

The Seven Churches of The Apocalypse



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The book of Revelation, also known as “the Apocalypse,” is one of the most fascinating books of the New Testament. It is filled with prophetic imagery—multi-headed beasts, strange celestial creatures, spectacular cosmic disturbances, and loathsome plagues being “poured out” on sinning mankind. But Revelation is also a book of exhortation and encouragement for suffering saints, as well as a book of admonition and warning for Christians who have strayed from the path of life. The book is addressed “to the seven churches of Asia” (Revelation 1:4), but its message is for every generation of God’s people. It’s time we listen to the voice of the Revelator! “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

The mysterious last book of the New Testament is not “The Revelation of St. John the Divine,” as it has been erroneously called. John was merely the instrument of divine revelation, not its source. And, if he were here today, he would be appalled at the title “the Divine.”

The very first verse of the book provides an appropriate title, and reveals both the source and destination of the message: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ”—a perfect title—“which God gave Him to show His servants—things which must shortly take place.” Ultimately, God the Father is the Source of the message contained in this book. He gave it to His Son to give to His servants. John was merely an instrument through which the message was delivered: “And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John.”

John, in turn, passed the message along to “the seven churches which are in Asia” (1:4). He was following the instruction Jesus Christ had given him in a vision while he was on the island called Patmos: “What you see, write in a book and send to the seven churches which are in Asia, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea” (1:11).

Once in the possession of the seven churches, the book of Revelation quickly made its way to assemblies of God’s people throughout the known world. It was copied and recopied countless times, and now, some nineteen hundred years later, has made its way into our hands. Obviously, the message to the seven churches was not meant only for the assemblies of first-century Asia Minor. It was meant for every generation of God’s people; it was meant for us.

So it’s time we pay careful attention to “what the Spirit says to the churches” (2:7,11,17,29; 3:8,13,22).

The ‘Seven Ages’ Theory

Many interpreters—especially dispensationalists—believe the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3 represent seven church ages, beginning with the time of the apostles and concluding with the time of the end. Through innovation and inference, one can make the

descriptions of the seven churches roughly “match” various movements and events in the 2,000-year history of Christianity, thus presenting what appears to be a plausible sequence of prophetic fulfillments.

Popular evangelical author Hal Lindsey, famous for his best-selling book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, follows other dispensationalists in his interpretation of the seven churches. He believes that the seven churches were literal assemblies that existed in Asia Minor at the time John wrote, and that they prophetically describe seven ages extending from the apostolic church to the church of the last days. He presented the following associations in *There’s A New World Coming*, his commentary on the book of Revelation:

1. The Church in Ephesus: Apostolic Church (A.D. 33–100)
2. The Church in Smyrna: Era of Persecution Under the Ten Caesars (A.D. 100–312)
3. The Church in Pergamum: Era of Church-State Union (A.D. 312–590)
4. The Church in Thyatira: Era Spanning the Middle Ages (A.D. 590–1517)
5. The Church in Sardis: Protestant Reformation (A.D. 1517–1750)
6. The Church in Philadelphia: Era of Revival and Great Awakening (A.D. 1750–1925)
7. The Church in Laodicea: Era of “Higher Criticism” (A.D. 1900–Tribulation)

Others have come up with different arrangements, even identifying specific organizations and movements as “eras.” For instance, some within the Sabbath-keeping movement have attempted to identify the Church of God (Seventh Day) with Sardis; the Worldwide Church of God (or one of its offshoots) with Philadelphia; and various other bodies with Laodicea.

Of course, any such theory is speculative at best. One cannot prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that the seven churches represent seven church ages. One could just as well argue that the seven churches are seven organizations or “branches” of the true church at the time of the end. But that, too, would be speculative.

The best we can do is believe—accept as fact—only those things that can be proved, and leave what cannot be proved in the vast realm of speculation. Our task, then, is to see what the Revelator—Jesus Christ—says, and what He does not say. In chapter 1, the glorified Christ has seven stars in His right hand, and is surrounded by seven golden lampstands. These stars and lampstands are obviously symbols. But what do they represent? What are the objects of these symbols?

Jesus Christ answers:

“The seven stars are the angels [messengers] of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches” (Revelation 1:20).

Remember, the symbols are the stars and the lampstands; the objects of those symbols—the things they symbolize—are the seven angels, or messengers, and the seven churches. There is no good reason to assume that the seven angels (symbolized by the seven stars)

are themselves symbols of something else; nor is it reasonable to assume that the seven churches (symbolized by the seven golden lampstands) are symbols of church ages. The Revelator says plainly that the seven golden lampstands (obvious symbols) ARE the seven churches, and He identifies those seven churches as “seven churches which are in Asia” (1:11).

Jesus Christ is the infallible Revelator. He alone can infallibly interpret the symbols of the book of Revelation. Here, He reveals the meaning of the symbolic stars and lampstands.

Now if the infallible Revelator tells us that the seven lampstands ARE the seven churches of Asia, then we should simply believe it. All of us—including the dispensationalists—should be able to agree on this. And most—if not all—do agree on this point. As noted above, Hal Lindsey believes that the messages of Revelation 2 and 3 were sent to, and received by, seven literal churches in Asia Minor. The Sabbath-keeping “Church of God” groups that teach “church eras” also accept this. The problem is that some move beyond the Revelator’s own interpretations and begin to teach as doctrine things the Revelator did not say.

Jesus Christ did not say that the seven lampstands are seven church ages. He said plainly that the lampstands ARE the seven churches of Asia—churches located in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. Therefore, if we say that we believe that the seven lampstands (churches) are something other than, or in addition to, what Christ plainly says they are, then it is imperative that we admit that we are speculating!

We can all say with certainty that the seven churches really existed, that they were located in Asia Minor, and that John wrote to them. But we cannot say with certainty that the seven churches represent seven church ages spanning some 2,000 years; nor can we say with certainty that the seven churches represent seven organizations or movements in the time of the end.

But this we can say: The messages to the seven churches are for anyone “who has an ear” and is willing to “hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22). So rather than engage in the unfruitful practice of labeling churches with “Laodicea” or “Philadelphia” or “Sardis,” let’s hear what the Spirit says to us in these seven messages.

Commendations

The seven churches had their share of problems, but they also had some important positive attributes. Christ commends them for their strengths, and His commendations should be both motivating and instructive for God’s people today.

The strengths Christ identifies in the seven churches can be summarized under three main categories: (1) vigilance, or watchfulness; (2) perseverance; and (3) improvements in performance.

Vigilance, or Watchfulness

To the church of Ephesus, Christ says, “I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars” (Revelation 2:2).

The Ephesians had done a good job of following the apostle Paul’s exhortation to their elders: “For I know this,” Paul warned, “that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves [the leaders] men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears” (Acts 20:29–31).

Paul’s admonition to the Ephesian elders probably took place several decades before the book of Revelation was written. Christ’s message to the church of Ephesus shows that the Ephesians had taken Paul’s exhortation seriously. The “wolves” had come, but the “flock,” being vigilant, recognized them for what they were.

The Ephesians, it seems, had become quite proficient in recognizing, and rejecting, heretical movements. “But this you have,” Christ says, “that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate” (Revelation 2:6). The precise identity of the Nicolaitans is uncertain, but we know for sure that they advocated a philosophy that made compromise with falsehood seem acceptable—a doctrine similar to the phony “grace” (or license to sin) some popular evangelists proclaim today. The Ephesians would not stand for it!

Perseverance

The Christians of Smyrna had endured tribulation and poverty, and Christ urges them to face the new trials that would soon come upon them with faith and courage. “Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer,” He urged. “Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Revelation 2:10).

Many of the believers of the church in Pergamos persevered in the faith even during times of severe persecution (verse 13). The faithful of the church in Thyatira, known for their patience and works of love and service (verse 19), were urged to “hold fast what you have till I come” (verse 25)—to persevere in love and good works in spite of the apostate movement spreading among believers in Thyatira.

Christ has only positive things to say about the Philadelphian Christians. “Because you have kept My command to persevere,” He promises, “I also will keep you from the hour of trial that shall come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth” (Revelation 3:10). This “hour of trial” appears to refer specifically to the end-time Day of the Lord—a major theme of Revelation—but in principle includes any time of divine intervention and wrath. This does not mean that the church in Philadelphia symbolizes a par-

ticular end-time assembly of the faithful. It simply means that the message is not restricted to the believers of late first-century Philadelphia; it is universal (as “whole world” suggests). It tells us that just as Christ called on the Christians of Philadelphia to persevere in the faith, so He calls on all His brethren everywhere to “Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown” (verse 11).

Improvements in Performance

The faithful believers within the troubled church in Thyatira are commended for their good works and improvements in performance. “I know your works, love, service, faith, and your patience; and as far as your works, the last are more than the first” (Revelation 2:19).

Each of the letters to the seven churches promises divine blessings for the one “who overcomes” (2:7,11,17,26; 3:5,12,21). To “overcome” is to prevail, or conquer. Overcoming, by its very nature, is an improvement in performance. We overcome when we conquer bad habits, successfully resist temptations, and take control of our thoughts.

The internal qualities of faith, love, and hope influence our behavior—our “works,” our service to others. But it’s important to realize that our external works—the things we do—have a powerful effect on the internal qualities of faith, love, and hope. The internal qualities and external works go hand-in-hand. Improving one results in improvements in the other—but deterioration of one means deterioration of the other. When we find ourselves short on faith or love, we need to follow the admonition Christ gave to the church whose love had waned: “Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works” (2:5).

Problems and Admonitions

Christ’s commendations for the seven churches are motivating and instructive, but His admonitions are equally important. The problems in the seven churches range from a loss of love and general apathy to full-scale apostasy. The following are the problems Christ identifies in His messages to the seven churches:

Loss of First Love

The church in Ephesus was known for its good works and perseverance, but somewhere along the way a problem developed: the church had lost its “first love” (Revelation 2:4). Christ knew that this problem would lead to the church’s inability to bear light to the world (verse 5) and would open the door to apostasy, though up to this point the Ephesian church had performed remarkably well in exposing false apostles (verse 2).

The church’s waning love had already affected its performance as a light-bearing instrument. For this reason, Christ warned, “Remember therefore from whence you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lamp-

stand from its place—unless you repent” (verse 5).

Christ is the One “who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands” (verse 1), as if moving from one to the other to monitor their performance and even remove lamps that had become so defective that they could no longer bear light. His coming to “remove your lampstand from its place” is not the Parousia, or Second Coming, but is a divine judgment occurring within the church age.

The Teachings of Balaam, the Nicolaitans, and Jezebel

Some of the members of the church in Pergamos had exhibited their loyalty to Christ and His truth even in times of severe persecution and martyrdom (Revelation 2:13). But other members of this church were not so faithful. They are identified as two groups. One held the “doctrine of Balaam” (verse 14), and the other held the “doctrine of the Nicolaitans” (verse 15).

In the Old Testament, “Balaam” is a diviner hired by the Moabite king, Balak, to curse the people of Israel, but God causes him to bless Israel instead (Numbers 22–24). Unable to curse Israel directly, Balaam taught Balak how to seduce the men of Israel to commit idolatry, thus causing them to bring a curse on themselves.

The “doctrine of Balaam,” then, is a teaching that permits mingling idolatrous practices with the worship of God. Apparently this teaching provided a philosophical “justification” for compromising with evil under certain circumstances. It was especially attractive in a time when refusing to participate in pagan rites and emperor worship could result in severe economic privation or even the death sentence.

Both “Balaam” and “Nicolaitan” can mean “to conquer the people.” The Balaamites and Nicolaitans were apparently two distinct groups who held essentially the same philosophy. As Balaam of old taught Balak how to “conquer the people” through seduction, the Balaamites and Nicolaitans in Pergamos attempted to conquer the people of God (for Satan) through encouraging them to compromise with paganism.

Christ’s warning is clear: “Repent, or else I will come to you quickly and will fight against them with the sword of My mouth” (verse 16).

In Thyatira, “that woman Jezebel” (verse 20), named for the idolatrous wife of King Ahab (1 Kings 18–19), appears to have taught the same philosophy. She apparently urged Christians to participate in trade-guild festivals (which involved idolatry) in order to prevent economic hardships. But to do so, Christ warned, would lead to a much greater loss:

“Indeed I will cast her [Jezebel] into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of their deeds. I will kill her children [followers of Jezebel] with death, and all the churches shall know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts” (verses 22–23).

Today, the long-accepted, time-tested Judeo-Christian standards of morality are being challenged and maligned. Many are caving in to pressures, rejecting the authority of Scripture and redefining biblical morality. Christ's call to faithful endurance is the same today as it was in the first century.

Spiritual Death and “Lukewarmness”

The church in Sardis had a few faithful members, but it was essentially a dead church (Revelation 3:1,4).

But how does a church “die”? Some clues are in the text.

Christ said, “You have a few names in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy” (verse 4). Apparently, the others—the members who made up the “dead” part of this church—had “defiled their garments.” This is a metaphor for the works of iniquity. The church in Sardis “died” because its members had let down their guard and let the enemy come in.

Christ warns, “Be watchful, and strengthen the things that remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God” (verse 2). To be “watchful” means to be vigilant—to remain at all times in a state of preparedness. This is what the Christians at Sardis had failed to do.

Christ's warning remains valid for God's people today: “Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch [be vigilant], I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you” (verse 3).

Members of the church in Laodicea thought they were in good shape spiritually, but their condition was similar to the condition of the church in Sardis. They were “lukewarm” (verse 16). Apparently, their complacency and self-delusion had led to an attitude of compromise.

Christ said, “I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth” (verses 15–16).

Cold water is good for quenching thirst, and hot water is a valuable aid to healing and pain relief. Spiritually, the Laodicean church was neither cold nor hot—could neither quench spiritual thirst nor provide spiritual healing.

Christ's admonition to the Laodicean church is timeless: “I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see” (verse 18).

In other words, get rid of impure thoughts and actions; remove the spots and stains of sin from your life; and stop deceiving yourself. And remember... “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me” (verses 19–20).

‘He who has an ear...’

The book of Revelation—the Apocalypse—directs our attention to the end of this age and the establishment of the everlasting Kingdom of God on this earth. It points to the future reality of the New Heaven and New Earth—the restoration and transformation of the cosmos—but its admonitions and exhortations are timeless. It is a message from God to His people—all His people at all times. And the letters to the seven churches of first-century Asia Minor are for the churches of God today. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

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