



Truth

On Tough Texts

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A MINISTRY OF GRACE BIBLE CHURCH

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Who are the “Angels” of the Seven Churches?

Revelation 1:20

IN LIGHT OF A LITERAL APPROACH TO THE Book of Revelation, God *strongly* emphasizes the messages to the seven churches of chapters 2–3. So important are these messages, in fact, that they comprise a little over twelve-and-one-half percent (or about one eighth) of the content of the book. Moreover, there is a lot of “Church Truth” in these messages that matches the Church Truth contained in other New Testament Epistles. Let us not neglect these two chapters in favor of the more “spectacular” parts of Revelation. These two chapters will honestly be of far more help to local churches and individual believers than will the remainder of the book.

In this issue of TOTT and the next, we will examine the four-fold application of these letters, the first of which provides us with our first “tough text.”

I. The Contemporary Application

By this is meant that Christ was concerned with the state of each of these physical, 1st Century local churches. As one commentator observes, “The order of scriptural presentation was geographic. A messenger would naturally travel the route from the seaport Ephesus, 35 miles north to another seaport, Smyrna, proceed still farther north and to the east to Pergamos, and then would swing further to the east and south to visit the other four cities (1:11).”¹ These cities, of course, were located in the Roman province of Asia Minor (modern Turkey) and were undoubtedly selected because they were the key cities of the seven postal districts of that

region. They were the cities one would choose if he wanted to spread information.

The Lord Jesus makes observations and counsels each one of them. Revelation 1:20 makes this clear: **The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches.**

As this verse declares, each church was viewed as a lampstand. The Greek here for “lampstand” is *luxnos*, which refers to the hand-lamp that was fed by oil. As we know, “oil” is used in Scripture as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, so the thought here is that the churches themselves do not create light; rather, each church bears the light of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

We now notice the word “angels.” The Greek here is *angeloi*, meaning “messengers.” The identity of these “angels” has been a matter of much discussion through the years. A clue to this identity lies in the fact that Jesus holds them **in His right hand**. As the **right hand** is used in Scripture as a symbol of honor and authority (Eph. 1:20; Heb. 8:1; 12:2; I Pet. 3:22; etc.), the idea here is that Jesus is controlling His church through the authority of these “messengers.” While **angels** is the common translation of *angeloi*, and while there are some valid arguments that these are literal **angels**, we are compelled to disagree for several reasons.

First, literal angels are never spoken of in Scripture as being the “authorities” in churches. In other words, they are never involved in church leadership; God does

not rule churches through **angels**. Nowhere is this indicated in the Epistles. Angels don't lead churches; God's *men* lead churches and are responsible for how they lead.

Second, all but two of these churches, and obviously their leadership, have been disobedient to God's Word and are commanded to repent of their sin (2:4-5, 14, 20; 3:1-3, 15, 17, 19). Angels, however, do not sin and, therefore, have no need to repent.

Third, and perhaps most significantly, saying that these are literal **angels** actually means that God is sending messages to **angels** through John, but such an idea has no precedent in Scripture. Not once do we read that God spoke to angels through men.

Fourth, while it is argued that *angelloi* always means **angels**, that simply is not so; there are several instances in Scripture where *angelloi* clearly speaks of "messengers," that is, *human* messengers. Luke 7:24, for example, declares, "And when the messengers [*angelloi*] of John were departed, [Jesus] began to speak unto the people concerning John." A few verses before, in fact, we read that these same messengers were John's disciples, that is, men (v. 19). Then in verse 27, our Lord Himself uses *angellos* to refer to John as His "messenger." Likewise, James 2:25 recounts, "Was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers [*angelloi*], and had sent them out another way?" The spies sent in to reconnoiter the Promised Land were men, not angels. As one Greek authority points out, an argument could be made that even Hebrews 13:2—"Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares"—might be referring to hospitality "to itinerate preachers rather than angels."²

Further, we see the same idea in the Old Testament, both in the Hebrew and the Greek (Septuagint), which provides a clear precedent for the New Testament use. While most references in the Old Testament are to literal angels, several are not. Commentator William Newell well points out some of those. While Genesis 32:1, for example, says that Jacob encountered literal **angels**, verse 3 says he sent his own "messengers" to Edom. In both verses, the Hebrew word is the same, *malāk*, which in-turn is translated as the Greek *angelloi*. Likewise, in Numbers 20:14, Moses sent his own "messengers from Kadesh unto the king of Edom," while God sent an "angel" to Moses. The Hebrew is again *malāk* in both verses and is translated as the Greek *angelloi* (and *angellos*). Again, in Judges 6:10-23, the literal "Angel of the Lord" is referred to seven times by the Hebrew *malāk* (vs. 11, 12, 20, 21 [twice], 22 [twice]), while the messengers Gideon sent are also called *malāk* (v. 35); in all cases the Greek is again *angellos*. And still again, Sennacherib's representative are called "messengers" in Isaiah 37:9 and 14, while in verse 36 the Angel of the Lord is in view, and the same Hebrew and Greek words are used.³

Most significant in all those examples is the fact that the Hebrew and Greek words refer to *both* angels and men *in the same context*. Some argue, "Since the word 'angel' occurs 67 other times in Revelation, and since every one of those refers to heavenly angels, then it must also be true here in 1:20." But that obviously is not so.

Fifth, the context clearly seems to argue against literal **angels**. Christ is speaking about *earthly* matters to an *earthly* messenger, who will in-turn pass on those matters to other *earthly* messengers. Why would He bring heavenly beings into a discussion of earthly issues? Further, the *responsible parties* in these letters are earthly beings, not heavenly beings.

Sixth, one final problem with the literal angel idea is that there is no way to explain how the angels then conveyed Christ's message to the churches. It seems more than obvious that men would carry these messages to the churches.

We must conclude, therefore, that the messengers of Revelation 2-3 were, indeed, the pastors of the seven churches. These men were those who were responsible for the leadership of those churches and those to whom the challenges and encouragements of the letters were given. It is through such men that the Lord (Who holds these **in His right hand**) leads and rules His Church.

If we may submit, therefore, this is precisely why the qualifications and requirements for leadership in the Church are *extremely* high, according to I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. God could not be clearer on this issue of qualified leadership. In spite of that, however, we increasingly see people today leading who, frankly, should not be doing so. The common attitude is that anyone can lead, but this is worse than dangerous. In fact, the precedent in Scripture for training to be a leader seems to be three years. The disciples spent three years with the Lord, Paul spent three years in training before being sent out to preach and plant churches (Gal. 1:11-18), and Timothy was with Paul three years during the second missionary journey (Acts 15:36-18:22). We would also add, as Paul wrote to Timothy—"And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also" (II Tim. 2:2)—can there be any doubt that he was saying, "As I trained you for leadership, you train others for leadership?"

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¹ *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*.

² Spiros Zodhiates, *Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, p. 68.

³ William Newell, *The Book of Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1935), pp. 33-34.

A Word for the Day: Key Words from the New Testament

Two excerpts from Pastor Watson's Book

June 15

Light (1)

phōs

In Classical Greek usage, the basic meaning of *phōs* (5457; English *phosphorus*, etc.) is **light** and brightness and conveys the ideas of sunlight, daylight, torchlight, firelight, and so forth. In other words, it refers to light itself, not the *source* of light, such as the sun, a torch, fire, or a lamp. Even early in secular usage, it was also used figuratively “to mean the sphere of ethical good, whereas misdeeds are said to take place in darkness.” All that was carried over into NT usage but intensified all the more by its identification with Christ.

The Christian, therefore, is to **walk** in light. Since we were once “darkness, but now are . . . light in the Lord,” we are to “walk as children of light” (Eph. 5:8). In other words, we conduct ourselves according to light, the light of Christ and His Word. As He is the Light (John 1:4; 8:12) and is the Word Who became flesh (1:14), then it is His Word in which we are to walk.

What seems obvious about darkness and light is that they cannot coexist. If you turn on a light in a dark room, darkness flees. But it's not as obvious in practical application. People talk much about “gray areas” of conduct, avoiding the terms *right* or *wrong* and *truth* or *error*. But the Scripture contains no such “gray areas.” Conduct is either moral or immoral, good or bad, true or false.

What, then, are the “attributes” of light? Generally speaking, **light** pictures two basic thoughts.

First, in regard to the *intellect*, light pictures *truth*. So, to walk according to light means that we walk according to **truth**. No longer are we ignorant, for the truth of Jesus Christ is in us. Moreover, walking according to light means that we are growing in the knowledge of Christ day by day.

Second, in regard to *morality*, light pictures *holiness*. To walk according to light means that we live a pure, holy life; we walk as holy people. All that we say and do shines forth the light of Christ that is in us (cf. Eph. 4:17–32).

Scriptures for Study: Read the following verses, noting other ways in which we are to walk in the Christian life: Romans 4:12; 6:4; Galatians 5:16, 25; Ephesians 5:2; Colossians 4:5.

June 16

Light (2)

phōs

Taking one more look at the word *phōs* (**light**), this is one of the most glorious NT metaphors concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. Without question, the most vivid example of Christ being Light appears in John 8:12, where He declares, “I am the light of the world.” But it's only when we realize where our Lord was standing when He uttered those words that we see the full significance of His statement.

The setting was the Illumination of the Temple ceremony that took place during the Feast of the Tabernacles (or Booths). That feast, which began five days after Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), involved the Israelites presenting offerings for seven days while they lived in huts (booths) made of palm fronds and leafy tree branches to remember their journey in Canaan (Lev. 23:43).

At the end of the feast, the illumination ceremony took place, which is described in *the Mishna*. *The Torah* was the Jews' title for the “Law” (Genesis through Deuteronomy). Questions arose, however, concerning the meanings of these laws, so over the years an oral law called “the tradition of the elders” developed, which was then put into written form around AD 200. This was called *the Mishna*, which means “repetition,” as much of Jewish education was based on repetition; this became a principle part of what was called the “Talmud,” the commentaries that were written on the Law.

The Mishna tells of four tall, massive golden candleholders that stood in the temple treasury. On top of each was a large torch and bowl containing 120 logs (about 20 gallons) of oil. There was also a ladder for each candleholder, which a priest climbed; then he poured oil into the bowl, placed a wick in it made of old garments, and lit it. *The Mishna* records that “there was not a courtyard in Jerusalem which was not lit up from the light.”

So, it was on that very spot that Jesus stood when he declared, “I am the light of the world.” What a scene! In essence, He said, “While these great torches light all *Jerusalem*, I light the entire *world*. Only if you know Me, will you be delivered from darkness and have light to see.”

Dear Christian Friend, this challenges us that since we are *part* of that light, we are to *walk* in that light (Eph. 5:8).

Scriptures for Study: Read the following verses and rejoice in the light: John 9:5; 12:46; Romans 13:12; 2 Corinthians 4:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:5; James 1:17. 📖 Also

read 2 Corinthians 6:14—7:1, which concerns our separation from the world.

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The first step astray is a want of adequate faith in the divine inspiration of the sacred Scriptures. All the while a man bows to the authority of God's Word, he will not entertain any sentiment contrary it its teaching. "To the law and to the testimony," is his appeal concerning every doctrine. He esteems that old Book, concerning all things, to be right, and therefore he hates every false way. But let a man question, or entertain low views of the inspiration and authority of the Bible, and he is without chart to guide him, and without anchor to hold him.

In looking carefully over the history of the times, and the movement of the times, of which we have written briefly, this fact is apparent: that where ministers and Christian churches have held fast to the truth that the Holy Scriptures have been given by God as an authoritative and infallible rule of faith and practice, they have never wandered very seriously out of the right way. But when, on the other hand, *reason* has been exalted above *revelation*, and made the exponent of revelation, all kinds of error and mischief's have been the result.

Robert Shindler in Spurgeon's
The Sword and the Trowel (1887)

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This monthly publication is intended to address Scriptures that have historically been debated, are particularly difficult to understand, or have generated questions among Believers. We hope it will be an encouragement and challenge to God's people to carefully examine and discern Truth. Periodically, we will also include book reviews of popular books, for much that is published today demands discerning reading. While the positions presented here are based on years of careful Biblical research, we recognize that other respected men of God differ.

If you have a question that perplexes you, please send it along so that we might address it either in an article or in our "Q & A" section. Other comments are also warmly welcomed.

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