

Wednesday Teaching Series
Revelation 2:1-17
February 18, 2009

The Book of Revelation
Lesson #5-Letters to the Churches
(Part One)

Introduction: Interpreting these letters

A. Comparative Note

1. Since they are not predictive in nature, the interpretation is not extremely controversial among the four interpretive approaches.
2. Preterist (already happened); spiritual and futurist understand the letters to be addressed to specific, actual historic churches and may extend by application to those who find themselves in similar circumstances. No other hidden meaning!
3. Historicist school sees parallels between the letters and successive periods of history (some futurists do this as well). "A panorama of the church age."
 - a. Ephesus; church in apostolic age until A.D. 100.
 - b. Smyrna; church persecuted until 313; Constantine made Christianity the official religion.
 - c. Pergamos; church that compromised with carnality after officialized from 313-500 (rise of the papacy).
 - d. Thyatira; papal church until the reformation (500-1500).
 - e. Sardis; church during the reformation (1500-1700).
 - f. Philadelphia; resurgent missionary church 1700-present.
 - g. Laodicea; lukewarm, liberal church of today.

NOTE: Many dispensationalists see this as well.

- o Nothing internal to support (points of history and may).
- o Never been a way to see the church as one homogeneous entity.
- o Unless we reject the natural interpretation; all 7 churches existed in the 1st century.

B. Structure of the letters

1. Same address in all 7 "to the angel of the church of (city) write..."
2. Christ identified as the sender of letter, usually describing him in terms of his description in chapter one (not always).
3. First message to each church is "I know your works" (sometimes commendable, but sometimes censure).
4. 3 of the 7 good works initially acknowledged but a disclaimer "nevertheless I have a few things against you..." (Ephesus, Pergamos, Thyatira).
5. 2 churches (Smyrna and Philadelphia) commended without complaint.
6. Sardis and Laodicea receive only rebukes.
7. 5 who are rebuked are told to repent with a threat attached.
8. Each letter ends with a command to hear what the spirit is saying to the churches and an encouraging promise to those who overcome.

NOTE: The order is changed in the last four letters.

I. The Church at Ephesus (2:1-7)

A. About Ephesus (v. 1)

1. Largest, most important city in the Roman province of Asia (250,000 people).
2. Devoted to the cult of Diana; temple to the goddess (1 of 7 wonders of the world).
3. Church established under Paul; ministered there 3 years (see Acts 20:17-38).
4. John probably lived there before being banished to Patmos.

B. Description of Christ (v. 8)

1. Church of Jesus Christ is secure (holds stars in hand).
2. Yet he still inspects the fruits of His church.

C. Positive traits (v. 9)

1. Works, labor, patience.
2. Testing of false teaching

Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. 29 For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. 30 Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. 31 Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. Acts 20:28-31 NKJV

3. In particular the Nicolaitans (see v. 6)

a. Followers of Nicolas

And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, Acts 6:5 NKJV

- b. Later became a heretical teacher.
- c. Some say a disciple of Gnostic heretic, Cerinthus.
- d. Note comparison to doctrine of Balaam.

Thus you also have those who hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate. Revelation 2:15 NKJV

- o Sinful license in idolatrous practices
- o Sexual immorality

D. Concern (v. 4)

- 1. Did not become weary
- 2. But left first love
- 3. Good orthodoxy, acts of ministry but lost love

And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing. 1 Corinthians 13:2-3 NKJV

But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her." Luke 10:42 NKJV

E. Charge

1. Repent
2. Do the first works

F. Warning; removing the candlestick

1. Extinction of the church
2. Today, none. Turkish location; Islam

G. Promise to the overcomer

QUESTION: What are they overcoming?

These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." John 16:33 NKJV

For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world — our faith. 5 Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? 1 John 5:4-5 NKJV

NOTE: Five of 7 were beginning to show a worldly spirit

1. Prize was the tree of life (now in New Jerusalem)
2. In the midst of Paradise (departed spirits above)
3. Really a guarantee of eternal life

II. The Church at Smyrna (2:8-11)

A. About Smyrna

1. 2nd largest city in Provincial Asia
2. Most beautiful
3. Only one that exists still today
4. Smyrna; once destroyed (700 years earlier, laid in ruins for 500 years)

*Note words of Jesus in verse 8

5. Most brief and only a word of commendation
6. Suffering persecution; later generation-Bishop Polycarp would be martyred by being burned at the stake

B. Christ identified

1. First-last/dead and alive
2. They too should be faithful to death (v. 10) life will come

C. Christ's awareness

1. Works, tribulation, poverty; He is aware
2. But you are rich (opposite of Laodicean church)
3. Trouble with those who say they are Jews but are not
 - a. Largest Jewish population
 - b. Jews were greatest adversaries to Christianity

D. Warning (v. 10)

1. 10 days (Ten waves of persecution)
2. Or, relatively short duration
3. Historicists; represent church under persecution began with Nero in A.D. 64
 - a. More focused from Domitian in A.D. 95 to 313
 - b. Last work under Diocletian 303-313
 - c. They say ten days is this 10 years

III. The Church at Pergamos (2:12-17)

A. About Pergamos (v. 12)

1. Provincial capital of Asia (Ephesus, like New York City; Pergamos like Washington D.C.)
2. 2nd largest library in the world-200, 000 volumes (only Alexandria; Egypt bigger).
3. First to create temples to Caesar Augusta, Zeus and the serpent god, Asclepius.
4. People would come to Pergamos seeking healing from the serpent-god.

5. Satan's throne (either Roman availability) or all the idolatrous practices.
6. Antipas; martyr. Only one of 7 to have a known martyr at that time.

B. Concern (v. 13-15)

1. Managed to hold fast to his name and not deny faith
2. Not all had remained faithful
3. Some held to Doctrine of Balaam and Nicolaitans
 - a. Balaam; caused Israel to stumble (Numbers 31:16)
 - b. Nicolaitans

C. Call to repent (v. 16)

D. To the overcomer (v. 17)

1. Promise to eat with Jesus in an eschatological feast.
 - a. Jewish tradition; Jeremiah had taken the ark with the pot of manna when he fled to Egypt before Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem.
 - b. Taught at initiation of Kingdom age; Jeremiah would return to serve a feast of manna that had been hidden for centuries.
 - c. Speculation about Jesus

When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" 14 So they said, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Matthew 16:13-14 NKJV

So when they were filled, He said to His disciples, "Gather up the fragments that remain, so that nothing is lost." 13 Therefore they gathered them up, and filled twelve baskets with the fragments of the five barley loaves which were left over by those who had eaten. John 6:12, 13 NKJV

Then Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. 33 For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." John 6:32-33 NKJV

- d. Promise to overcomers; they will eat with Jesus since they did not fellowship with drunkards.

Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. 15 I speak as to wise men; judge for yourselves what I say. 16 The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? 17 For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread. 18 Observe Israel after the flesh: Are not those who eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar? 19 What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything? 20 Rather, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons. 21 You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons. 22 Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than He? 1 Corinthians 10:14-22 NKJV

2. White stone

- a. Vindication or acquittal (judge to criminal; white or black stone)
- b. Token given to contestants in Greek games as they finished the race, later to be traded in for an actual award.
- c. White stone with name on it was a pass for admission to function/feasts in idol temples.

NOTE: Those who do not compromise wine; idols, will receive a pass into the messianic feast of the kingdom!

3. New name-"Kainos"

- a. New in quality
- b. Righteous
- c. Forgiven
- d. Seated at the Lamb's Supper