**Christ’s Call to Reformation (Revelation 1-3)**

I want to praise the Lord with all the richness that is possible, but I just don't have the words, and so I borrow the words for my praise from others, and that's what hymns are to me. I've always felt that the highest form of art is poetry. In reality, words are far more significant than a picture, even though we hear that a picture's worth a thousand words.

I think the opposite is true, because it speaks with precision and detail. Words are the most important thing, and the most beautiful use of words is poetry. And then when you take poetry, the highest art form, and set it to music, it elevates it even more.

There was a time when believers had a Bible and a hymnal, and the hymnal became the means by which they were able to praise the Lord in language that they themselves could not generate. And we hope the hymnal will continue to be a blessing to you and to many churches in the future. Again, I'm very grateful to be here with my friends to minister the Word of God to you, and I have been challenged to look at what I suppose we could call Christ's call to Reformation.

We have all looked back, looked at critical aspects of Reformation theology that define the Reformation and therefore define what it means to be Reformed today. But having sort of been assigned the subject of Christ's call to Reformation, I'm driven by that assignment to one portion of Scripture, the only place in the Scripture where you have Christ actually, specifically calling churches to Reformation. And that is in Revelation chapter 2 and 3. So if you'd like, you can turn in your Bible, and what we're going to try to do in this session is just get a sense of this passage.

And I know most of us have preached on Revelation 2 and 3. Most of us have broken down those messages as we would naturally do into seven letters and each letter constituting a message. But I want us to kind of go above that and just look at it in a general sense. And I want to begin with a couple of questions, and I think they're very important questions.

Have you ever heard of a church that repented? Have you ever heard of a church that repented? A church, a whole church that repented. Have you ever been part of a church that repented? I mean openly, genuinely, collectively, with sadness and brokenness, a church that repented for sins against its head, the Lord Jesus Christ? Probably not. Probably not.

If you are a pastor, have you ever led your church to repent? Have you ever called your church to repent collectively, and then threatened them that if they do not repent, judgment from heaven could fall on them? Not likely. Not likely. In fact, if you as a pastor were so bold as to call your own church to repent, you might not be the pastor anymore.

You certainly would face strong and hostile resistance. And that generates a sort of preemptive fear against even approaching the notion that a church should repent. Have you ever noticed perhaps another church that you're familiar with, and because you're so concerned with the direction of that church, you have called another church to repentance? Probably not.

You kind of feel like you're stepping on somebody else's territory, and you really have enough trouble without being accused of elevating yourself to some importance in the kingdom that gives you power not only over your own ministry, but the ministry of other people. So, you're treated with scorn. So, churches rarely repent.

Rarely are they broken over their collective sins. Rarely do they cry out from the depths of their heart for forgiveness and cleansing and purity and restoration. It's just a very dangerous thing to do.

The Puritans of the seventeenth century called the churches of England to repent, to repent for their extensive corruptions, to repent for their sins against the head of the church, the sovereign Lord. The result, as you know, was hostility and persecution by the impenitent churches and their impenitent leaders. The impenitence led to the monumental day that is known as the Great Ejection.

That was the official day when the impenitent corrupt churches threw out the pastors who were calling them to repentance. Unless the church turned from sin to Christ and to holiness and to truth, there was little hope for the nation. The churches needed to repent before they could expect the nation to repent.

The Puritans understood this, and so they called for that repentance. It was August 24, 1662, St. Bartholomew's Day, when the faithful Puritan preachers who were calling the churches to repentance were permanently ejected from their churches, 2,000 of them. And they were ejected by the corrupt clerics of the impenitent churches of England.

This was called the act of uniformity, and it silenced or attempted to silence the majority of England's faithful preachers. Subsequent history reveals that the Great Ejection was no isolated event with temporary significance. It wasn't over when it was over.

In fact, the Great Ejection of 1662 was a spiritual disaster that is a dividing line in England's history. One of those ejected pastors is a man named Matthew Meade, and he wrote, This fatal day deserves to be written in black letters in England's historic calendar. There were others who said that the day of the Great Ejection was the greatest tragedy ever in England's history.

Led by apostate Protestant leaders, it was a wholesale condemnation of the Bible and the gospel and the Lord Jesus Christ. A friend, Ian Murray, writing on this, said, After the silencing of the 2,000 came an age of rationalism, of coldness in the pulpit, and indifference in the pew. An age, he writes, of skepticism and worldliness that went far to reducing national religion to a mere parody of Christianity.

J. B. Marsden, writing in 1852, looked back on the Great Ejection and said, As proofs of God's displeasure, a long, unbroken course of disasters began. Within five years, London was laid waste twice. In 1665, the plague came, basically killed one-fourth of London's population, 100,000 people, died by the disease transmitted through the bite of a rat flea.

In 1666, the Great London Fire came and consumed the homes of 70,000 people and destroyed 90 churches. Marsden, in his history of the later Puritans, wrote, Other calamities ensued, more lasting and far more terrible. Religion was almost extinguished.

The lamp of God went out. There followed a culture of coldness and darkness. The well-known and beloved Bishop of Durham, J. C. Ryle, looking back, also wrote, The Great Ejection was an injury to the cause of true religion in England, which will probably never, never be repaired.

The twenty-five years after the Great Ejection were one long string of attempts to continue to silence the faithful preachers, to shut their mouths. Why all of this? Because they had called the church to repent of its corruptions. The reaction was so strong that preaching the truth became a crime.

The Puritans, in their faithful effort to call churches to repent or else, were following their head, the Lord Jesus Christ. That is exactly what He did at the end of the first century in the book of Revelation. Let's look at the book of Revelation for a moment.

Let me just give you some overviews of it. Persecution had begun, as Jesus promised in John 15 and 16. Persecution begun in a very intentional and organized way.

In the year 64, under Nero, it lasted about four years. Thousands of Christians were killed, and that persecution under Nero brought about the martyrdom of Peter and Paul. There was a second persecution under Domitian, which lasted about fifteen years from, say, 81 to 96.

And again, Christians were killed and banished for refusing to call Domitian Lord. This persecution swept up many thousands of Christians, including Timothy, who tradition tells us was clubbed to death, and John. Tertullian says, and Fox reiterates, that John, before he was exiled to Patmos, was boiled in oil.

So, by the time he went to Patmos, a five-mile by ten-mile rock jutting up out of the Mediterranean, he was scarred profoundly. He was an exiled prisoner, the last living apostle, sentenced to die at hard labor with meager food and desperate conditions. But John has one more task, the last living apostle, one more task.

In chapter 1 and verse 11, that task is simply write. Verse 19, write, write, write a book, a book which I will give you, a book of supernatural visions, the final book to close the canon. This incredible final revelation is written, not to the hating world, although it threatens the hating world in its very opening, verses 7 and 8, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him, and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him.

It does promise to the world judgment, but it is not written to the world. It is written to the churches. John, verse 4 says in chapter 1, to the seven churches.

John is not the author, because verse 5 says it's from Jesus Christ. The book of Revelation is from Jesus Christ to the churches. The churches, verse 5 says, whom He loves and has released from their sins by His blood.

The church, which is a kingdom, priests to His God and Father. This is to the churches that He loves. John had to believe that this was going to be a hopeful experience for him.

He had to believe that this was going to be that which his heart had longed for. Everything seemed to be going disastrously bad. He, the last living apostle, knows he will never see his beloved churches again, the churches of Asia Minor over which he had responsibility.

Jerusalem had been destroyed twenty years earlier. That city that God loved more than any city. Some historians say that after the destruction of Jerusalem, the Roman army sacked to one degree or another about 985 towns in the country of Israel.

It was a massive bloodletting against the apple of God's eye. There was no prospect of the promised messianic kingdom. Paganism was in power.

Paganism was not only in power in the world, it was in power in Israel. The apostles had all been killed, and he languishes in exile. And if that's not bad enough, the churches were in serious decline.

Under the powerful influence of the world, the absolutely, utterly, and totally non-Christian world, and as if that powerful influence, which was ubiquitous, wasn't bad enough, it was topped off with persecution. The very churches in Asia Minor to which he had given his leadership was heartbreaking in the direction they were going. Twenty-five years before, Paul had warned about this in 2 Timothy.

When you read 2 Timothy, and I'm talking about chapter 1, 2, 3, 4, Paul just continually warns against what is coming, against the necessity to be faithful to the truth, to guard the truth, to hold the truth. Paul makes it very clear that persecution is going to come, false teaching is going to come, and it's necessary to hold onto the truth, to guard the truth, to preach the truth. Twenty-five years later, everything that Paul said in his swan song has come to pass.

John had to be hopeful as that first vision broke into his consciousness. In verse 11, the Lord says, write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, and Smyrna, and Pergamum, and Thyatira, and Sardis, and Philadelphia, and Laodicea, real churches in real cities. That's the postal route in Asia Minor.

If you follow the postal route from Ephesus, those are the cities you pass in that order. The beginning of the church at Ephesus was monumental, significant, Acts 18 and 19. We know the story.

The gospel went from Ephesus along the postal route, and churches developed in all these towns along the way. John is about to, in a vision, get the Lord's diagnosis of the situation in Asia Minor. I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me.

And having turned, I saw seven golden lampstands, which verse 20 says represent those churches. And in the middle of the lampstands, I saw one like a son of man, clothed in a robe, reaching to the feet and girded across his chest with a golden sash. His head and his hair were white like white wool, like snow, and his eyes were like a flame of fire.

His feet were like burnished bronze when it has been made to glow in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in its strength. This is a shocking image.

It's an absolutely shocking image. It's almost a warrior image, fire, burning bronze, as if it's been in a furnace, a crashing thunderous voice, sovereign control over all those who are in positions of leadership in the church represented by the seven stars. And out of his mouth, a sharp two-edged sword.

This is a warrior. I think John was hoping for a comforting image of Christ. This was not that, and his reaction makes it clear in verse 17.

He is not comforted. He is absolutely terrified, and he falls over like a corpse, like a dead man. Reminiscent of others who had this experience, such as Isaiah, who also, in his vision, according to the very words of Jesus, saw the Son of Man.

He is absolutely terrified. This is the Lord of the church coming to His church like a warrior. And as the Lord then lays out the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor, we find two of them that are true and faithful, and five of them who are in a series of decline.

Looking at them collectively, the five had succumbed to corrupting assaults by Satan. In those five churches, there was, collectively, sexual immorality, idolatry, which was absorbing the culture, compromise, tolerance of sin, dealing with it by allowing it, hypocrisy, false teaching. There are false apostles, false teachers, false prophets or prophetesses.

There is seduction by error and deception. We can assume there was even preaching for money, because Balaamism is mentioned. Some in those churches had sunk into the depths of Satan, and the Lord knows it all.

In fact, we read in those letters, I search the hearts, and I hate the deeds. I know what's in you, and I know your behavior. It really is shocking.

At the end of the first century, the church could have declined like this. It's still shocking to me that there are some in ministry, some churches, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, who are proud that their churches are open and welcoming to adulterers, open and welcoming to fornicators, open and welcoming to the immoral, to the idolatrous, to those who are supporting members of the kingdom of darkness. It's shocking to me that there is, in some churches, little concern for doctrinal truth, not only for the sake of sanctification, but for the sake of protection.

To the churches, the five churches described here, our Lord does not say, I want to commend you because I am so glad that you make all the assorted sinners feel welcome. So glad you do that. That is the opposite of His reaction.

To all those churches in which these transgressions exist, the Lord sounds an unmistakable call to repentance. Here is the only New Testament call from the head of the church to specific churches that dishonor Him, and His call is repent. Repent.

Six times that word appears in these letters. Repent. And it's not just repent, it's repent or else.

Twenty-five years earlier, Peter had written, it is time for judgment to begin at the house of God, which means twenty-five years earlier, Peter already realizes that the house of God needs judgment. And if it begins with us, he said, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel? Repent. It's reminiscent of Ezekiel 9 where the judgment from God is coming on Israel, and it's depicted in the angels that come as slaughtering angels, slaughtering angels.

And God says, go down and mark the ones that are Mine, and the rest kill, and start at My sanctuary. Start at My sanctuary. Judgment begins at the house of God.

Peter may well have had in mind that passage in Ezekiel 9. John would be eager at this point for a vision of comfort, a vision of encouragement, a vision of the triumph of the truth. Instead, he gets a frightening, terrifying picture of the Lord of the church coming like a warrior, and not against the world, but against unfaithful churches that need to repent. We all like to call the nation to repentance, but when do we call the church to repentance? Chapter 2, verse 5, repent, I'm coming to you, and I will remove your lampstand out of its place.

Unless you repent, I'll shut you down. Chapter 2, verse 16, repent, or else I am coming to you soon, and I will make war with the sword of My mouth. Chapter 2, verses 21 to 23, unless they repent, I will kill her children with pestilence, and all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts, and I will give to each one according to your deeds.

Chapter 3, verse 3, repent, if you do not, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. Chapter 3, verses 16, 19, because you are lukewarm and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. Be zealous and repent, repent, or else.

Chapter 2, verse 4, I have this against you. Chapter 2, verse 14, I have these things against you. Chapter 2, verse 20, I have this against you.

Chapter 3, verse 2, I have not found your deeds sufficient in the sight of My God. Chapter 3, verse 16, you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked. Amazing.

Like Ezekiel 9, there are some in these churches who are marked as belonging to the Lord, and to them promises are given, promises to the overcomers. And 1 John says that they overcome by their faith, which is a gift from God. To the overcomers are some wonderful promises, the tree of life in the paradise of God, escape from the second death, hidden manna, a white stone, a new name, authority over the nations, white garments.

They become pillars in the temple of My God. They bear the name of My God and Jesus and the name of Jerusalem and a new name, and they sit on My throne. Those are many ways to express the glories, the inexpressible riches of heaven, but that's heaven.

That does not remove the earthly responsibility of a sinful church to repent. And what is it that defines a church that needs to repent? Any tolerance of worldliness, idolatry, sexual immorality, compromise, deadness, hypocrisy. Churches have people who worship all manner of idols, who engage in all kinds of immorality, which are tolerated and even welcomed.

Churches today commonly compromise with sins of all kinds to gain favor with sinners. Churches are alive organizationally but dead spiritually. This goes on unnoticed.

As the liturgy and the programs continue, some churches are so far gone that the Lord has departed altogether and Ichabod has been written over the church. It's not amazing to think that this was true at the end of the first century. And the Lord, the head of the church says, John, I know you're traumatized.

Get up, pick up your pen, and write this down. This is Christ's call for reformation in the church. These are actual churches, but they are also types of churches through all of church history, and all of them are also a part of our church culture today.

Now, I want to dig down a little further in a kind of broad look at these churches. Two of them, as I said, the second and the fifth, Smyrna and Philadelphia, don't need to repent. So, it is possible to be a part of a church that doesn't need collectively to repent.

Smyrna, troubled, suffering, poor, blasphemed by Jewish agents of Satan, undergoing the same persecution of the other churches, surrounded by the same corrupt world paganism, was faithful and true and pure and holy, and promised even more suffering, even martyrdom, but it was spiritually rich and faithful. Philadelphia, also persecuted, also suffering, also blasted by satanically motivated Jews and tested by trouble, was promised more trouble but protection and fruitfulness. But the other five churches are called to repent because the Lord has something against them.

It is so serious, He is about to come in judgment and even death. Now, some observations. There is a flow from Ephesus to Laodicea, from Ephesus to Pergamos to Thyatira to Sardis to Laodicea.

There is a flow, a very fascinating flow. In Ephesus, you have all believers, in Laodicea, you have no believers, and Christ is outside, knocking. He's not even in the church.

And as you read these five letters, it's so fascinating. There is no statement in the letter to Ephesus about any unbelievers. It's just, you left your first love.

But when you get to Pergamos in chapter 2, all of a sudden there are unbelievers in the church. Verse 14, I have a few things against you. You have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, to commit acts of immorality.

You also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Guess what? You have some unbelievers in your church, some immoral, idolatrous, heretical unbelievers in your church. They're accepted.

They're tolerated, along with their idols and immorality and false teaching. In Thyatira, the number of unbelievers is growing. There are more unbelievers.

In verse 20, I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel. Now He's not saying a few of you do it, you do it. It's as if now there are more unbelievers.

And over against that, verse 24 says, I say to you, the rest who are in Thyatira, the rest refers to the believers. In Ephesus, you have no unbelievers. In Pergamos, you have a few unbelievers.

In Thyatira, the rest are the believers. Then you come to Sardis, and in Sardis, verse 4, you have a few who haven't soiled their garments, and they'll walk with me in white. This is a flow.

This is a pattern of churches being taken over by nonbelievers. And then you come to Laodicea, and there are no believers. There are no believers.

Verse 20, Jesus is on the outside, knocking. This is a church that He would vomit out of His mouth. In reverse order, the false church is made up of hypocrites, no true believers.

The dead church has a reputation for life, but is dominated by the spiritually dead, full of non-Christians with a few believers hanging on. Thyatira, the immoral church, deep into satanic things, still has a remnant of believers. Pergamos, the compromising church, has some unbelievers.

Ephesus, still a church with all believers. I think it's helpful to see the sequence as a slide toward Laodicea, the church that Jesus vomits out of His mouth. If it is true, and I think it is, that there is a flow here, how does the flow begin? How does the drift begin? How does it start? You know.

It started in Ephesus in verse 4 of chapter 2. I have this against you, that you've left your first love. One of the pastors ejected in the Great Ejection was John Flavel. Here was his cry, O Christian, O church, consider your heart is sunk deeper into the world than it used to be.

Repent, return, O backsliding souls, and labor to recover your first love to Christ, whatever pains it costs you. Ephesus had such a great beginning. Paul came there, preached the gospel in the synagogue.

Aquila and Priscilla remained there and became part of the new church. Apollos, the eloquent preacher, mighty in the Old Testament, came and was speaking and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus, helped by Aquila and Priscilla. Paul returned and stayed three years in Ephesus.

Paul trained pastors there, according to Acts 20. Timothy was there shepherding. Tychicus was there shepherding.

And finally, John was there. And that is a lineup, isn't it? Thrilling beginning, teaching, preaching, miracles, the exposure of the sons of Sceva, a riot, shutting down the business of selling idols. What a church-planting experience, even with the best of beginnings, the most miraculous of beginnings, the most esteemed, elevated of leadership.

There is a danger in the church losing its first love, abandoning its first love, and that's where the slide begins. There's a lot that I wanted to say about that, but there are a whole bunch of zeros down here. So, I will say this to you.

If your church has left its first love for Christ, please call your church to repent. Metanoeo in some lexicons is translated reform. Reform.

Do your people love Christ? Are they a part of the fellowship of the burning heart of Luke 24? Do they love Christ? They cannot love Him unless they know Him. They cannot love Him fully unless they know Him fully. They cannot know Him fully unless you preach Him fully.

Preach Christ. In all His majesty, in all His glory, in all His beauty, preach Christ. I wrote this, and I'll close with it.

We love Christ. We love Christ who is the eternal Son, one in nature with the eternal Father and the eternal Spirit, the triune God. We love Christ who is the Creator and life-giver, as well as the sustainer of the universe and all who live in it.

We love Christ who is the virgin-born Son of God and Son of Man, fully divine and fully human. We love Christ who is the one whose life on earth perfectly pleased God and whose righteousness is given to all who by grace through faith become one with Him. We love Christ who is the only acceptable sacrifice for sin that pleases God and whose death under divine judgment paid in full the penalty for the sins of His people, providing for them forgiveness and eternal life.

We love Christ who is alive, having been raised from the dead by the Father, validating His work of atonement and providing resurrection for the sanctification and glorification of the elect to bring them safely into His heavenly presence. We love Christ who is at the Father's throne interceding for all believers. We love Christ who is God's chosen prophet, priest, and king, proclaiming truth, mediating for His church, and reigning over His kingdom forever.

We love Christ who will return suddenly from heaven to rapture His church, unleash judgment on the wicked, bring promised salvation to the Jews and the nations, and establish His millennial reign on earth. We love Christ who will, after that earthly reign, destroy the universe, finally judge all sinners, and send them to hell, then create the new heavens and the new earth where He will dwell forever with His saints in glory, joy, and love. This is the Christ we love.

This is the Christ we preach, and we love Him because He first loved us. Father, we thank You for Your Word, for its richness, even for its threats that warn us of a path that heads toward judgment. We don't want churches that You are against.

I pray, Lord, that there will be a serious movement of Your Holy Spirit to bring repentance to Your church. And may each of us honestly come before You with our leaders and our congregations to cry out and say, Lord, do we need to repent? If so, reveal that to us. We want to be Your church, bringing honor to Your name.

Before we can expect a nation to repent, the church has to repent so that You can use us. We ask these things, Lord, humbly. We want Your blessing and favor.

We don't want You to shut us down. We don't want You to be against us. That's hopeless.

We don't want You to remove our people. We don't want to see people literally dying, being removed like those who desecrated Your table in Corinth. We don't want You to be our enemy.

May we exalt You, O Lord Jesus. May You be the theme of our songs and our preaching, and may we focus on Your glory so that our love for You burns bright and then brighter and then the brightest, that we may know Your blessing and be useful. Thank You for the calling You've given to us.

Give us the strength and power to be faithful to it, and we thank You in the name of our blessed and beloved Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.