

THE SEVEN CHURCHES:

Chapters 2 and 3 contain seven distinct letters written to seven churches that actually existed at the time of Christ's Revelation to John. The letters were not only written to particular churches but perhaps even to particular individuals within these churches because in each case Christ commands John to write the letter and send it ***"to the angel of the church."*** In all cases the word "angel" could be interpreted as the "messenger who is the presiding bishop or elder" of the church in that community.

At the end of the previous chapter, Christ orders John to ***"Write therefore the things which you have seen, and things which are, and the things which shall take place after these things"*** (Revelation 1:19). The implication is that John is being told to write about things Christ has already shown him, things that are happening in the present time and things that will take place in the future. This would seem to effectively kill the argument of many scholars that John is strictly writing about things which have already happened. What is clearly implied is that Christ is speaking about things that were currently taking place within these particular churches and/or would take place in their futures. Historically, we know that the things which are described regarding each church actually took place. The question that must be raised is why did Christ pick only these seven churches to address when there were certainly many more churches in existence at that time, and many of these other churches were of even greater prominence. Many believe that these churches were selected because each of them portrays the "Church" at various stages of its history, and/or various aspects of the Church throughout history. An examination of Church history from the time Revelation was written to today reinforces this view because these churches and the Church have gone through various stages that seem to strongly correlate with the characteristics of the seven churches to which John has been instructed to write. Churches continue to struggle with these challenges.

Consistent in most of the letters, after first crediting them for what they have done right, is the judgmental way the Lord portrays their failures and calls them into repentance and reward. Christ is telling them what they are doing wrong and the punishments that wait if they fail to repent. He then tells them what they must do to correct their error, and what will result if and when they do. Applying these letters to the greater Church, Christ is appealing to the Church in all ages, pronouncing judgment,

calling them to repentance, and providing reassurance of the blessings which accompany repentance and obedience to the Lord. Viewing these seven letters through the lens of the entire Book of Revelation, reinforced by what God has consistently revealed throughout the Scriptures contained in the Bible, it seems clear that the Lord is writing the history of the future church. Therefore, by learning from the mistakes and experiences of these churches we can examine ourselves to determine if we are making these same errors. If we are willing to recognize and repent of our errors, we also can receive the blessings and reassurances that Christ provides to the seven churches.

EPHESUS: (2:1-7)

In each letter Christ is portrayed by a symbol which was shown to John in Revelation chapter one or by an attribute unmistakably identified with Christ. To the church in Ephesus the letter is said to be from ***“The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lamp stands”*** (2:1). It was revealed in the previous verse (1:20) that ***“the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches”*** and that the ***“seven lamp stands are the seven churches.”*** Therefore, Christ is saying that He is the One who holds the churches in the palm of His hand and walks in their midst. Christ is not separate but present with the Church.

Also following the greeting in most letters, Christ praises the church for the good things it has done. To Ephesus Christ says: ***“I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot endure evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name’s sake, and have not grown weary”*** (2:2-3). The church in Ephesus began in all purity, as can be confirmed by the study of Acts. Paul had visited Ephesus during his second missionary journey (Acts:18-21) and left Aquila and Priscilla there to help them. Paul spent three years in Ephesus on his third tour (Acts 19). The major theme of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians is: (1) that the Church is the mystical body of Christ; (2) that God’s great master plan is to bring everything together (Eph. 1:10) under Christ as head (Eph. 1:22, 23); and, (3) that we, as the body of Christ on earth, have a part in this plan and the Holy Spirit is the guarantee of God’s promise (Eph. 1:13, 14). Perhaps the best expression of Paul’s emphasis on the unity of the Church in Christ comes in Ephesians 4:4-6, which states: ***“There is one body and one***

Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.” In other words, in Ephesus we see a shining example and a struggle over what the Church is supposed to be.

Following the praise is a warning of judgment with Christ stating that the church has left its first love, or in other words, it has stopped being what it was in the beginning. It has lost its passion, its purpose, and its discipline for doing what is right. In verse 2:2 above, Christ has praised the church at Ephesus for not tolerating *“evil men,”* and putting *“to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not.”* It may be presumed that when Christ says, *“you have left your first love”* (2:4), that the church has become tolerant of other influences and allowed them to dwell in its midst. Referring back to Acts 20:29-31 we can hear Paul’s prophetic warning that this would come upon them. Paul writes: *“I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.”* This understanding of a struggle between maintaining the true faith against intrusive and corrupting influences is reinforced by Christ’s words found in Revelation 2:6, which read: *“Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.”* The Nicolaitans (also mentioned in Revelation 2:15) were advocates to a return to pagan worship. Early Church fathers alleged that the Nicolaitans were founded by Nicolas of Antioch mentioned in Acts 6:5. In Ephesus was the great temple, dedicated to the goddess Artemis, or “Diana” as the Romans called her. Pagan rituals were well established within society and many Christians wanted to hold on to their pagan rituals. The accepting of these rituals as harmless to Christians was a mistake and hated by God. A good example today would be the celebration of Halloween, a pagan holiday filled with pagan ritual, but accepted by most Christians as harmless.

What makes all of this so profound is what will happen later and that we now view as history. Ephesus will become the center of a Church controversy between the orthodox doctrine that the Incarnate Christ was a single Person, at once God and man

and, “Nestoriansim”—the doctrine that there were two separate Persons in the Incarnate Christ, the one Divine and the other Human. This may seem to be a minor distinction but in essence it espouses a separation of “God from man.” Nestorius, for which it gets its name, was condemned by Rome in 430 AD but the controversy persisted. Finally, the Council of Ephesus was called in 431 AD which upheld Christ as “Theotokos” (God-bearer). After the Council of Ephesus the Bishops who refused to accept the Formula gradually constituted themselves a separate Nestorian Church centered in Persia. From the early 6th century the Nestorian Church was active in missionary work and established Christian settlements in Arabia. The church persists to this day, primarily in the mountains of Kurdistan. The Islamic faith denies that God can indwell the human heart.

Christ warned the church at Ephesus, saying, ***“Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you, and will remove your lamp stand out of its place—unless you repent”*** (2:5) Today, the church in which the Council of Ephesus met is in ruins. After the conquest by Islam, the church of Ephesus became nonexistent. The lamp stand, which represents the church, has apparently been removed. Christ says: ***“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God”*** (2:7). Jesus said to His disciples: ***“Do not judge lest you be judged”*** (Matthew 7:1), but He also said, ***“Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment”*** (John 7:24). The Apostle John also warns us in 1 John 4:1, saying, ***“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”*** We must not repeat the mistakes of Ephesus. We must continue to test the spirits to discern which are of God and which are false, and we must not tolerate evil men or false apostles in our midst. For if we do, our fate will be the same as that of the church of Ephesus—we will be corrupted from within and our lamp stand removed.

SMYRNA: (2:8-11)

To the church in Smyrna Christ is described as: ***“The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life”*** (2:8). This description is extremely revealing and important because the church of Smyrna will suffer unspeakable persecution and tribulation because of their steadfast faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore, even Christ’s opening greeting

is filled with reassurance, because if Christ is forever and has suffered death but came to life, then those who put their faith in Him may have hope of eternal life as well. Christ identifies with their trial, saying, ***“I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan”*** (2:9). The church in Smyrna finds its counterpart in the martyr church of the second and third centuries. The Caesar cult had emerged and the Christians suffered a great deal because they would not worship Caesar. Polycarp, the bishop of the church, was martyred by fire there in 156 AD because he refused to call Caesar “Lord.” The Smyrna church members were fed to the lions at Rome while multitudes cheered. Christ’s accusation against the Jews in Smyrna is likely associated with the fact that the Jews there resented the Christians and often conspired with the Roman authorities contributing to the Christians’ persecutions.

The letter to Smyrna is different in that it does not contain a condemnation or judgment against the church, but instead, seeks to reassure those who will undergo great suffering. Christ says to them: ***“Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life”*** (2:10). Christ is promising them life in the face of death. We do not know with any certainty what is represented by the “ten days.” Some scholars believe that the ten days of persecution consisted of ten literal periods of suffering found in history. The number “10” is also sometimes seen as representing things “worldly” as opposed to heavenly.

Christ concludes saying, ***“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death”*** (2:11). According to Revelation 20:14 and 21:8, the “second death” is the final death which comes from being cast into the “lake of fire” along with Satan and his angels. Christ is assuring us that if we persevere in our faith to the very end, even though we physically die, yet shall we gain eternal life in Him. Regardless of what comes, we must remain faithful always. Jesus said, ***“I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die”*** (John 11:25-26). The devil may be able to kill our bodies but our souls belong to our Lord, Jesus Christ, and those who persevere shall live with Him forever.



PERGAMUM: (2:12-17)

To the church in Pergamum Christ is described as: ***“The One who has the sharp two-edged sword”*** (2:12), previously mentioned in verse 1:16. Again, Hebrews 4:12 portrays the two-edged sword as the ***“Word of God”*** and as able to ***“judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”*** The implication is that there is good and bad in Pergamum, just as there was in Ephesus, which will be separated (cut apart) by the Lord.

Also as with Ephesus, the Lord begins with praise for the good in Pergamum, stating: ***“I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith, even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells”*** (2:13). The reference to “Satan’s throne” has been widely debated. It could refer to the “Great Altar of Pergamum” in the enormous temple of Zeus which was erected on a hill and stood 800 ft. above the city. Pergamum was also the center for worship of Asclepius, the god of healing. The “serpent” was Asclepius’ symbol, and it is still depicted in the rod of Asclepius, the insignia of many medical associations. The symbol is similar to that described in Numbers 21:6-9 which was used to heal people bitten by serpents. Others believe “Satan’s throne” refers to the emperor worship centered around a temple to the goddess Roma and emperor Augustus erected there. Pergamum was also a Babylonian religious headquarters. Because the name Pergamum has the same root from which we get our English words “bigamy” and “polygamy,” it is even possible that Satan’s throne could be associated with the materialism, self-indulgence and worldliness that existed there and suggest a mixed marriage of the church and the world. Consistent with this Pergamum was a center of commerce and was renowned for its library, which rivaled the famous library at Alexandria and has left a monument to that the city’s name in our word “parchment” which was derived from “Pergamum.” In any case, the Christians there were under great pressure and persecution from numerous hostile influences, but had remained faithful and not denied Christ. Regarding the martyr Antipas, little is known about him but tradition holds that he was ordained by the Apostle John as Bishop of Pergamum and was martyred in 92 A.D. by burning in a brazen bull-shaped altar used for casting out demons worshiped by the local population. Clearly, his witness was a great inspiration to the Christians of Pergamum and his great faith recognized by the Lord.

This leads us to the problem the Lord identifies within the church there, stating, ***“But I have a few things against you, because 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, and to commit acts of immorality”*** (2:14).

The story of Balaam and Balak can be found in Numbers, chapters 22 through 24. After being delivered out of Egypt and as the Israelites approached Moab, out of fear of Israel Balak summoned Balaam, a diviner, to come and curse Israel so that he could defeat them. Balaam first refused to go but when offered great gifts and wealth was persuaded to go. Still, he refused to curse Israel and ended up blessing them instead three times. But ultimately, Balaam gave Balak evil council, pointing out how he could lead them into sexual immorality and idolatry, thus bringing about their downfall. This teaching of immorality and idolatry is the teaching that the Lord is condemning in the church at Pergamum. This is reinforced by the next verse, which adds, ***“Thus you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans”*** (2:15). Remember that the Nicolaitans were those Christians who wanted to retain or return to pagan rituals such as eating food sacrificed to idols and temple fornication. To put it simply, God condemned them for succumbing to self-indulgent and worldly influences.

Christ now warns them, saying, ***“Repent therefore, or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth”*** (2:16). Again we see the two-edged sword as the word of God pronouncing judgment. If the Christians who are practicing self-indulgence and idolatry do not repent the Lord will wage war against them. Clearly, the message of Pergamum is that we must be careful not to practice self-indulgence or allow anything to come between us and the Lord. Materialism and worldliness are our enemy because, as Christ said so clearly, ***“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon”*** (Matthew 6:24).

Christ’s closing words to Pergamum, state: ***“To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it”*** (2:17). Just as God provided manna in the wilderness to sustain His people, He will provide food that sustains those who remain faithful to Him. The meaning of the white stone and the name

upon it is obscure, but white stones were given by jurors as a vote for acquittal. In ancient times a white stone with the engraved name of a deity was sometimes used as a mark of membership. Regarding the name that no one knows except those who will “receive” it, in the Gospel of John, Jesus tells us, ***“And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you, and will be in you”*** (John 14:16-17). Only the faithful can receive and know the name. Revelation 3:12b will add concerning those who overcome: ***“I will write upon him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God, and My new name.”*** All who remain faithful to the Lord will receive the mark for eternal life and will bear His holy name, whether they are physically alive or dead, yet shall they live.

THYATIRA: (2:18-29)

To the church of Thyatira Christ is described as, ***“The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze”*** (2:18). This is significant in its association because the guardian divinity of this prosperous city was Apollo, the son of Zeus. All of the emperors were identified as Apollo incarnate and each, like him, the son of Zeus. Therefore the celestial Christ, the “Son of God,” is set over against and above the emperor, who as the incarnate Apollo is the “son of Zeus.”

As typical in all the letters to the churches, the Lord next extends His praise for what the church is doing right. The Lord says, ***“I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first”*** (2:19). The Lord’s words depict a church serving and growing. Not only are they excelling in many areas but they are doing more now than in their beginning. The phrase “deeds of late” literally means “last deeds.”

The church in Thyatira is not without its problems and so the Lord immediately follows His praise with His warning, saying, ***“But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bondservants astray, so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols”*** (2:20). Who was Jezebel? In the Old Testament she married Ahab, one of the kings of the northern kingdom of Israel. She was a Sidonian and a worshiper

of Baal. She influenced Ahab to build an altar to Baal in Samaria and worship the false god. This self-appointed prophetess brought Baalism into Israel as a new religion and seduced God's servants to commit fornication and to eat things sacrificed to idols. This constituted the breaking of God's commandments against creating graven images and idols, and committing adultery (Exodus 20:4, 5 and 14). She also systematically murdered the prophets of God in Israel and even attempted to murder Elijah. She was perhaps the wickedest woman of her day. Ultimately, God pronounced judgment upon her that she would be killed and eaten by dogs, which was fulfilled and she became ***“as dung on the face of the field in the property of Jezreel”*** (2 Kings 9:37). The story of Jezebel is told in 1 Kings, chapters 16, 18, 19 and 21, and in 2 Kings, chapter 9. As Balaam was used as a “type” of the false prophet, his female counterpart, Jezebel, the immoral and idolatrous queen, is the “type” of the false prophetess who teaches the Christians to commit fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols. Here, fornication is not simply sexual immorality, but in a special way is equated with idolatry, particularly emperor worship.

Verses 21 through 23 warn of what will happen within the church if it fails to repent. First, the Lord expresses His willingness to be patient and allow time for repentance, saying, ***“And I gave her time to repent; and she does not want to repent of her immorality”*** (2:21). Unfortunately, He also lets us know that those who were sinning did not want to repent. Next, the Lord reveals the form His punishment will take upon those who fail to repent, saying, ***“Behold, I will cast her upon a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds”*** (2:22). It would seem clear that the Lord is saying that if the church fails to repent He is going to make it sick and bring upon it great tribulation or distress. But in verse 23 the Lord reminds us that He makes a distinction between those who sin and those who remain faithful, saying, ***“And 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 of you according to your deeds”*** (2:23). Surely God will punish the wicked—those churches and individuals who allow the immoral and adulterous influence of Jezebel in their midst. But God knows the mind and the heart of everyone and will give to each one according to their deeds. We have learned from the letter to Smyrna that

the death of the martyrs guarantees their blessed immortality in the New Jerusalem, and that those who die as idolaters are to be cast into the lake of fire for an eternity of punishment (21:8). Now we hear that no sinner can escape the searching look of Christ with *“eyes like a flame of fire”* (2:18) who *“searches the minds and hearts”* (2:23) of all. The Lord sees all, knows all, and judges all according to their deeds, that is to say, how they live their faith.

The message now turns from condemnation for the unrepentant to assurance for those who remain faithful. The Lord now says, *“But I say to you, the rest who are in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not known the deep things of Satan, as they call them—I place no other burden on you”* (2:24). For those who do not succumb to Jezebel’s theological follies or fall into the fornication and idolatry propagated by the false Babylonian religion, Christ will not add additional burdens. Apparently what they have already endured in holding to the faith is heartache enough. In regard to the reference to the phrase *“who have known the deep things of Satan,”* this may be an attack upon “Gnosticism.” Gnostics were those who professed having received “secret knowledge” regarding the “deep things of God” revealed to them by the Holy Spirit. While Gnosticism may seem similar to traditional Christian belief because of its claim that the Holy Spirit reveals knowledge of God, it has been condemned by the Church. The distinctive difference and problem with Gnosticism is found in the word “secret” in that the knowledge is only given to a few who claim to speak for God and is withheld from the community. Christ teaches us that He is the Light and we have been given His Light and instructed to let it shine so all can see Him. Cults keep secrets but Christians bear witness to all who will listen to the Truth and follow the Way.

Verse 25 is short but reveals much. Christ says, *“Nevertheless what you have, hold fast until I come.”* We are to hold fast in the faith as it has been revealed to us through Jesus Christ until His return. The church of Thyatira, or the church type for which it represents, will continue to exist all the way until the time of His return. The faithful church can be defined as the church with deeds of *“love and faith and service and perseverance”* (2:19) which are even greater at the end than at the beginning.

Verses 26 through 28 proclaim Christ’s reward and promise to those who overcome and keep His deeds until the end. The Lord says, *“And he who overcomes,*

and he who keeps My deeds until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations; and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to pieces, as I also have received authority from My Father; and I will give him the morning star” (2:26-28). Apparently at the time of Christ’s return there will be a reversal of worldly authority, where the faithful will no longer be persecuted by the unfaithful but will rule over the nations of the world. Some believe this is a reference to the Millennium—the 1,000 years of piece when Christ and the faithful will reign over the earth before final judgment is executed (See Revelation 20:4). One thing is certain. There can be no mistake that this passage is pointing back to Psalm 2, where it is written regarding those who devise plans against God and His people, *“Thou shall break them with a rod of iron, Thou shalt shatter them like earthenware”* (Psalm 2:9). The power that overcomes and destroys evil is Christ. This is reinforced in verse 28 when Christ will *“give the morning star”* to those who overcome and keep His deeds. What is the morning star? Revelation 22:16 says, *“I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things for the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star.”* Jesus Christ is Himself the morning star who fills us with His Light. The message found in 2 Peter 1:19 is similar, when Peter says: *“And so we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts.”* Another interpretation is that the “morning star” which appears at dawn is representative of the “eternal life” that comes through faith in Christ. This understanding can be seen in Daniel 12:3, which speaking of the faithful at the time of the end says, *“And those who have insight will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heavens, and those who lead the many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.”* In reality they are the same. Christ Jesus is the Light which gives us eternal life. Though the world remain in darkness, may the Light of our Lord Jesus Christ arise and burn brightly within us until His return and for all eternity.

SARDIS: (3:1-6)

To the church of Sardis Christ is described as, *“He who has the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars”* (3:1). This statement is simple and of course references back to the greeting in (1:4) which stated: *“Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and*

who was and who is to come; and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne.”

From this statement we learn that the seven Spirits are before the throne of God, but who are the seven Spirits and the seven stars? Remember, that Christ revealed that **“the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches”** in (1:20), and because angel means messenger, then the seven stars are messengers of the seven churches. Looking ahead to Revelation 4:5 and 5:6 we gain additional critical insight. First, in (4:5b) we learn that the **“seven lamps of fire burning before the throne”** are **“the seven Spirits of God.”** Remember, that in (1:20) the Lord said that **“the seven lamp stands are the seven churches.”** Revelation 5:6 reveals even more insight, saying, **“And I saw between [in the midst of] the throne (with the four living creatures) and the elders a Lamb standing, as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, sent out into all the earth.”** Remember from (1:4) that God is the One **“who is and who was and who is to come.”** From all of these references we can conclude that the “seven Spirits” are the Holy Spirit of God that comes from God into the world to indwell the seven churches, to shine through the seven churches as the Light of God, and to convey to the churches the Word (message of truth) from God. Jesus said in John 14:26, **“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.”** When the Holy Spirit was poured forth as Jesus promised, moved by the Spirit, Peter proclaimed the message first heard through the prophet Joel, saying, **“And it shall be in the last days, God says, ‘That I will pour forth of My Spirit upon all mankind”** (Acts 2:17a). The significance of all of this relative to the church at Sardis is that the Spirit, i.e., the Light has gone out and the church is asleep, therefore the Lord is calling for it to “Wake up!”

The praise for Sardis is barely praise at all. Christ says to the church, **“I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead”** (3:1b). Simply being a church by name and saying one is alive does not give one life. If the Holy Spirit is not moving in a church it is dead and only appears to be alive. This does not mean that all hope is lost or that the Spirit is absent. Hence, the Lord’s call, saying, **“Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God”** (3:2). Obviously there is still an opportunity for the church to rekindle the Spirit and finish the work for which God has called them.

The Lord continues his warning, saying to the church, ***“Remember therefore what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. If therefore you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you”*** (3:3). Is what they ***“have received and heard”*** the Holy Spirit of God? If they will not wake up, will the Lord’s coming be ***“like a thief”*** because in the absence of the Spirit they cannot perceive His coming? Or, in the absence of the Spirit will Satan come with his lies and steal their very souls? Jesus said in Matthew 24:43, ***“But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into.”***

Just as we first heard in the letter to Thyatira, the Lord will make a distinction between those who remain faithful and those who do not. The Lord continues speaking but now directs His attention to the remaining faithful in Sardis, saying, ***“But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white; for they are worthy”*** (3:4). In Revelation 7:14, John will be told that the people he sees in heaven standing before the throne of the Lamb are the ones who ***“have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”*** Jesus said, ***“If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him, and make Our abode with him”*** (John 14:23). Notice that Jesus says ***“make Our abode with him.”*** When we remain faithful, the Lord and the Spirit of God abide in us. Jesus went on to say, ***“If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned”*** (John 15:6). As with the church at Sardis, we must remain faithful and abide in the Lord so that the Spirit of God will abide in us, guiding (eyes see the way) and empowering (horns represent power) us in our walk with the Lamb. (See Revelation 5:6).

Finally we receive the promise. The Lord says, ***“He who overcomes shall thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father, and before His angels”*** (3:5). Revelation 20:12 informs us that anyone who is not recorded in the Book of Life will be thrown into the fire. The Lord is providing assurance that all who remain alert and do not become complacent or allow their faith to fall asleep will continue to abide in Him and live.

We must keep the Spirit of God within us flaming and be on fire for the Lord, if we are to escape the flames of judgment.

PHILADELPHIA: (3:7-13)

To the church of Philadelphia Christ is described as, ***“He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens”*** (3:7b). You will note that beginning with the church in Philadelphia the Lord stops using portions of the vision described in Revelation 1:12-16. Instead, the Lord provides a three-fold description of Himself as “holy,” “true,” and as having the “key of David” and who opens and shuts what no one else can shut or open. In a manner of speaking, the Lord Jesus Christ seems to be referring to Himself as the only One who can provide or deny access to heaven. This is supported by other Scripture. As we look at each of the three parts of the description we can see evidence of this.

In the first part Christ speaks of His holiness. The Book of Hebrews speaks of Christ as the great high priest that intercedes for us and is the only One pure enough and holy enough to provide the sacrifice that cleans us of our sins and allows us entrance into heaven. Hebrews 7:26 states: ***“For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens.”*** The pure and innocent Lamb of God is the only One holy enough to pay for our sin.

In the second part Christ speaks of Himself as “True.” In this we may be reminded of His declaration in John 14:6, saying, ***“I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me.”*** The truth is that Christ is the only way to God.

In the final part Christ speaks of Himself as the “key of David” and as the One ***“who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens”*** (3:7b). The Lord seems to be quoting or pointing to a passage in Isaiah where the Lord speaks of the authority He will give the king He has chosen. Isaiah 22:22 states: ***“Then I will set the key of the house of David on his shoulder, when he opens no one will shut, when he shuts no one will open.”*** The One on whom God places authority has ultimate authority. In John 10:9 Jesus says of Himself, ***“I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture.”*** And in Revelation 22:16 Jesus will remind us of His relation to David, saying, ***“I am the root and the offspring of***

David.” Clearly what the Lord is saying is that He and only He provides us access to heaven.

Apparently, like the Church in Smyrna, the church in Philadelphia has remained true to Him and therefore He offers only praise without any condemnation for faults. Christ says to them: ***“I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have kept My word, and have not denied My name”*** (3:8). Jesus promises to open the door for those who genuinely seek Him, as He says in Matthew 7:7-8: ***“Ask , and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it shall be opened.”*** Likewise, Jesus makes it clear that in the absence of a “genuine relationship” with Him and if we have not “prepared” ourselves for Him the door will remain shut when we knock. In the “parable of the ten virgins” found in Matthew 25:10b-12, Jesus says, ***“And those who were ready went in with him to the wedding feast; and the door was shut. And later the other virgins also came, saying, ‘Lord, Lord, open up for us.’ But he answered and said, ‘Truly I say to you, I do not know you.’”*** The key here is the phrase “I do not know you.” Knowing of Christ and even believing that Jesus is the Christ is not enough, even ***“the demons also believe and shudder”*** (James 2:19). We must have a personal relationship with Him, that we know Him and He know us on a personal level. The fact that Jesus has ***“an open door which no one can shut”*** (3:8) for them indicates they the people of this church have such a relationship with Him. Christ’s statement that they have only a ***“little power”*** (3:8) is not an indication of fault or weakness but of relative size. The number who are faithful is small as compared to those who are not, so the church has little power over those who oppose it. In the end, the Church will find itself dwarfed by the unbelieving and unfaithful world in which it resides with little power to change it, but the key is to remain faithful even in the midst of such overwhelming darkness. What Christ says the church of Philadelphia did that was most admirable was that they ***“have kept My word, and have not denied My name”*** (3:9). Remember what Jesus said in Matthew 10:32-33, ***“Everyone therefore who shall confess Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever shall deny Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven.”*** Likewise in

Mark 8:38, speaking of His return Jesus said, ***“For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.”*** Clearly, those who remain faithful to His word and name and continue to confess Him, even when it is unpopular and considered shameful to do so, He will ultimately honor.

Next, Christ continues with words of reassurance that those who are faithful to Him until the end will ultimately prevail. He says, ***“Behold, I will cause those of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews, and are not, but lie—behold, I will make them to come and bow down at your feet, and to know that I have loved you”*** (3:9). Again as in the letter to the Smyrna church the Lord mentions the ***“synagogue of Satan”*** and ***“those who say they are Jews and are not”*** (2:9). In Galatians 3:7, Paul makes the distinction that it is not blood lines but faith that make one a son of Abraham, saying, ***“be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham.”*** This verse may be saying that the Jews who did not accept but denied that Jesus was the Messiah will end up bowing down before the Christians, who while not descendants of Abraham by birth, became descendants through their faith in Christ. The Jews will ultimately have to recognize and acknowledge God’s love for the Gentile believers in His Son. What was said to Abraham will be fulfilled: ***“And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”*** (Genesis 12:3b). God has never limited His salvation to one people and Christ’s sacrifice on the cross was intended to purchase salvation for all who would believe in and accept Him as their Lord and Savior. Scripture clearly says that the Jews were God’s chosen people and that He will ultimately fulfill all His promises to them. But even the Jews will have to recognize and acknowledge the love of God for the Christian when it is finally revealed to them that Jesus was and is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.

Following the reassurance of verse 9 is a promise of deliverance in verse 10. The Lord promises, ***“Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell upon the earth”*** (3:10). Because the preposition that we translate as “from” has a meaning in the Greek of “out from” or “away from,” many believe this is a reference to a pre-tribulation Rapture—the removal of the church prior to the great tribulation. Likewise, the word we translate as “testing” can also be translated as

“temptation,” perhaps meaning that it will be so difficult to endure as a Christian during the tribulation that Christians will be “tempted” to deny their faith to survive, which in reality, is a test of faith. Regarding the belief that this passage supports the Rapture, this view is not shared by all Christians and quite honestly it doesn’t matter how God is going to protect His children from testing. What matters is that God will keep His promise, regardless of which way He chooses to do so. Psalm 91:1-3 helps us see a picture of this, saying, ***“He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the Lord, ‘My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust!’ For it is He who delivers you from the snare of the trapper, and from the deadly pestilence.”*** Whether God shall choose to pluck His Church from the face of the earth or protect His children wherever they are as He did Lot when He destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19), God will keep His promise.

Again, in verse 11 we hear echoes of the letter to Smyrna. The Lord says, ***“I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, in order that no one take your crown.”*** The martyrs of Smyrna were told: ***“Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life”*** (2:10). Now those of Philadelphia are told to “hold fast” so that no one “take their crown.” These words remind us of Paul’s statement in 2 Timothy 4:7-8, when he says, ***“I have fought the good fight. I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge will award me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.”*** The “crown” seems to represent God’s reward for the righteous who hold fast to Him to the end. It may equate to God’s gift of internal life or only to the treasures that await the faithful. Regarding the phrase, ***“I am coming quickly,”*** as was discussed regarding verse 1:3, this does not mean coming soon but when He comes it will happen quickly.

Finally in verse 12, just as Jesus described Himself with a three-fold description in the opening to the letter to Philadelphia, now He promises a three-fold reward to those who remain faithful. Christ says, ***“He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore; and I will write upon him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from out of heaven from My God, and My new name.”*** Revelation 21:22

tells us that the Lord God Almighty (Father) and the Lamb (Son) are the temple of the new Jerusalem, for speaking of the new Jerusalem John says, ***“And I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb, are its temple”*** (21:22). The three-fold promise is first, that those who overcome will be made a part of the city of God, the new Jerusalem, never to leave it again. Second, they will be marked with God’s name, as among those who belong to God. And third, they will be marked with the name of the Lamb, the Lord Jesus Christ. Of course, we cannot know with absolute certainty the meaning of the “new name.” Based on context it seems logical that it is associated with the Lord Jesus Christ because this is the “Revelation of Christ” and He refers to the name saying, “My new name.” Also consistent with the church of Philadelphia being lifted up so that others bow down before it, the reference to a “crown” and “new name” are words found in Isaiah 62:2-3, which reads, ***“And the nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; and you will be called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord will designate. You will also be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.”*** The church of Philadelphia is often viewed as the missionary church, and of course, the “missio Dei” or the “mission of God” is for the church to make disciples for Jesus Christ. To do this we must not hide from the world but bear witness in the world, which necessitates being faithful to His word and not denying His name. For those who are not overcome by the world but boldly bear witness until the end God promises great reward.

LAODICEA: (3:14-22)

To the church of Laodicea Christ is described as, ***“The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God”*** (3:14b). As in the letter to the church of Philadelphia we have a new description not found in the opening vision. Again we have Christ described three-fold, as first, ***“The Amen”*** which literally means “truly indeed.” Christ is the Truth (John 14:6) and God’s Holy Spirit is called the ***“Spirit of Truth”*** (John 14:17). This first description is reinforced by the second stating the Christ is the ***“faithful and true Witness.”*** This is to say that He is the One we can trust to tell us the truth and bear witness to the truth. While there are more references than we could possibly have time to review just think of how many times Jesus said to His disciples ***“Truly, truly, I say to you.”*** Therefore, Christ is the Truth and bears witness to the truth.

And third, Christ refers to Himself as the ***“Beginning of the creation of God.”*** I am reminded of Paul’s description of Christ in Colossians 1:15-16, which states, ***“And He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on the earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created by Him and for Him.”*** In the context of the letter to Laodicea, what makes this description so important is that Christ is the Truth and speaks the truth and is the beginning of everything, but unless the church changes and repents, the truth is that it will be cast out.

There is no praise for this church, but only condemnation. The church represents the apostate church of the last days. The church is neither filled with faith or a lack of faith but straddles the fence and lacks any real commitment. Verses 3:15-16 state: ***“I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I would that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth.”*** The description is so much like so many churches today, neither hot or cold but only lukewarm with a severe lack of passion or commitment. Churches go through the motions of worship and ministry believing they do God’s work while at the same time adhering to the world’s socially and politically correct standards. The church cannot be of God and of the world. The church cannot remain neutral and compromise God’s truth in order to avoid conflict with the world. Christ says He will ***“spit you out of My mouth.”*** The word “spit” here is of the same Greek root as the English word “emetic.” What is interesting is that an emetic is given to one who has swallowed poison in order to make him regurgitate (vomit). In other words, the lukewarm, uncommitted church is repulsive to Christ and makes Him sick enough to vomit it out. This is certainly not the church we want to be.

Historically, we know that the city of Laodicea was extremely wealthy and was both a banking center and contained a famous medical school. The city was so wealthy and proud of its self-dependence, that after it was devastated by an earthquake of 61 A.D. it refused financial assistance from the Roman government, and out of its own resources and by its own efforts eventually rebuilt the city. This is consistent with what Jesus says next in verses 17 and 18: ***“Because you say, “I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,” and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and***

poor and blind and naked, I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire, that you may become rich, and white garments, that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see.” Sometimes worldly wealth can blind us from seeing what is truly of value. Sometimes worldly knowledge can blind us from understanding true wisdom. Sometimes fancy clothes cannot hide the naked shame of our unrighteousness. God longs to help us see, but we must step into His Light and be willing to look through the eyes of His Spirit rather than through worldly vision. Without God’s Light everything is gray and what is right cannot be easily distinguished from what is wrong, what is good cannot be distinguished from what is bad. God calls us to make a choice. We must put Him first or yield to our own selfish interests. But we cannot save ourselves because salvation comes only through the Lord Jesus Christ. Truly, no one can serve two masters (Matthew 6:24), and God will ultimately separate the sheep from the goats (Matthew 25). If we choose to remain lukewarm, we choose against God and will be cast out of His presence. The once wealthy and prosperous city of Laodicea today lies in complete ruins.

Next, the Lord reminds us that love is accompanied by discipline, saying, ***“Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; be zealous therefore, and repent”*** (3:19). As Jesus said, ***“If you love Me, you will keep My commandments”*** (John 14:15). If we love God we will repent of our sins, turning back to God’s commands and discipline ourselves to be obedient to His Word. Just as we discipline our children because we love them and want them to grow up safe and knowing the difference between right and wrong, so God disciplines His children to teach them all they must know to obtain His righteousness.

Jesus awaits our response to His call, desiring we invite Him into our lives. While Jesus is the door that opens into heaven, He does not force Himself upon us. We must open the door and invite Him into our lives, and be willing to dine with Him, be in a relationship with Him. Verse 20 states: ***“Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me.”***

And finally, verse 21 contains a promise for those who overcome their complacency, their lack of commitment, those who repent and rekindle their fire for God and relationship with the Lord. Christ says to them, ***“He who overcomes, I will grant to***

him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.” Christ overcame the temptation of sin, and suffered and died for the sake of the unrighteous that we might obtain the righteousness of God through His sacrifice. If we too are willing to give up everything for Him we too can share in His inheritance and take our place with Him in heaven.

The words spoken to the seven churches are true. They speak to all churches in all ages. They speak to the Church which is the body of Christ. He has given the Church His Spirit to be in our midst and to illuminate God’s purpose for us and to empower us to do God’s will. All of the Book of Revelation must be viewed as a message to the Church, as a message to all who are members of Christ’s Church. The messages for the churches are for us. If we heed them we will receive the promises and rewards God has promised. If we fail to heed their warnings then we will receive the punishments and consequences that they reveal. God is “revealing” His Truth to us. Will we listen?

REPRESENTATIVE OF CHURCH HISTORY?

The seven churches found in Revelation were local churches that actually existed in Asia Minor at the time Revelation was written, but each seems clearly representative of a particular age in church history. Therefore, in a very marvelous way, the Lord takes churches currently existing at that time and compares their behavior and their circumstances with certain epochs which were yet to appear in the history of the church. The Lord wants to make clear that He is writing the history of the future and is providing instruction relevant to both the original hearers and all future generations.

The church of **Ephesus** corresponds to the apostolic church, which began with the birth of the Church at Pentecost (33 AD) and ended with the death of the Apostle John (about 100 AD), but continues to call the Church to rekindle its beginning passion.

The church of **Smyrna** finds its counterpart in the martyr church of the second and third centuries, the greatest period of persecution in all Christianity (100 to 312 AD). But Christians of every age who suffer persecution for their faith can find hope and reassurance in this letter.

The church of **Pergamum** represents the state church, beginning with Constantine (312 AD) and continuing to the end. Some scholars limit this church period to ending in 606 AD, seeing this period as a time when materialism, self-indulgence and worldliness

invaded the Church. Because these characteristics continue to plague the institutional church to this day, others see the representation as also continuing until the end.

The church of **Thyatira** has the features of the firmly established church that is not only a church but state, such as the Vatican which is indeed both. It begins with Gregory the Great (590 AD) and continuing to the end. Again, some scholars limit this church period to ending in 1540 AD, seeing the developing Protestant Reformation as a shift away from the dominate state-church into a church of the people.

The church in **Sardis** pictures the Reformation church, beginning in the sixteenth century (around 1540 AD) and continuing into the Tribulation at the end. The Reformation Church is identified by some with dead and/or lukewarm churches, lacking in fervor and spirit.

The church in **Philadelphia** sets forth the characteristics of the missionary church, beginning with the rise of modern missions under William Carey who founded the English Baptist Missionary Society in 1792 AD. Carey also translated all or portions of the Bible into over 29 languages and dialects. The missionary church is seen as continuing until the end, but as in the example of the letter to Philadelphia, its influence may be small compared to other world influences as the end approaches.

The church in **Laodicea** portrays the apostate church of the last days—a church which has become corrupt and rejects fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. Certain church theologians of the 4th and 5th centuries considered apostasy to be as serious as adultery and murder. In the 20th century, the Roman Catholic Code of Canon Law still imposed the sanction of excommunication for those whose rejection of the faith fitted the technical definition of apostasy. But the absence of civil sanctions and an increasing tolerance of divergent viewpoints have tended increasingly to mitigate the reaction of believers to those who reject Christianity. In other words, beginning in the 20th century, the church has tolerated the rejection of many beliefs previously viewed as fundamental to all Christians, while also allowing previously viewed heretical beliefs to be taught as acceptable and Christian teachings. This has led to the secularization of the Church where there is less distinction between Christian doctrinal views and worldly views within the church. The Church continues but no longer lives out its purpose.

In summary, what was then and what was to become of the seven churches cited in Revelation, can be viewed as examples of both historic periods of the Church, and characteristics or types that can be found in many churches. The lessons within the letters, proven true in church history, provide example of both how churches anywhere and at any time can error and/or prosper. The seven churches provide examples of what can go wrong in any church. Any church is capable of losing the love and passion for ministry it may have had at its beginning (Ephesus). Any church can encounter fear and suffering (Smyrna). Any church can be subject to doctrinal compromise (Pergamum). Any church can slide into moral compromise (Thyatira). Any church can over time become spiritually dead (Sardis). Any church can find itself engaged in a struggle to hold fast against great opposition (Philadelphia). And any church can become lukewarm, going through the motions but no longer serving its purpose (Laodicea). The Lord helps us understand both what causes failure and success within the Church. If we will listen and obey the teachings found in these letters we can both avoid mistakes and become the Church the Lord desires we be. Failing to learn the lessons of the letters leads only to repeating the mistakes and our ultimate destruction. ***“Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near”*** (Revelation 1:3).

(This Concludes Part-2)