



The Seven Churches of Revelation

Article: Revelation 2-3

The Seven Churches of Revelation

By Randy Judd

CrossSites Bible Study

©2023 CrossSites Bible Study
St. Augustine, FL 32092

{Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture verses are taken from the English Standard Version}

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	4
THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS	4
Background.....	4
Content of the Letter.....	4
Church Age Represented	5
THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT SMYRNA	5
Background.....	5
Content of the Letter.....	5
Church Age Represented	5
THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT PERGAMUM	6
Background.....	6
Content of the Letter.....	6
Church Age Represented	6
THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT THYATIRA	7
Background.....	7
Content of the Letter.....	7
Church Age Represented	7
THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT SARDIS	7
Background.....	7
Content of the Letter.....	8
Church Age Represented	8
THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT PHILADELPHIA	8
Background.....	8
Content of the Letter.....	9
Church Age Represented	9
THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT LAODICEA.....	9
Background.....	9
Content of the Letter.....	9
Church Age Represented	10
CONCLUSION	10
ENDNOTES.....	11

INTRODUCTION

The letter to the seven churches of Asia Minor is found in the 2nd and 3rd chapters of the book of Revelation. The section of the book is “The things which are.” This indicates that the letters were sent to seven literal churches. These seven churches are only a representation of possibly 100 separate and independent local churches, established in the first century.¹ These churches were a result of the missionary efforts of the Apostles.

Christ instructed John to write to only these seven churches. These seven letters had a threefold significance² First, they were real churches that had real problems. Second, the problems which these churches had are representative of problems that churches throughout history have faced. Third, these churches are representative of the stages of development of the Christian church.

The content of each of the letters follows a similar format. The letters begin with an introduction of Christ. In the introduction an aspect of the nature of Christ is described. The body of each of the letters contains basic elements common to each. There is a commendation, in which Christ praises the good works of the churches. The commendation is followed by a condemnation of the evil in the churches. The churches are exhorted to repent and are told what would happen if they did or didn’t repent. All the letters end with a command for all the churches to take notice of the letters. By studying the background of the churches, a better understanding of the content can be gained.

THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT EPHEBUS

Background

The city of Ephesus was located at the mouth of the Cayster River on the west coast of Asia Minor, Ephesus was the capital of the Roman province of Asia. The population of Ephesus was more than 300,000 people.³ It was a trading center with a beautiful and accessible harbor. Ephesus was not only a trade center but was also a center for cult worship. The city was built near the site of a shrine to an old Anatolian fertility goddess.⁴ This temple was beautiful and was considered to be one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

The church at Ephesus was the product of Paul’s third missionary journey. The Apostle John was said to have lived in Ephesus before and after his exile on Patmos.

Content of the Letter

The letter to the church Ephesus is found in [Rev 2:1-7](#). The letter opens with the introduction of Christ as being the one who walks among the seven lampstands which is representative of the seven churches ([2:1](#)). The omnipresence of Christ is illustrated. Christ is always present and concerned about the church. Christ compliments the church of Ephesus on three things ([2:2-3](#)). First, their hard work. The church was evangelistic. Second, they had perseverance. The church had endured the persecution of the culture. Third, they did not tolerate false doctrine. The church had separated itself from the culture. The church at Ephesus was faithful to Christ, but it also had a problem. Christ condemns the church for losing its first love ([2:4](#)). The members of the church which the letter was addressed were second generation Christians. They were the offspring of the Christians who converted under Paul’s ministry. The losing of their first love was not a complete forsaking of the love toward God but was a lack of the fervent expression of that love.⁵ The first love refers to that love a person has when they first accept Christ as savior.

Christ exhorts the church to repent and return to their first love ([2:5](#)). Christ also warns the church that if they did not repent then He would remove their lampstand. Albert Barnes states that, “The expression is equivalent to saying the church there would cease to exist.”⁶ In other words if the church did not repent, then Christ was going to remove it from the city. Christ does praise the church for its stand against the Nicolaitans ([2:6](#)). Christ promises that those who repent He will give the Tree of Life ([2:7](#)).

Church Age Represented

The word Ephesus (*Gr. Ephesos*) means desirable.⁷ This is a good description of the early churches. In church history this period is known as the Apostolic Church. During the Apostolic period, the writing of the New Testament was completed. The Apostolic period lasted from A.D. 30-100. Like the church at Ephesus, the churches in Apostolic period started out strong but toward the end they began to lose their fervent expression of the love and witness of Christ.

The church at Ephesus also represents individual churches throughout history. These churches have started out as doctrinally strongholds with a fervent passion for the gospel. These churches loved God and worked overtime to serve Him. Then as time passed, they become tolerant of their culture and lost their true commitment to sound doctrine and the gospel.

THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT SMYRNA

Background

The city of Smyrna was located approximately 40 miles north of Ephesus. The ancient city of Smyrna is the modern city of Izmir, Turkey. It is located on the west coast of Turkey. Smyrna was a beautiful city with its excellent harbor. Smyrna was known for its fine schools of medicine and science. The city was also home of my apostate Jews. One of the products produced in the city was the aromatic substance Myrrh.

Content of the Letter

The letter to the church of Smyrna is found in [Rev 2:8-11](#). The letter opens with the introduction of Christ as the first and the last which was dead and is alive ([2:8](#)). In this statement Christ is shown as incarnate and eternal. He is from eternal past to eternal future.

Christ commends the church at Smyrna for their perseverance in poverty and persecution ([2:9](#)). The church at Smyrna was a poor church. Many of the members had belonged to the labor guilds. When that became Christians, they were forced out of the guilds and had no way to support their families⁸ Christ says that He knows of their state and about the persecution from the apostate Jews who lived in the city.

Christ has no commendation for the church at Smyrna. Christ exalts the church for the way that they are during persecution. Christ tells them not to fear persecution. He also warns that there were coming ten days of persecution ([2:10](#)). During these days of persecution some would be cast into prison and others would die. Christ tells the church that those who are faithful unto death will be given a crown of life. Christ closes the letter by saying that those who overcome will not be hurt by the second death. The faithful would not die spiritually but receive eternal life.

Church Age Represented

The word Smyrna means “myrrh.”⁹ This fragrance was used in the burial process. This describes the church from A.D. 100-313. This period of church history is known as the Martyr Church. During this period the church was under heavy persecution by the Roman government. During this period the church faithful to the gospel and many died for their faith. It was one of the greatest times of persecution that the church has experienced.

The church at Smyrna represents all the churches throughout history that have endured persecution. When you read about a church under persecution, you also read about those who remained faithful. A good example is the churches under totalitarian rule. When the Iron Curtain fell in 1989, a strong underground church was able to come out into the open.

Today around the world in many countries, Christians are being persecuted for their faith. The Chinese church though forced into hiding is very strong with millions of believers faithfully Christ. Muslim governments are hunting down and killing Christians in the name of Allah. Even in America, Christians are beginning to be persecuted for not going along with the

culture. If there was every time that believers should stay faithful it is today. The modern church in America could learn a lot from the church at Smyrna.

THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT PERGAMUM

Background

The city of Pergamum was located approximately seventy-five miles north of Ephesus, in the Casius valley. The Roman writer Pliny called it “by far the most distinguished city in Asia”¹⁰. Pergamum survives today as the Turkish city of Bergama.

Pergamum was a center of cultic worship. Some of the cults were Athena, Zeus, Asclepius, and Dionysus. The first temple for emperor worship was built in Pergamos. The city was the location of the famous library (over 200,000 written volumes) that Mark Anthony gave to Queen Cleopatra of Egypt.¹¹ The main trade in Pergamum was the making and selling of papyrus, which was used in the making of parchment.

Content of the Letter

The letter to the church at Pergamum is found in [Rev. 2:12-17](#). Christ opens the letter by Himself as having a sharp twoedged sword ([2:12](#)). This is in reference to the Word of God.¹²

The commendation that Christ gave the church was that the church was holding fast to the faith while living in the presence of cultic worship ([2:13](#)). Christ refers to Pergamum as throne of Satan.

Christ also has a condemnation for the church. The sin of the church was compromise. The church has allowed two false doctrines to be taught in the church. These doctrines were Nicolaitan and Balaam ([2:14-15](#)). The church was compromising with the culture. They compromised with paganism, going back to the teaching of Balaam were spiced with the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Together they argue that it really doesn't matter how you live, because you will be discarding your body at death and your soul will fly safely to God.¹³ It was compromising with the culture in order to fit in. The church began to develop the beginnings of clergy rule.

Christ warns that He will come quickly with a sword in His mouth if the church does not repent ([2:16](#)). This possibly in reference to that Christ will judge with a spoken word.¹⁴ Christ also promises that the one who overcomes will eat of hidden manna and will be given a white stone ([2:17](#)). The hidden manna refers to spiritual food and the white stone refers to acquittal. In the first century a person who was on trial was given either a black stone or a white stone at the end of the trail. If given a black stone, it means guilty, and the white stone meant not guilty.

Church Age Represented

The word Pergamum (Gr. *Pergamos*) means marriage.¹⁵ The church at Pergamum was comprising or intermarrying with the culture. During the period of church history from A.D. 313-590 the church intermarried with the culture. Historians call this period the “Compromising Church.” In A.D 313, Constantine signed the “*Edict of Tolerance*.”¹⁶ Christianity became the national religion. It became fashionable to join the church. There was an intermarriage of the church and the culture. Many of those who joined brought with them pagan practices. Many of these practices became a part of church doctrine. During this time, we begin to see a formation of the clergy as rulers of both the church and politics. The church had compromised with the culture.

Throughout history there have been churches and denominations that have sought to make themselves a part of the culture. The modern church is not immune to compromise. The Seeker Friendly movement sought to make the church comfortable for non-believers. Many denominations today are splitting over cultural issues. This has led to a weak church that has very little influence on the culture that it is trying to reach with the gospel. If there is not repentance and a return to the truth of the Bible, there will be judgement. This is what was promised to the church at Pergamum and is true for the unrepented church today.

THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT THYATIRA

Background

The city of Thyatira was located 35 miles southeast of Pergamum. The modern city is called Akhisar. The city was the headquarters of many labor guilds. Among them were guilds of tanners, potters, weavers, dyers and robemakers.¹⁷ Paul's first European convert was, Lydia, was from Thyatira.

Content of the Letter

The letter to the church at Thyatira is found in [Rev 2:18-29](#). Christ describes Himself as the one who has eyes like fire and feet like fine brass ([2:18](#)). This description reveals two characteristics of Christ. The eyes of fire show His piercing penetrating knowledge, while the feet of fine brass show that the outgoing of His providence is pure and holy.¹⁸ Christ compliments the church for its works ([2:19](#)). The church was a church of love, service, faith, and patience. Christ has a condemnation for the church. The problem that the church at Thyatira had been moral compromise. Christ likens its moral compromise to the Old Testament queen Jezebel ([2:20](#)). It is possible that Christ is referring to a woman in the church who had gained prominence in the church.¹⁹ This woman like Jezebel encouraged fellow members to practice cultic practices. These practices included indulging in prostitution and eating meat sacrificed to idols. Christ demands that the church at Thyatira repent and turn from their immoral ways. If the church would not repent, then He would bring His wrath upon them ([2:22-23](#)). Christ says that He Knew that there are some in the church who hold fast to the faith ([2:24](#)). To these members He promises that they will have power over nations and will be given the morning star ([2:26-28](#)). This morning star could possibly refer to a spirit of hope, like the coming of a new day.²⁰

Church Age Represented

The word Thyatira (Gr. *Thyatira*) means "continual sacrifice"²¹ This could represent the Roman Catholic Church. This period is considered to be from A.D. 590 – 1517. The Roman Catholic Church taught many false doctrines. The church leaders claimed rights that were not given to them in scripture. The Papacy was instituted. It was a period of time of moral compromise and teaching of false doctrines by the church. Sin among the clergy was tolerated. This behavior led the church and the culture into a period that historians call t "The Dark Ages". It was a time of superstition and cultural decay.

There have been churches though out history that have fallen victim to moral compromise. The most common factor in these churches is they turn away from true doctrine and follow a false or more convenient doctrine. We are seeing this in some main line denominations today. In order to be accepted by the culture they create false doctrine. History has proven and Christ warns against following false doctrines or teachings. Doing so will always lead to moral compromise.

THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT SARDIS

Background

The city of Sardis was founded about 1200 B.C. Sardis had been one of the greatest cities in the ancient world, capital of the fabulously wealthy Lydian kingdom.²² Sardis was located approximately 30 miles south of Thyatira, the fertile valley of the Hermus River.

Sardis was famous for its wealth. Sardis was also famous for its art and crafts and was the first center to mind gold and silver coinage. The major industry of Sardis was the making of carpets.

The city came under Roman control in 133 B.C. In A.D. 17 the city was completely destroyed by an earthquake. The city was rebuilt with the generous financial aid of Emperor Tiberius. In John's time the city was prosperous but decayed, its glory days long past.

Content of the Letter

The letter to the Church at Sardis is found in [Rev 3:1-5](#). Christ describes Himself as the one who has the seven spirits of God and seven stars ([3:1](#)). The seven spirits, first mentioned in [Rev 1:4](#), are simply another designation for the Holy Spirit. The Seven stars represent the seven messengers or pastors of the seven churches.²³ Christ is declaring that He is in control of the messengers of the churches.

Christ uncovers the sin in the Church at Sardis. It was a church that was thought to be alive by those looking on from the outside, but in fact it was a spiritually dead church ([3:1](#)). The church was so spiritually dead that Christ could not find anything good to say about the church. The result was that Christ warns the church to repent or face sudden judgement ([3:2-3](#)).

The good news was that the Church at Sardis was not completely dead. Among the believers were some who were still faithful to the teachings of Christ ([3:4](#)). These believers had not dirtied themselves with false teachings or the sins of the world. To this remnant Christ promises to clothe in white raiment and not blot out their names from the Book of Life. He promises them Eternal Life ([3:5](#))

Church Age Represented

The word Sardis (Gk. *Sardeis*) means remnant.²⁴ The wickedness of the Roman Catholic Church was too much for some Christians. On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther took a stand against the Church. He posted 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. Martin Luther was challenging the teaching of the church. Especially in the area of indulgences. This action was the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Luther and a remnant of other believers began to challenge what they saw as false doctrines being taught by the Roman Catholic Church. This reformation the remnant of true believers to take a stand for biblical truth.

Down throughout history there has been a remnant of true believers who have not strayed for the truth of the Word of God. During times when churches have gone dead and followed false doctrine, these believers have stood strong on the truth. Many have given their lives protecting the truth. Like the reformers, they have left the false teachings of a dead church to spread the truth.

Today many of the main line denominations in America are following false teachings because of pressures from the culture. There is need today for believers with the courage of the early Christians and others who have stayed true to Word of God. This will mean standing in opposition to the culture and standing on the truth.

THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT PHILADELPHIA

Background

The city of Philadelphia is located approximately 30 miles southeast of Sardis. Philadelphia was the youngest of the seven cities, founded sometime after 189 B.C. The city derived its name from Attalus II's nickname *Philadelphus* ("brother lover"), which his loyalty to his brother Eumenes had earned him.²⁵ It was known as the "gateway to the East," Philadelphia sat in a lush valley in the heart of Asia Minor, near the pass into the Timolous Mountains. It was literally the "open door" between East and West.²⁶

Little is known about the Philadelphia church apart from this passage. Like most of the other seven churches, it was probably founded during Paul's ministry at Ephesus. While we know very little about the Philadelphian church, their faithfulness stands as a challenging testimony to us. While the political environment shifted around them, they remained true to Christ. There is a Christian presence even today in the modern city of Philadelphia.

Content of the Letter

The letter to the church in Philadelphia is found [Rev 3:7-13](#). Christ describes Himself as the holy and sovereign God who is in control of everything. Christ had only commendations for the church at Philadelphia. The church was completely surrounded by a culture of heathenism and cults. Even with all this darkness surrounding the church it remained faithful to the Word of God. For their faithfulness Christ gave the church an open door of evangelism ([3:8](#)).²⁷ The church in Philadelphia got out the Word of God and, as far as it is known, this church lasted longer than any other of the seven churches. Until the thirteenth century, it had a continuous existence. It is also believed that the gospel reached India because of their faithfulness.²⁸

As a result of their faithfulness, Christ tells the church that no one will be able to stand in the way of their service ([3:9](#)). Christ promised to keep them from the hour of tribulation ([3:10](#)). To those who overcome and endure are given the promise of eternal life in heaven ([3:12](#)).

Church Age Represented

The word Philadelphia means “brotherly love”.²⁹ The church in Philadelphia represents the revived church, dating from approximately the beginning of the seventeenth century to the Rapture. During the period of from 1700 to 1900 there were many spiritual revivals. These revivals were called “*Great Awakenings*”.

There were many preachers and evangelists that travelled the world preaching the gospel and seeing revivals accrue. It is said that during some of these revivals bars and pubs would have to shut down due to amount of people coming to know Christ and lives being changed. Like the church at Philadelphia, these evangelists witnessed the opening of a door for soul winning.

Today in churches there are multitudes of people who are turning to the Word of God. People wanting to hear the true Word of God and are hungry for it. The true church is called to be a church committed to the Great Commission. They are to make disciples and teach the commandments of God. A church that fails to complete this mission will be like the last church Christ addresses...Laodicea.

THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT LAODICEA

Background

The city of Laodicea was part of a triad of cities (with Colossae and Hierapolis) in the Lycus Valley. It was about one hundred miles east of Ephesus. It was the southernmost city of the seven cities. Laodicea was a wealthy and prosperous city. It had three main industries, finance, wool, and the production of eye salve. The city was so wealthy that when it was devastated by an earthquake in A.D. 60, it was able to rebuild without any outside help. In fact, it rejected offers of financial aid from Rome. It prided itself on being self-sufficient.

The city sat on a plateau. This required that water be piped in from Colossae and Hierapolis. The water from Colossae was cold while the water for Hierapolis was from hot springs. This meant that by the time it reached Laodicea the water would have been lukewarm.

Content of the Letter

The letter to the church at Laodicea is found in [Rev 3:14-22](#). Christ opens the letter by describing Himself as being present at the creation of the earth. Christ has no commendation for the church. His description of the church is that they are like lukewarm water ([3:15](#)). Christ says that the church was good for nothing. In fact if they were lukewarm water, He would spit them out of His mouth. This was an apostate church; they had abandoned the truth of the gospel for a lie. The members of the church had become indifferent to the things of God. The church was a totally unregenerate, false church.

This church had as Paul writes, *“Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away”* ([2 Tim. 3:5](#)). No one is harder reach for Christ than a false Christian.

The second fault that Christ finds with the church is wealth. Laodicea was a wealthy and prosperous city. The members of the church relied on their wealth and not God ([3:17](#)). This wealth gave the members a false sense of security. They placed their trust in material things not the things of God.

Christ exhorts the church to repent and come back to Him for their needs ([3:18](#)). Christ illustrates His willingness to forgive, as one who stands a door knocking to come in ([3:20](#)). Christ is standing outside the door of this apostate church seeking for them to repent, so that He can come in and dine with them. Sharing a meal in ancient times symbolized the union of people in loving fellowship. This can also be applied to the heart of any lost person. Christ seeks to come in and have fellowship with all who are willing to repent and turn to Him. Christ promises that anyone who opens the door, repents, and seeks fellowship will gain eternal life in heaven with Him.

Church Age Represented

The word Laodicea means “People’s Rights”.³⁰ The Greek word *laos*, from which we get our word “laity,” means “people.” *Diece* means “decision” or “rule.” Thus, the church of the Laodiceans was directed by the people rather than guided by the Lord.³¹ Throughout history there have been those churches that have relied on their prosperity and wealth. They presented themselves as a spiritual church but inside they were lost and unrepentant. They have allowed people to rule the doctrine and actions of the church, not the Holy Spirit. They are called apostate churches.

Unfortunately, there are many churches and denominations in this country that could be called a Laodicea church. These churches use wealth as a measuring rod of spiritual success. Many are run like a business and seek to accumulate wealth. They are more concerned with pleasing the culture and people’s rights than standing on the truth of the Word of God. They use the excuse that *“we have to be like the culture to win the culture.”* Anytime you accommodate the culture, you move further away from the doctrines of the faith. This is the true definition of apostate.

The growth of the apostate church is a clear foreshadowing of the coming of Christ. Jude writes that in the last days there will be a falling away for spiritual things. Truly we are seeing a falling away by many of the main line denominations. They have become wealthy. They seek to accommodate the culture to remain *“relevant.”* They reject the truth for a lie. They seek to reinterpret the Word of God to meet their beliefs. The apostate church has and is causing many to follow a false doctrine that will lead to destruction.

The only way that the believers will have any impact on their culture is to live authentic lives. This will mean taking a stand against the culture. Believers have to study the Word of God carefully and consistently. They have to be in tune with the leadership of the Holy Spirit. If there is ever a time in human history where the remnant stands strong on the Word of God, it is today. As the return of Christ nears the true church must faithfully seek to accomplish the Great Commission of making disciples.

CONCLUSION

A study of these seven churches will help in the understanding of the church. The letters were to seven literal churches. Christ not only showed the churches where they had problems but gave solutions to those problems. The letters to the seven churches of Asia are a call of heartfelt faithfulness to Christ.

These churches also represented periods of church history. As we read the letters, we can see the issues that many churches throughout history have faced. The modern church should study these letters in order to avoid or correct issues that hinder the growth of the Kingdom.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Willmington, Harold, *Willmington's Guide to the Bible* (Tyndale House Publishers, 1981), p. 541
- ² Gromacki, Robert G., *New Testament Survey* (Baker Book House, 1974), p. 401
- ³ Pfeiffer, Charles F., Howard Frederic Vos, and John Rea, *The Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia* (Moody Press, 1975), p.534
- ⁴ Halley, Henry Hampton, *Halley's Bible Handbook* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), p. 695
- ⁵ Henry, Matthew, *Matthew Henry's Commentary the Bible:* (Revell Co, 1975), p. 1124
- ⁶ Barnes, Albert, *Notes on the New Testament: Revelation*, (Bake Book House, 1949), p. 66
- ⁷ Falwell, Jerry, Edward Hindson, and Woodrow Kroll, *Liberty Commentary on the New Testament*, (Liberty Press,1978), p.753
- ⁸ Willmington, p.547
- ⁹ Falwell, p.753
- ¹⁰ Mounce, Robert H., "*The Book of Revelation*", *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 95)
- ¹¹ MacArthur, J.F., Jr. *Revelation 1–11*, *MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Moody Press, 1999), p. 84.
- ¹² Walvoord, John F. *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Moody Press, 1966) p.67
- ¹³ Knowles, Andrew. 2001. *The Bible Guide*. (Augsburg, 2001), p 698
- ¹⁴ Barnes, p.77
- ¹⁵ Falwell, p.757
- ¹⁶ Willmington, p.543
- ¹⁷ Ibid, p.544
- ¹⁸ Henry, p.764
- ¹⁹ Walvoord, p.73
- ²⁰ "The Revelation of John", *The Cambridge Bible Commentary*, (Cambridge University Press, 1965), p.31 ²¹ Falwell, p.754
- ²² MacArthur, John F., *Revelation 1–11. MacArthur New Testament Commentary*. (Moody Press, 1999), p. 109 ²³ Barnes, p.89
- ²⁴ Falwell, p.754
- ²⁵ MacArthur, p. 109
- ²⁶ Hindson, Ed, and Elmer L. Towns. *Illustrated Bible Survey: An Introduction*. (B&H Academic, 2013) p.564
- ²⁷ Falwell, p.755
- ²⁸ McGee, J. Vernon. *Thru the Bible Commentary*. Electronic ed. Vol. 5. (Thomas Nelson. 1997) p 918
- ²⁹ Wilmingon, p.541 ³⁰ Ibid, p. 541
- ³¹ Courson, J. (2003) *Jon Courson's Application Commentary*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, p. 1684.