

# The Seven Churches of Asia



## Introduction

The book of Revelation is authored by John. This is the same one who wrote the Gospel of John and 1, 2, 3 John. It was written between 95-96 AD while he was exiled to the small, rocky, barren isle of Patmos. We find our aging and faithful author being punished. He is there because of his witness about Jesus:

9 I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

He addresses the letter to the Seven churches.

4 John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia:

He is told to write to the churches in his vision.

10 On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, 11 which said: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."

These seven churches are important to our understanding of Revelation. This does beg the question, Why these seven churches? These are not the only churches at this time. These are not the most important churches at this point in history. Argument for why these churches were used are:

1. They represent the universal church in John's day.
  - a. Seven is perfection
  - b. Collectively portrayed the Universal church
  - c. Portrayed the problems in the local church
2. They represent Seven periods in Church History. (I do not hold to this one.)

Our study will be focused on Chapters two and three. Here we find the specific messages to the churches. There is a distinct pattern that occurs for each and every church. For the sake of simplification and presentation I will present each church through the following five points:

1. Church
2. Christ
3. Commendation
4. Criticism
5. Counsel

This method should allow us to compare and contrast the letters. We must not only define and interpret but we must find application. For our purposes we will use three applications that I believe are important to consider as we examine the text. There are four used traditionally however I find issues in the third one.

1. To the church addressed (Historical)
2. To any local church in the condition described (Spiritual)
3. To a certain period of church history (Prophetical)
4. To the individual believer (Personal)

As we proceed, keep these applications in mind.

## Ephesus

- Church – This church was founded by Paul at the end of the second missionary journey (AD 54-57, Acts 18:19-21). It sits in a city that was a port city. The Temple of Artemis or Diana was there. It was the Seventh wonder of the ancient world standing 425 feet long and 220 feet wide. It had 130 pillars supporting a roof 60 foot high. Historically this church was pastored by Paul, Timothy and then John.
- 6. Christ – He is described as He was in Chapter one. John sees a vision of Christ walking among lampstands holding seven stars (messengers or pastors) in his right hand.
- 7. Commendation – He starts with the phrase “I know”. The gives the good aspects of Ephesus. There are Five:
  1. Deeds – Action with energy
  2. Hard Work – Costly sacrifice
  3. Perseverance – Patience and endurance
  4. Discernment – They have not tolerated wicked men and tested so called apostles and found them false. Nicolaitans in verse 6 as well. Define=Involved in worship in pagan temples including eating and immorality.
  5. Endured Hardships (for His name) – Willing to stand for Jesus even if it means suffering.
- 8. Criticism – They have “Forsaken their first Love” This church has forgotten how they started in His love. This harken us back to the verse below:  
John 15:9 “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.
- Counsel – There are two aspects of the Counsel:
  1. Warning – If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. (5b)
    1. Remember – Your glorious past
    2. Repent – Repent Change your mind and direction
    3. Restore – Your first works

Colossians 2:6 So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, 7 rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.
  2. Promise
    1. He who over comes eats from the tree of life.

## Smyrna

- Church – The word Smyrna means “Bitter or Suffering”. It is located 35 miles north of Ephesus and famous for trade and beauty. It was called the ornament, crown and flower of Asia. It was founded in 1000 B.C. as a Greek Colony and later was a free city due to its faithfulness to Rome. Known for the Balsam herb which grew here. It is used

in perfumes and embalming bodies. Today it is called Izmir and has a population of 280,000 as well as still having a Christian church.

9. Christ – He is described as the First and the last (eternal in time) and the one who died and died and is alive again (eternal as to life). In light of their suffering, these descriptions are comforting.
- Commendation – He starts with the standard “I know”. He then gives us Three good points of this church:
  1. Afflictions – Meaning pressure mental and physical. This city has many temples to other gods (Zeus, Apollo, Aphrodite and more) and the center of Emperor worship. They were facing much opposition.
  2. Poverty – Meaning utter destitution. They had nothing at all. “Yet you are rich!” This is not financially rich but spiritually rich. This reminds me of 2 Corinthians 6:10 “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.”
  3. Enemies – There were also Jews who were not saved who were attempting to poison their minds. These people had wealth and influence.
- Criticism – NONE! How is this possible? I love Dr. Gingrich’s insight here:
  1. Suffering eliminates hypocrites.
  2. Suffering drives true believers closer to God. “No atheists in foxholes”.
- Counsel – He gives them two exhortations and two promises:
  1. You will suffer more (ten days)
  2. Do not Fear
  3. Will receive the crown of life
  4. Will not be hurt by the second death

## **Pergamum**

- Church – Pergamum means “High Marriage” or “Thoroughly Married”. It was historically the greatest city of Asia. Today it is called Bergamos. The city was built on an acropolis 15 miles from the Aegean Sea. It was the capital of Asia Minor for 400 years at the time of John’s writing. There are numerous temples including: Zeus, Dionysius, Athena, and Asclepius. Asclepius had two medical schools. The word “scalpel” comes from this name. They used snakes in healing. Their emblem was coiled snakes on a pole. This city had a huge library. Pergamos invented “Parchment” from animal skins.
- Christ – He is depicted as having a sharp two – edged sword. Why a sword?
  1. Instrument of salvation
  2. Instrument of judgement

Which one you face is determined by your actions and perspective. This is important! When Christ comes the faithful will see it as liberation and bringing salvation. The unfaithful or pagan will see His coming as terrifying as they face judgement. Verses on Christ and the power of the Sword or Word of God are below:

Ephesians 6:17 New King James Version (NKJV)

17 And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God;

Hebrews 4:12 New King James Version (NKJV)

12 For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

Revelation 19:15 New King James Version (NKJV)

15 Now out of His mouth goes a sharp[a] sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God.

- Commendation – “I know” begins the commendation section of the passage as well.
  1. Their extreme opposition – Satan’s throne and where Satan lives. Satan is not omnipresent so he must be somewhere. It does beg the question, where is Satan’s throne today? Moscow? Washington? Where? I don’t know.
  2. Their faithfulness
    - a. Toward His Name
    - b. Toward His Doctrine
    - c. Toward Martyrdom
- Criticism – There are two-fold criticisms. Some of their people are holding to false teachings:
  1. Doctrine of Balam: They taught God’s people to participate in pagan feasts and all that that entailed.
  2. Doctrine of the Nicolaitans: They were involved in worship in pagan temples including eating and immorality. Remember the Ephesians hated their practice.
- Counsel – “Repent!” This is an “Or Else” statement. He is effectively saying, “If you do not deal with this, I will”. When he comes, He will use the sword. Judgement is pending to those who have not repented.

For those who are faithful however he gives three promises:

  1. Hidden Manna (God’s Word) We do not need to partake in the bread of idols and false religions we have the Word of God. SO we do not need their doctrine mixed with His either.

2. White Stone (Full Justification): Ancient courts gave a white stone to say you were acquitted and justified
3. New Name (Reward at Bema Seat Rev. 19:7-8) Is it simply “Christ” written on the stone to show that we are His or do we receive a new name individually.

## Thyatira

- Church – The City was founded in 290 BC by Seleucus as a sentinel block to guard Pergamos. It was an outpost to fight a delaying action and so it was originally a military town. It became a prosperous city as a Center of wool and for dye. This Dye came from the madder root, shell fish (murex) and was worth thousands of denarii (one denarii is a day’s wage). It also became a center weaving rugs.  
It is very possible that Lydia in Acts 16:14-15 had something to do with this church being founded. <sup>14</sup> One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message. <sup>15</sup> When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home.”  
Thyatira means continual sacrifice. This letter is the longest of the seven letters and the most severe.
- Christ – There are three major things in the description of Christ here:<sup>1</sup>
  1. He is the Son of God: “Position of Authority”. This speaks to His authority
  2. His Eyes like Fire: “Penetrating Insight”. This speaks to His awareness of Christ.
  3. His feet like Brass: “Judgement upon Evil”. This anger towards evil.
- Commendation – We see Six things that this church is doing well:
  1. Deeds – Works, action, energy
  2. Love – Divine love demonstrated
  3. Faith – Trust, belief
  4. Service – severing God and Humanity
  5. Perseverance – Patience and enduring
  6. Increase – They have grown to do more than when they started!
- Criticism – The Main criticism is that they tolerate the false prophetess Jezebel (Most likely this is not her name). She is leading some into paganism. Note that the Lord has given her time to repent but she has not and the church has not dealt with her false teachings. The judgement against her is now coming from the Lord and upon all who are following her.

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<sup>1</sup> The Book of Revelation (in outline form), Dr. Roy E. Gingrich, Page 23

- Counsel – This is for the remnant. This is for those who have not fallen for the lies. Note the author of Jezebel’s false teachings (“Satan’s so-called deep secrets”). There are Two things for them to know first (v.24-25)
  1. No other burden to be added
  2. Hold on until He comes

The promise to those who endure is that they will rule with Him. When will this occur? Note the verses below:

Revelation 20:6 New International Version (NIV)

6 Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years. (Millennium)

Revelation 22:5 New International Version (NIV)

<sup>5</sup> There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever. (Eternally)

## Sardis

- Church – Sardis means “remnant” or those escaping. It was formed with the help of Paul in Acts 19:10.
 

Acts 19:10 New International Version (NIV)

10 This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.

The city was famous for more than two thousand years. It was the first to use coin money and was known for its wise men. It was also known for its wealth. Built upon Mt Tmolus at 1500 ft. above sea level. It was a fortress! The story of it’s conquering by Persia is interesting. No one could defeat the sheer walls and singular entrance. One general decided to just watch for days. A guard lost his helmet...and retrieved it using a secret entrance that was not guarded.
- Christ – He is described as having the seven spirits and seven stars. The seven spirits are more difficult. Many reference Isaiah:
 

Isaiah 11:2 New International Version (NIV)

2 The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—  
     the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,  
     the Spirit of counsel and of might,  
     the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—He has the pastors (Stars) under His control and authority.
- Commendation – None!

- Criticism – There are two main criticisms:
  1. They have a name for being alive but they are dead.
  2. Their deeds are unfinished.
- 3. Counsel – They are encouraged to do the following:
  1. Be watchful and alert. (2) “Wake Up!”
  2. Strengthen the things dying. (2)
  3. Remember their past. (3)
  4. Hold Fast. (3)
  5. Repent. (3)

They receive warnings as well to Watch or else Judgement will come. Then they receive a promise. The “few” who are faithful with walk in white, their names will not be blotted out and will be given to the Father.

## **Philadelphia**

- Church – Philadelphia means “Brotherly love”. We do not know how the church was founded. It was most likely founded by one or more of Paul’s associates and/or assistants. This church existed nominally until WWI. The city was founded in 140 BC by the king of Pergamos.
- Christ – Note this is not a part of the vision seen in Chapter One.
  1. He is seen as being Holy...
  2. ...and true.
  3. He holds the keys of David. (Keys mentioned in Isaiah 22:20-24)

The implication is the His being Holy means that He is completely separate and lifted up in Character, thoughts, words and deeds. Christ is also truth. Which means His words are trustworthy and right. Lastly the keys. The description here is enough: “What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.”

John 14:6 New International Version (NIV)  
 6 Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Matthew 7:13-14 New International Version (NIV)  
 13 “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. 14 But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.
- Commendation – There are 5 commendations or praises:
  1. They are a working church (Knows their Deeds)
  2. They have an open door to witness



3. They have a little strength (Feeble Few)
  4. They Guarded His Word
  5. They Honored His Name
- Criticism – None! (Like Smyrna!)
  - Counsel – We also see no Warnings here (Also like Smyrna). They are encouraged to Hold fast as He comes quickly and the faithful will receive their reward. They are given several promises:
    1. Their enemies will bow before them (Verse 9: Odd the next two are not with the other promises. Special promise?)
    2. They will escape the tribulation. (The dispensational view considers this church a representation of the current true church and Laodicea the opposite. The see this promise as proof that the true church is raptured out before the tribulation.)
    3. They will be pillars in God’s House (Interesting! The city of Philadelphia had a tradition that the person who did something honorable would have their name inscribed on a pillar in the temple.)
    4. They will be identified as a part of God’s family (Name of the father, Name of the city and Name of the Lord.) The Name of the City can represent citizenship.

### **Laodicea**

- Church – Laodicea means “ruled by people”. It was probably founded by Epaphras in mentioned in Col. 1:7 and 4:12-13.  
 Colossians 1:7 (NIV)  
 7 You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our[b] behalf,  
 Colossians 4:12-13 (NIV)  
 12 Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. 13 I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis  
 Paul has never met them:  
 Colossians 2:1 (NIV)  
 2 I want you to know how hard I am contending for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally.  
 Colossians 4:16 (NIV)  
 16 After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.  
 The city was founded in 250 BC by Antiochus II for his wife. It was known for its Banking, clothing and medical school. There was a large Jewish population.
- Christ – He has three descriptions here:
  1. “Amen” – which means “so be it”. Christ approves and executes the will of God.

2 Corinthians 1:20 (NIV)

20 For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ. And so through him the “Amen” is spoken by us to the glory of God.

2. “The faithful and true witness” – His testimony is without flaw or blemish.
3. “Ruler of Creation” – He is the “beginning” of creation. Beginning means “beginner or one who began.”

Colossians 1:18 (NIV)

18 And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

- Commendation – None! This is a spiritually dead church. Some use the term “apostate”.
- Criticism – There are two major criticisms:
  1. They were lukewarm. They lack the cold, callousness of an unbeliever but do not have the fire of a true believer either.
  2. They were self-sufficient. This is to say that they were proud. They were outwardly wealthy but on the inside they are bankrupt. Their finances were strong but they have nothing spiritually. This is even seen in the city being destroyed in AD 61 by an earthquake but the citizens refuse help and rebuild it themselves. They pay for it without any assistance. The reality is so aptly described in verse 17: “...you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked”
- Counsel – He encourages them to do three things: Ironically, He says they should purchase or but the items since that is where their confidence is.
  1. Buy Gold (Word of God) (Psalms 12:6 & 18:30)  
Psalm 12:6 (NIV)  
6 And the words of the Lord are flawless,  
like silver purified in a crucible,  
like gold[a] refined seven times.
  2. Buy White Clothes (Righteousness)
  3. Buy Eye Salve (Holy Spirit)There are also a two warnings. First He says to the apostate church that He will spew them out of His mouth (V16). Then He tells the believers within this church to He will discipline them and He can come in if they repent (19-20). The passage ends with the promise that those who overcome will sit on His throne (21) and the familiar phrase for “Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (22).