup>10</sup> “Because you have obeyed my command to persevere, I will protect you from the great time of testing that will come upon the whole world to test those who belong to this world. <sup>11</sup> I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take away your crown. <sup>12</sup> All who are victorious will become pillars in the Temple of my God, and they will never have to leave it. And I will write on them the name of my God, and they will be citizens in the city of my God—the new Jerusalem that comes down from heaven from my God. And I will also write on them my new name.

<sup>13</sup> “Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches.”

### **Increase and prevail—with encouragement.**

Jesus’ letter to believers in Philadelphia held no message of rebuke, just words of encouragement. Reflect on the role Barnabas played in the life of the Antioch mission hub. His name meant “son of encouragement” (see Acts 4:36, 37; 11:19-30). Encouragement is the *Barnabas factor*—essential for multiplying movements.

1. What words of encouragement did Jesus have for believers in Philadelphia?

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2. How could the *Barnabas factor* (encouragement) be cultivated by leaders in faith movements—and why is encouragement so vital to multiplying movements?

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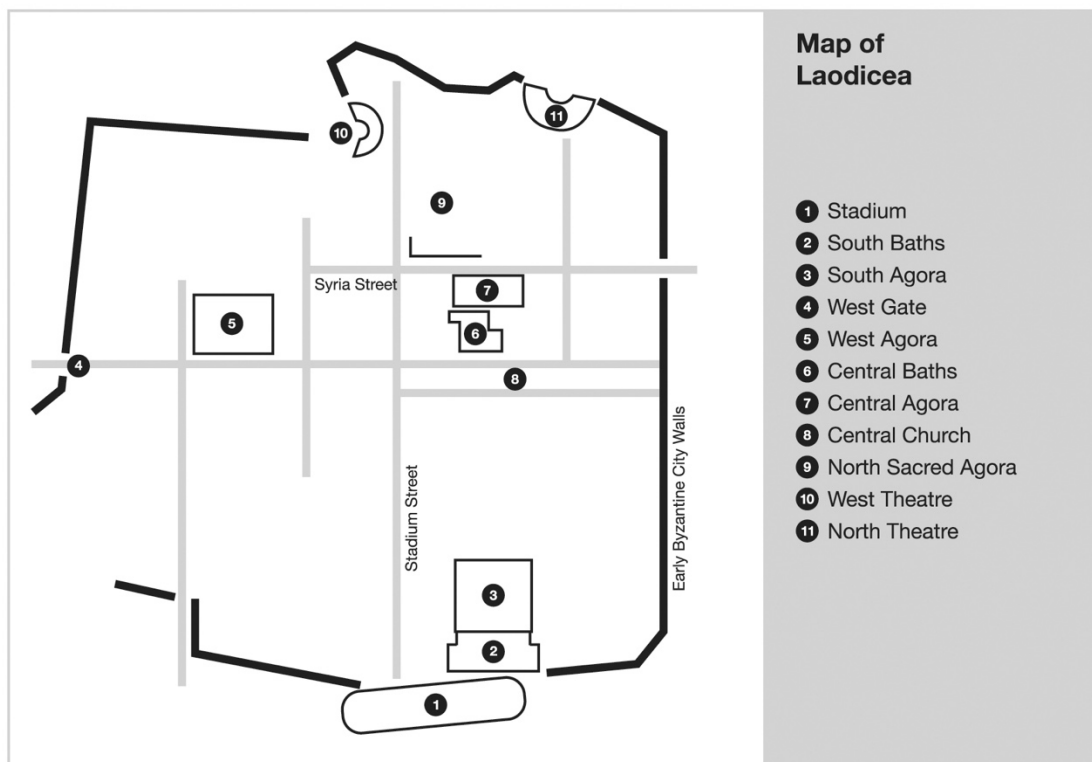
## **7. LAODICEA**

After the city of Laodicea was destroyed by the Turks in the thirteenth century the ruins served as a quarry for the modern city of Denizli. It seemed little was left, however, the spade of the archaeologist has revealed that in the first century the Laodiceans were rich and self-sufficient.

When their city was destroyed by an earthquake in AD 60—less than a decade after the churches were planted in the valley, they refused Roman help and rebuilt the city from their own resources.

Extensive excavations have been carried out in recent years and we can now walk along Stadium Street viewing:

- Residential areas.
- Ancient temples, monumental fountains, and agora.
- The restored west theatre, and the north theatre.
- The earthenware pipes in the streets that were used to bring water to the city from the hot thermal springs of Pamukkale seen across the Lycus Valley.



This city was famous for its production of glossy black wool, black garments, and medicinal powder. A Christian church was planted in this wealthy city in the mid-first century, and Revelation was sent to the believers there with a special message to meet their spiritual needs.

### Jesus' Message to the Church in Laodicea—Revelation 3:14-22

<sup>14</sup> “Write this letter to the angel of the church in Laodicea. This is the message from the one who is the Amen—the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s new creation:

<sup>15</sup> “I know all the things you do, that you are neither hot nor cold. I wish that you were one or the other! <sup>16</sup> But since you are like lukewarm water, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth! <sup>17</sup> You say, ‘I am rich. I have everything I want. I don’t need a thing!’ And you don’t realize that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked. <sup>18</sup> So I advise you to buy gold from me—gold that has been purified by fire. Then you will be rich. Also buy white garments from me so you will not be shamed by your nakedness, and ointment for your eyes so you will be able to see. <sup>19</sup> I correct and discipline everyone I love. So be diligent and turn from your indifference.

<sup>20</sup> “Look! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal together as friends. <sup>21</sup> Those who are victorious will sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat with my Father on his throne.

<sup>22</sup> “Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying to the churches.”

### Increase and prevail—with passionate spirituality and mission engagement.

Jesus expressed serious concern about the spiritual condition of the believers in Laodicea. They were *lukewarm* towards Him, a metaphor well understood by them. Their city water came from the hot springs of Pamukkale, about eight kilometres across the valley, and by the time it reached Laodicea it was insipid, lukewarm, and sickly—apparently an apt description of the church’s spiritual condition.

1. What is the impact of **lukewarmness** upon a movement?

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2. By contrast, how can **passionate spirituality** be cultivated—and how would this facilitate the multiplication of movements?

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### **Jesus took the story to the next level!**

The original story was of the planting and witness of the *seven churches*, “so that people throughout the province of Asia—both Jews and Greeks—heard the word of the Lord” (Acts 19:10). Then, forty years later we have Sequel One—the letters of Revelation chapters 2 and 3, and the message of the whole of Book—in which Jesus took that story to the next level. He encouraged, gave guidance and counsel, and issued dire warnings to churches transitioning into their second and third generations. The next phase of the story, Sequel Two, provides us with a critical view of the journey these churches took over the ensuing centuries!

## #3

# A CRITICAL OVERLAY: SEQUEL TWO A LITTLE HISTORY OF THE SEVEN CHURCHES

The letters to the *seven churches* and a survey of the remains of those cities today, reveals the deeply cultic nature of the Roman Empire. With the Greco-Roman world so deeply religious early Christians were despised as atheists for refusing to worship and sacrifice to pagan gods—especially the imperial cult of the Empire, as expected of all good citizens! It took enormous courage to follow Jesus Christ; to declare openly that they worshipped One who had been crucified on a Roman cross, but who was now alive!

The forty years between the planting of the *seven churches* by Paul from the Ephesus *mission hub*, and their receiving the letters of Revelation of Jesus from John, were extremely difficult. Under Emperor Nero (AD 54-68) persecution, which had been mostly localized until then, became widespread and systematic. Paul was in Ephesus when Nero became emperor and was executed in Rome under Nero's rule in 63 or 64. Domitian, who was deeply paranoid and ruthless was emperor from AD 81 to 96, and no doubt responsible for John's exile on Patmos.

Of the four Apostolic Fathers, two were from the *seven churches*. Polycarp (69–155) was a young man of 26 or 27 years when Revelation was sent to his church at Smyrna. He was a disciple of the apostle John, a faithful leader in the Smyrna church, and was burnt as a martyr about 155 when the townspeople demanded his execution for being a Christian.

Another was Papias from Hierapolis, near the hot springs in the Lycus Valley where a sister church of Laodicea was planted when Paul was in Ephesus (see Colossians 4:12, 13; Acts 19:1-10).<sup>7</sup> Described as “a hearer of John and a companion of Polycarp,” the historian Eusebius adds that he was the elder of the Hierapolis church around the time Ignatius was the elder of Antioch—a third Apostolic Father, who was executed in Rome.<sup>8</sup>

While several Roman emperors were intent on destroying the Christian movement, Christians continued to multiply and by the early-fourth century Christianity was rapidly becoming a majority religion in the Empire. Sociologist Rodney Stark suggests over 56% of the estimated 60 million people in the Roman Empire were Christians by the middle of that century.<sup>9</sup> It was therefore expedient for Emperor Constantine, as he gained power, to use their numbers to his political advantage. So, rather than persecuting them he signed the Treaty of Tolerance in 313, giving all religions—including Christians—freedom and protection.

When he became sole emperor in 324, he moved the capital of the Empire to Byzantium, renaming it New Rome—and then Constantinople in 330 when it was dedicated to him. Having declared himself “a convert to Christianity,”<sup>10</sup> Constantine “publicly united Christianity into idolatry”<sup>11</sup>—and in Constantinople “the spiritual, the aesthetic and the political were often fused together.”<sup>12</sup> The city became a thriving Christian centre, and in 380 Emperor Theodosius of Constantinople declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire.

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7 The writing of Papias from Hierapolis dates from AD 95–120.

8 See James Culross, *John, Whom Jesus Loved*, Kessinger Publishing, 2010 (1878), pages 242-243, see also Joseph S Exell (Ed), *Bible Illustrator Commentary*, Volume 4, Matthew—John, Delmarva Publications, 2015.

9 Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, New York: HarperCollins, 1996, page 16.

10 Andrew Miller, *Church History: From the First to the Twentieth Century*, Pickering & Inglis, London, page 186.

11 Miller, page 190.

12 Richard Fidler, *Ghost Empire*, HarperCollins Publishers Australia, 2017, page 16.

## Christianity had become a different religion!

Under Constantine's influence enormous changes swept over the church. Before his time there were no church buildings. Christians met in homes, with their faith multiplying through households. However, with grand public edifices gifted by the state Christianity gained status together with political and civil authority. Church buildings were Constantine's idea; and he influenced the forms and structures of the church!

In 324 when he moved the capital of the Empire to Constantinople, theological tensions among Christians over the nature of Jesus had reached a crisis point—with aggressive discord spreading—and the emperor got involved.

Christians had to defend their faith, being asked: Who was Jesus? Was He God or human, fully both or partly both? By the second century it is thought the **Rule of Faith**<sup>13</sup>—also known as the Old Roman Creed and later “the creed of the Apostles.”<sup>14</sup>—was being used like a baptism vow, and with their answer:

I believe in God the Father almighty;  
and in Christ Jesus His only Son, our Lord,  
Who was born from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,  
Who under Pontius Pilate was crucified and buried,  
on the third day rose again from the dead,  
ascended into heaven,  
sits at the right hand of the Father,  
whence he will come to judge the living and the dead;  
and in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy Church,  
the remission of sins,  
the resurrection of the flesh,  
life everlasting.

However, while there was wide consensus with this statement of faith, disagreement over the relationship between Jesus the Son and God the Father arose in the churches in Egypt and north Africa. Arius, a popular church elder from Libya, did not accept that Christ was one or co-equal with the Father in His divinity. Athanasius, a young presbyter from Alexandria in Egypt supported his bishop Alexander in arguing against Arius. In calling the First Council of Nicaea in 325, Constantine sought to settle this dispute.<sup>15</sup>

While he left the elders and bishops to debate the issues, Constantine organised and conducted the Council as if a Roman Senate, with his pre-eminence and hierarchies on display. Following discussion and debate, decisions on the nature of Christ or biblical/theological questions were settled by majority vote—a political system. And those who disagreed with the vote were labelled heretics—and banished!

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13 J N D Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, Continuum, 2006, page 101—although the earliest written form of the Rule of Faith dates from about 341, in a letter in Greek from Marcellus of Ancyra (or Ankara) to Julius, the elder of the church or bishop of Rome.

14 *Ep.* 42, trans. in *Saint Ambrose: Letters*; see also “The Apostles’ Creed: Its History and Origins,” <https://blog.faithlife.com/the-apostles-creed-its-history-and-origins/>.

15 See Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*, Oxford University Press, 2004—for a detailed study of this first ecumenical Church Council.

This was a radical departure from the consensus reached in the conversational environment of the *households of faith*, or the process used in Jerusalem when Paul, Barnabas and others from Antioch sought the advice of the “the apostles and elders” (Acts 15:1-35).

However, majority votes did not settle the issues. While the first Ecumenical Church Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381) affirmed the Apostles Creed, future Councils affirmed heresy (as at Ephesus in 431 when the majority vote honoured Jesus’ mother Mary as “Mother of God”), and in becoming more definitive—with demands for compliance—they led to major splits (as at Chalcedon in 451, with the divide between Eastern Orthodox Churches and Oriental Orthodox Christians).<sup>16</sup>

### **Christendom was forming!**

What could be described as *Constantinian factors*<sup>17</sup> had a devastating impact upon the very essence of church as described by Jesus (Matthew 16:13-21; 18:15-20). Once persecuted and derided, the church gained status in the empire—expanding its political and cultural dominance.

Church buildings were gifted by the state. The hierarchical Senate system of governance was adopted by the church. Its Councils were seen as God’s highest authority on earth—with a majority vote determining biblical truth over heresy. A distinct clergy-laity divide was cultivated, with the clergy determining truth and doing ministry, caring for some aspects of the state (such as keeping registers of births, deaths, and marriages)—and given status not seen in the early church. Although the title *clergy* is not once used in the New Testament to denote Christian leaders, they were given an elevated distinct status represented by the robes bestowed on them “which vied in splendour with the best vestments of the pagan high priests.”<sup>18</sup>

### **This is the second Sequel!**

The story of the *seven churches* in the centuries after receiving the Revelation of Jesus from the apostle John is frequently overlooked. It is a history that is not part of western educational curriculum, the story of Eastern Christianity’s wealth, influence, pomp and notoriety. But neglecting this sequel distorts our understanding of God’s disciple-making movement, for much that shapes how we approach mission today comes from that era and not from the life, teachings, or commission of Jesus.

Constantine and the following emperors indissolubly linked church and state as one—a Christendom empire—and the impact of this is seen in the *seven churches*, as illustrated in the histories of Laodicea and Ephesus.

At **Laodicea** in 2010 archaeologists unearthed the fourth century church building used as the venue for a regional Church Council in 363-364. Both this massive 2,000 square metre church building, and the rules or canons voted by that Council, are stark indicators of the enormous changes that swept over the churches in the Constantinian era.

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16 See Peter Roennfeldt, *The Eastern Empire and Eastern Christianity: The Reshaping of Faith and Church*, PDF e-book available from [peter@newchurchlife.com](mailto:peter@newchurchlife.com), 2023, pages 20-23.

17 “Constantinianism is a view in Christian politics that epitomizes the unity of church and state ... modeled after an ideal Christendom which arose during the reign of Constantine ...”  
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constantinianism#:~:text=Constantinianism%20is%20a%20view%20in,reign%20of%20Constantine%20the%20Great>, viewed 25 May 2023.

18 A M Renwick, *The Story of the Church*, Inter-Varsity, London, 1955, page 51.



Just fifty years after Constantine had signed the *Treaty of Tolerance* (AD 313) protecting Christians from state persecution, and just forty after the very first church buildings were erected—remembering there were no church buildings before Constantine—this elaborate church basilica stood in the city centre! And the canons voted by the Council held in that church building reflect how far the church had moved from the teachings and practices of New Testament *households of faith*.

In transitioning from houses to public buildings participation was curtailed. In his counsel for the churches of his day—all meeting in households, the apostle Paul had written:

*Well, my brothers and sisters ... When you meet together, one will sing, another will teach, another will tell some special revelation God has given, one will speak in tongues, and another will interpret what is said. But everything that is done must strengthen all of you.* (1 Corinthians 14:26).

However, in their concern to regulate the conduct of bishops, clerics, and members<sup>19</sup>—including how they related to heretics, pagans, and Judaism<sup>20</sup>—Canon 59 of the Church Council of Laodicea forbade the reading of any psalm composed by private individuals or any books not in the Old or New Testaments. Personal expression and participation, natural in households, was curtailed—and the list of the canonical books in Canon 60, the authenticity of which is admittedly disputed, omits the Book of Revelation!

Then, while women like Lydia, Phoebe and Priscilla led churches in their households (or *oikos*), once the church moved to a public building in the city (or *polis*) only men could lead. This change was emphasized by rule 44, which declared, “Women may not go to the altar.”<sup>21</sup> Participation by every believer—whether “Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female ... (all) one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28)—was restricted, with the church building a sacred temple with a holy altar, totally foreign to the Jesus’ or the apostles’ idea of church!

Then at **Ephesus**, just to one side from the Arcadian Way—the marble avenue from the Great Theatre where Paul preached to the now silted-up harbour—are the remains of the Church of St Mary built for the third ecumenical Church Council in AD 431. There the 280 bishops who met to resolve the conflict over the nature of Christ agreed by majority vote, that Mary the mother of Jesus be honoured as *Theotokos* or “Mother of God”!

Emperors and church leaders together consolidated their political and religious authority by constructing grand church and civic buildings, and by issuing decrees from their Councils. On a hill above modern Seljuk, near ancient Ephesus, was the Basilica of St. John that was constructed by Emperor Justinian I between AD 548 and 565 on the site of an earlier church building.<sup>22</sup> However, all of this was to fall—and these once magnificent structures now lie in ruins!

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19 For a list of the voted canons, see Stephen Pidgeon, *The Canons of Laodicea*, <https://www.cepher.net/blog.aspx?post=3268>, 2016.

20 For example, Canon 29 states: “Christians must not judaize by resting on the Sabbath, but must work on that day, rather honouring the Lord’s Day; and, if they can, resting then as Christians. But if any shall be found to be judaizers, let them be anathema from Christ.”

21 The interpretation of Canon 11, which “Forbids the ordination of priestesses” is disputed.

22 According to tradition John lived on this hilltop, where he was later buried. His traditional grave, as well as an early baptistery, are in the basilica. And further examples of these basilicas are found among the ruins of Sardis and Philadelphia. In **Sardis**, in the compound of the fourth century Temple of Artemis that was never completed, are the remains of a small, fourth-century mortuary chapel—one of the earliest church buildings. And in the centre of **Philadelphia**, Alaşehir today, are the remaining columns—once topped by a dome—of the Basilica of Saint John, built in the late sixth or early seventh centuries.

## Buildings, hierarchies, and forms are vulnerable!

Jesus explained that His victory over the evil one and death would be the foundation of His church (Matthew 16:13-21). He declared, “I will build my church, and all the powers of hell (or, the gates of Hades) will not conquer it” (Matthew 16:18). And during His trial before Pilate, Jesus told him, “My Kingdom is not an earthly kingdom. If it were, my followers would fight to keep me from being handed over ... But my Kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36).

His model of church and His kingdom cannot be overthrown, but when the church adopts the structures, systems, and forms of a state it is as vulnerable to plague, political intrigue, military attack, and economic collapse, as with any other empire.

Eastern Christianity, of which the *seven churches* became a part, was weakened by pandemics and schism. During the reign of Emperor Justinian, the devastating *Justinian Plague* of 541-542 spread across Asia, Arabia, North Africa, and Europe, killing 300,000 in the capital Constantinople, and some 30-50 million worldwide—about half the world’s population.<sup>23</sup> Plans to reunite the Roman Empire were derailed, and the Greek and Latin branches of the church in the East and West were isolated from each other!

Five years after Justinian’s death in 565, Mohammad the prophet of Islam was born (570/571). And within a hundred years of Mohammed’s flight from Mecca in 622, and return in 630, Islam had spread from India to the Atlantic, and soon after into central and southern Asia and to China.<sup>24</sup> The church’s hierarchical princely rulers, grand palaces, headquarter offices, and magnificent churches or temples—adorned with icons and art which were anathema to Islam—were ready targets for the Caliphs.<sup>25</sup> But the speed and devastation of the Muslim conquests is hard to grasp, with only remnants of the great patriarchates of Antioch, Jerusalem, and Alexandria surviving. “In Syria alone, 10,000 churches were destroyed or became mosques. The Church of North Africa ... was practically obliterated. Only small Christian communities survived here and there.”<sup>26</sup>

And as with any empire, once these trappings were destroyed—the church was dismantled! In Türkiye today there are no more than 200,000 Christians—with, as already seen, only 0.2% of the population being Christians or members of other official religions such as Judaism.<sup>27</sup>

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23 Stephanie Paulsell, “Religion in a Time of Pandemic”—an interview with Kevin Madigan, Winn Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Harvard Divinity School, about pandemics in the medieval Christian West, <https://hds.harvard.edu/news/2020/05/07/religion-time-pandemic>; also John Horgan, “Justinian’s Plague (541-542 CE),” *World History Encyclopedia*, <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/782/justinians-plague-541-542-ce/>.

24 A M Renwick, *The Story of the Church*, Inter-Varsity, 1965, page 78.

25 While others claimed authority, the Caliphates were the Rashidun Caliphate (632–661), the Umayyad Caliphate (661–750), the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258), and the Ottoman Caliphate—with the rulers of the Ottoman Empire claiming authority in 1517.

26 Renwick, page 78.

27 Op cit., *Religion in Turkey*—see page 5 of this PDF e-book.

## The fate of the *seven churches!*

The second sequel ends with the seven churches overrun by a new religion! In *The Lost History of Christianity* Philip Jenkins writes of this time, when “church hierarchies were destroyed, priests and monks were killed, enslaved, or expelled, and monasteries and cathedrals fell silent.”<sup>28</sup> And as “Christian communities shrank, the result of persecution or ethnic and religious cleansing,” he points out, “Survivors found it all but impossible to practice their faith without priests or churches, especially when rival religions offered such powerful attractions.”<sup>29</sup>

1. Think about why churches and movements die. With the solid foundations that Paul laid (the original story), the counsel Jesus gave after the first forty years (Sequel 1), but the impact of *Constantinian factors* (Sequel 2)—why do you think these seven churches have all disappeared?
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2. What is the risk of your movement disappearing? What can we learn from the *seven churches*?
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The Red Basilica of **Pergamum**, or Bergama today, represents this second sequel. Also called the Red Hall, Red Courtyard, or Red Church, it was built of red brick in the second century as a pagan temple, most likely during the time of Hadrian, and adorned with cultic sculptures dedicated to Serapis and Isis—among the most important gods of Egypt. It was an engineering feat built over the Selinus or Bergama Çayı river, an immense structure that would have dwarfed many temples of the ancient world.

In the fifth century this temple became a church building dedicated to St John, but this was destroyed during the Arabian Muslim invasions at the beginning of the eighth century. And, when Pergamum was overthrown by the Turks in 1336 the northern tower of this Red Church was converted into a mosque, still used by the locals today.

*Constantinian factors* had come to define Christian faith—“the atmosphere in which we operate, and the ground on which we walk.”<sup>30</sup> They devalued the original story of the *seven churches*—together with the first sequel, the Revelation letters—and Christianity did not survive without them being woven into its fabric! But the challenge of the original story, together with the counsel and inspiration of the seven letters from Jesus is to now, ***be the SEQUEL!***

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28 Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity*, HarperOne, 2008, pages 22, 23.

29 Jenkins, page 23.

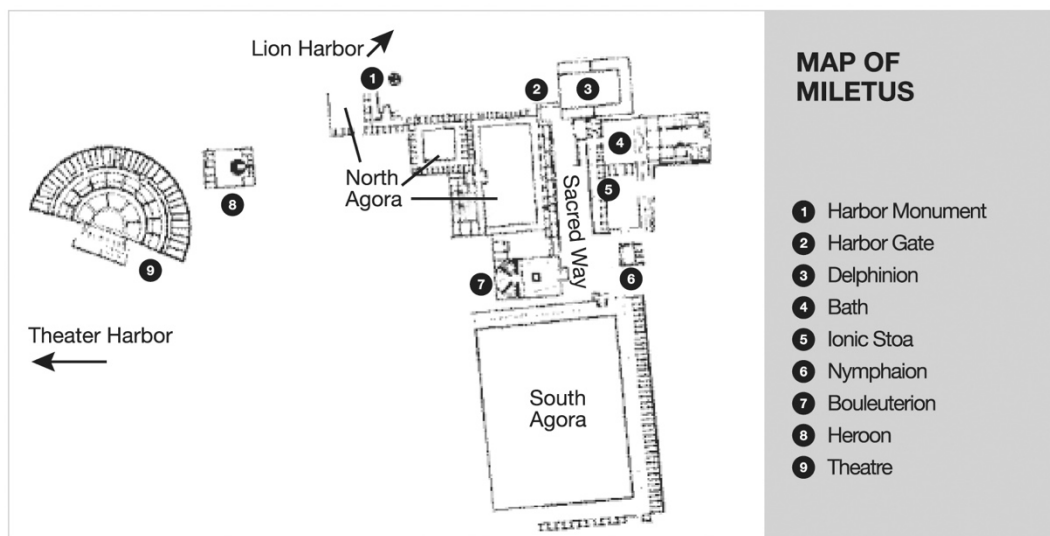
30 Philip Jenkins, “Empires and the Making of Religions,” *Patheos* (January 7, 2023), [https://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2022/01/empires-and-the-making-of-religions/?utm\\_source=Newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Sharing+the+Gospel&utm\\_content=46&ctg=451187&rsid=55&recipId=451187&siteId=7DF2956C-D2F1-40D4-A777-98E450E58360](https://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2022/01/empires-and-the-making-of-religions/?utm_source=Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Sharing+the+Gospel&utm_content=46&ctg=451187&rsid=55&recipId=451187&siteId=7DF2956C-D2F1-40D4-A777-98E450E58360).

## #4

# be the SEQUEL: INCREASE & PREVAIL MULTIPLYING MISSION HUBS

After planting the *mission hub* in Ephesus on his third major missionary journey, with multiple church plants in the province of Asia and beyond—including the *seven churches*, Paul made a three month visit to Corinth—during which time he wrote his missionary letter to the Romans. He then returned to the region of Asia on his way to Jerusalem for Pentecost. Being in a hurry he bypassed Ephesus but stopped in at Miletus, calling the Ephesians elders—none of whom had been believers for more than three-and-a-half years—to join him there!

**At Miletus Paul challenged them to *be the Sequel!***



The earliest settlement of Miletus—near the mouth of the Meander River in ancient Ionia, and near the village of Balat today—came under Minoan influence, a dominant civilization from Crete, and named after a place on Crete. By the sixth century BC it was one of the greatest and wealthiest Greek cities on the western coast of Anatolia—famous for founding multiple (perhaps 90) other colonies and known for its poets and philosophers.

When Paul visited Miletus in the mid-first century, it was under Roman control but still an important commercial centre. Emperors Augustus and Trajan paid a lot of attention to this city, but by the 6th century AD its two harbors had silted up and it was finally abandoned.

Today we can see where the harbors were, with the few remains of colonnaded thoroughfares and baths, and a well-preserved 15,000-18,000 seat Roman theatre—with its covered walkways and reserve seating inscription: “the place of the Jews who are also God-worshippers” or “the place for the Jews and the God-worshippers,”<sup>31</sup> perhaps showing Miletus was a tolerant multi-cultural city.

From Miletus “Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church” (Acts 20:17 NIV), 80 kilometres away, to farewell them. His farewell message is one of the most important of the many speeches in Acts.

<sup>31</sup> Compare the similar terminology in Acts 13:16, 26, 43; 17:4, 17.

## Paul's farewell message to the Ephesian elders—Acts 20:18-38

<sup>18</sup> When they arrived he declared, “You know that from the day I set foot in the province of Asia until now <sup>19</sup> I have done the Lord’s work humbly and with many tears. I have endured the trials that came to me from the plots of the Jews. <sup>20</sup> I never shrank back from telling you what you needed to hear, either publicly or in your homes. <sup>21</sup> I have had one message for Jews and Greeks alike—the necessity of repenting from sin and turning to God, and of having faith in our Lord Jesus.

<sup>22</sup> “And now I am bound by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem. I don’t know what awaits me, <sup>23</sup> except that the Holy Spirit tells me in city after city that jail and suffering lie ahead. <sup>24</sup> But my life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus—the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God.

<sup>25</sup> “And now I know that none of you to whom I have preached the Kingdom will ever see me again. <sup>26</sup> I declare today that I have been faithful. If anyone suffers eternal death, it’s not my fault, <sup>27</sup> for I didn’t shrink from declaring all that God wants you to know.

<sup>28</sup> “So guard yourselves and God’s people. Feed and shepherd God’s flock—his church, purchased with his own blood—over which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as leaders. <sup>29</sup> I know that false teachers, like vicious wolves, will come in among you after I leave, not sparing the flock. <sup>30</sup> Even some men from your own group will rise up and distort the truth in order to draw a following. <sup>31</sup> Watch out! Remember the three years I was with you—my constant watch and care over you night and day, and my many tears for you.

<sup>32</sup> “And now I entrust you to God and the message of his grace that is able to build you up and give you an inheritance with all those he has set apart for himself.

<sup>33</sup> “I have never coveted anyone’s silver or gold or fine clothes. <sup>34</sup> You know that these hands of mine have worked to supply my own needs and even the needs of those who were with me. <sup>35</sup> And I have been a constant example of how you can help those in need by working hard. You should remember the words of the Lord Jesus: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”

<sup>36</sup> When he had finished speaking, he knelt and prayed with them. <sup>37</sup> They all cried as they embraced and kissed him good-bye. <sup>38</sup> They were sad most of all because he had said that they would never see him again. Then they escorted him down to the ship.”

### *be the SEQUEL*—increase and prevail!

Paul was leaving the *mission hub* that he had planted in Ephesus in the hands of others. Handing on to next generation leaders is critical for movements to multiply and continue.

1. What message and vision defined Paul? (Also read Romans 15:14-33.)

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2. What movement ideas do you find in Paul’s farewell to the Ephesian elders?

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3. From Paul’s farewell words, what do you learn about the task of planting a *mission hub*?

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4. How did Paul prepare and equip these spiritual leaders for their continuing mission task?

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5. While we sometimes think of our societies as secular, they might be “spiritual”—but not defined by Christian faith. Paul’s world was very “religious”! Our world is aggressive towards Christianity—as was Paul’s!

Compared to that in which Paul made disciples, planted churches, and cultivated kingdom movements, what other similarities do you see in your mission environment?

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6. What would it take for your church or ministry to become a *mission hub*—multiplying churches across your city, region, state, or country? What actions will you take?

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### **The challenge is for us, to *be the SEQUEL***

We have reviewed four defining movement principles used by the apostle in planting these *seven churches*—teams from the harvest, the *ethne* and *oikos principles*, and the enormous impact of multiplying *mission hubs*. We have identified with the messages of Jesus’ letters for believers facing the life and mission challenges of their world, and their transition to being second and third generation churches.

*be the SEQUEL* is an invitation to re-examine the original story and learn from the sequels of history.

*be the SEQUEL* is a challenge for you to participate in God’s movement of multiplication, to immerse yourself in God’s movement—modelled on the life, teachings, and ministry of Jesus—to see God’s Word “increase and prevail” with—

- multiplying mission hubs (as from Ephesus),
- sacrificial faithfulness to Jesus (as found in Smyrna),
- total reliance on the Word (as needed in Pergamum),
- perseverance (as called for in Thyatira),
- dependence upon the Spirit (as required in Sardis),
- a spirit of encouragement (like evident in the letter to Philadelphia),
- and with passionate spirituality and multiplying *households of faith* (as around Laodicea and the Lycus valley).

*be the SEQUEL* is an opportunity to hear Jesus and the Spirit speak again to you. Jesus’ letters to the churches were just what each needed for their circumstances. And His words: “Anyone with ears to hear must listen to the Spirit and understand what he is saying ...” (Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22)—underscoring His mission. These words remind us of when the Spirit spoke to the church in Antioch to launch the mission journeys of the apostles (Acts 13:1-4)—to multiply disciple-making disciples, *households of faith*, and *mission hub* movements!

*be the SEQUEL* is a call to you to be part of the ongoing story—to respond to the words of Jesus and the voice of the Spirit—to see all in your “province” hear the gospel; and to see “the word of the Lord (continue) to **increase** and **prevail** mightily” (Acts 19:20 ESV).

# AN ANYONE-CAN-DO-IT, REPRODUCIBLE, NO COST PROCESS!

For movements, it is essential that simple, enjoyable, and reproducible processes are used that all can immediately follow—including the person or family that you are sharing with! Unfortunately, sharing the gospel and making disciples has been made so complicated that most feel they cannot do it; but movements focus on Jesus' method. He modelled and taught a process that you will enjoy.

## Jesus' method is best practice!

In Luke 10:1-24 we have a full lesson by Jesus on equipping and multiplying disciples.<sup>32</sup> He taught how to connect:

1. Working in teams, “two by two” (Luke 10:1).
2. Knowing where He is “about to go” (Luke 10:1)—starting at home, with those nearby!
3. Praying for more harvesters, for “the harvest is plentiful” (Luke 10:2).
4. Focusing on *persons of peace* (Luke 10:6)—those who are hospitable, welcoming, with a reputation (good or bad!) and therefore with influence!

Jesus said to be intentional—not distracted on the way; to leave our own things and agendas behind; and to spend time with people—in their homes, not just on the street, and not in a rush (Luke 10:4, 7).

## Jesus' 3 simple steps!

We interact and share life with many each day—family, friends, neighbours, fellow students, work associates, and others. However, many believers find it difficult to transition from sharing life to sharing faith.

The steps or process Jesus taught for this are natural:

- You do not need to be an expert.
- You do not need all the Bible answers.
- You can guide people to discover what Jesus is really like.
- You can encourage people to discover God's Word for themselves.

The process Jesus taught applies in all cultures and social environments—and you can multiply your witness, for those you share with will immediately pick up on the process. These three simple steps, outlined in Luke 10:8 and 9, take us easily from contact to sharing faith:

1. Eat with people—and listen to their story.  
Share a coffee or meal and listen—and you will identify the desperate needs of people.
2. Heal them—using your story as a bridge.  
Share a one or two sentence testimony of your story—as a bridge to their healing.

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<sup>32</sup> See Peter Roennfeldt, *If You Can Eat ... You Can Make Disciples: sharing faith in a multi-faith world*, Signs 2021, for a full discussion of this training in Luke 10:1-24.

3. Introduce God's story—assure them that He cares, “the Kingdom of God is near”!  
Share that God walks with them through the *valleys*.

Let people experience God. This is not time to prove doctrine, but for them to experience God's care, love and healing. Pray a very simple direct prayer, in everyday conversational language, focusing upon God's interest in their lives.

### **Telling God's story**

Many know very little or nothing about God or Jesus. However, eating their food with them, listening to their brokenness and needs, encouraging them and praying with them—as you assure them that God does care, may open their hearts to knowing more about Him!

You could suggest that together you get to know Jesus through watching the *Jesus Film*, or by reading a Gospel together using a simple process called *Discovery Bible Reading*. The Gospel of Mark is a great place to start. It is the shortest, simplest introduction to Jesus, and can be read in a few weeks using the *Discovery Bible Reading* process.

### **What is *Discovery Bible Reading*?**

It is an effective reading plan whatever a person's knowledge or experience of Jesus or the Bible. Two or three friends get and follow these steps—

- Pray: *Dear God, guide us as we read your Word. Thank you. Amen.*
- Start at the beginning of the Gospel of Mark.

Read one story-section at a time, with—

- One reading the story.
- Then the other reads the same story, perhaps in another translation if you have one.
- Then one tells the story in their own words without looking at the text.

After this, use these **five discussion** questions—

1. What is new to us?
2. What surprises us?
3. What do we not understand?
4. What will we each apply or obey this week?
5. Who will we share with—and what will we share from this story, this week?

Pray together: *Dear God, thank you for your Word. Help us to follow you. Amen.*

Plan to catch up again, and when you do, ask each other: (1) How did we go applying what we read? and (2) How did we go sharing? Then, follow the same process for the next story!

### ***Discovery Bible Reading* is reproducible!**

Anyone can do it. The Holy Spirit is the primary teacher, and even before a person makes a full commitment to Jesus Christ, they can use this approach with friends and facilitate *Discovery Bible Reading* groups—and they come to know Jesus as they share!



If you or they do not understand something, don't argue. Continue to read and the answers may be found! If there are questions you don't have answers to, simply acknowledge that you don't know—and the best answer is: "Let's keep reading!"

Start with the Gospel of Mark—it is direct and short, only 20-25 pages. It may take some months to explore, but there is no need to rush. Get to know Jesus. Then, the Gospel of John is a great next read—and it introduces all the fundamental teachings of Christian faith, through the life and teachings of Jesus. Following that, in the book of Acts you and your friends will experience the activities of the early followers of Jesus and be inspired by the Spirit and Jesus' idea of church.

### **Tell others of this Bible reading plan!**

Invite people to join you. Download a *Discovery Bible Reading* bookmark—which has an outline of the whole process on it—and give it to all you are encouraging and equipping to be involved. Give each person a bookmark! It is available in numerous languages in a variety of styles from [www.following-Jesus.com](http://www.following-Jesus.com)—where you will find other resources to equip in multiplying disciples, planting churches, and cultivating movements. Encourage all to form *Discovery Bible Reading* groups.

As well as involving skilled Bible teachers, use *Discovery Bible Reading* in all Bible classes and sermon-worship times in churches and *households of faith*. Make it integral to worship experiences, together with music, prayer, praise, giving, scripture readings, and sermons. Use it when portions of scripture are read, and when whole books of the Bible are considered. Each time it is used, believers are equipped as disciple-makers.

Implement a process like this, so that all believers are equipped to multiply.

### **be the SEQUEL ... count movement numbers!**

Denominations and mission agencies count churches and institutions; employees, members and attendees; and income, offerings and donations. This is important accounting, and necessary for companies and organizations. However, these are not movement numbers.

For movements the important questions are: How many disciple-makers do we have? How many multiplying teams are there? What relational streams are the teams following? How many churches or *household of faith* are planting new, and how often? How many of these are now functioning as *mission hubs*—and what regions are being reached with the gospel?

Foundational to all movement numbers is the question: what simple, reproducible processes are all new disciples equipped to use as they become believers—that they can immediately and seamlessly put into practice? This is where a process like *Discovery Bible Reading* can fit! And as it is used, new disciples are equipped and multiplied—by the process!

You may use another process, but to **be the SEQUEL** to God's movement—it must be so simple and reproducible that anyone can do. And I mean—anyone, at no cost!

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