

Seven Letters  
to the  
Church



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# *Seven Letters to the Church*

## Overview

**W**hen Jesus looks at the church today, what does He think? Do we please Him who gave Himself up for us? By reading Revelation, chapters two and three, we can gain insight about how we are doing as Christians. Jesus critiques seven churches from the province of Asia. From our point of view, they constitute Jesus' seven letters to the Church today.

We know there were more than that in the province of Asia because churches existed in Colossae and Hierapolis (Col. 1:1 and Col. 4:13). Why did Jesus choose these seven and no others?

Since Revelation elsewhere makes clear that seven is a number symbolic of completeness, perhaps Jesus chose these seven as representative of all the other churches. Bible students through many years have found that nearly every possible condition of local congregations is addressed to some degree by one or another of these letters.

One church is rich; another is poor (Laodicea and Smyrna); one has disfellowshipped false apostles while another tolerates a self-proclaimed prophetess (Ephesus and Thyatira); one is doing more now than at the beginning while a sister church has lost the love it had at first (Thyatira and Ephesus). Two are being harassed by non-Christian Jews (Smyrna and Philadelphia), while another lives in the very shadow of Satan's throne (Pergamum). The Christians in one are about to suffer

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imprisonment and perhaps even death for Christ; another will escape the coming hour of trial (Smyrna and Philadelphia). One is lukewarm, another is spiritually dead (Laodicea and Sardis). Two receive only praise (Smyrna and Philadelphia). One receives only rebuke (Laodicea). The rest are praised for their strengths and corrected for their faults.

**T**o every church the Lord says that He knows their situation. He understands what a time Ephesus has had with false teachers. While appreciating their concern for healthy teaching, He grieves that they no longer love as they did at first. This is a common problem we can characterize as the Ephesian Pendulum Syndrome. Somehow, they must learn not to be too harsh in their efforts to rid their church of heresies. Of course, they could easily slip into the opposite problem, tolerating too much in the name of love. Christ demands of all of us to love the truth of God's Word and love the people that Word brings into God's family. The heresy hunter must avoid a harsh, judgmental spirit. Christ calls on the Ephesians to repent and go back to the way they loved at the beginning. Only then will they be overcomers.

To the Christians in Smyrna, Christ is only encouraging. He is aware of their troubles, that they are both financially destitute and suffer persecution from the unbelieving Jews. He exhorts them to focus on their spiritual riches and to face the short trials looming ahead. He promises them that if they will stay loyal, even through death, He will reward them with the overcomer's crown of life. The danger for a poor church and for a church taking one hit after another from a hostile community is to become discouraged or intimidated. Christians in such churches could easily think their sacrifices don't count for much or their risk-taking has no value. But Jesus sees what's going on. To Him it counts. He coaches us to endure to the end, where awaits our prize.

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Pergamene Christians lived at the capital of the province—inside the beltway where power broker demand favors and pay them back in a dog-eat-dog environment. In Pergamum, as in Washington and many another modern city, compromise is the key to surviving and to gaining success. This principle of business and politics does not work in Christ's church. Jesus calls Christians who compromise with the world followers of Balaam, whose philosophy was, "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em!" These erring Christians were forsaking the purity of the Christian life-style to blend in with their worldly friends. Sound familiar?

**A**nother straying group in the Pergamum church was known as the Nicolaitans, meaning "victorious people." Perhaps its leaders erroneously taught that God's grace gives us license to sin as much as we please. Paul's detractors had earlier accused him of the same teaching, though he strongly denounced it (see Romans 6). Whether Christians today actually advocate this verbally or only in practice, Nicolaitan-like abuse of God's grace (if that is what the Nicolaitans taught) is still with us 2000 years after the Pergamenes received Christ's rebuke.

The church of Thyatira had many praiseworthy qualities. Their love was still growing. They had endured through tough times. They demonstrated their faith by practical service. Nevertheless, one influential woman was causing many to fall away from Christ. Jesus calls her "Jezebel" after the Sidonian princess who married King Ahab and led all Israel into the worship of Baal.

The first-century "Jezebel" was apparently making converts by telling pagans they could become Christians while continuing to attend dinner parties at the city's pagan temples and with their guild meetings with official idolatrous opening ceremonies. "We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world," she may have argued. "There is no God but

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one" (like the arrogant Corinthian Christians, see 1 Cor. 8:4). In this way she was underestimating the power of pagan religion and of the strong pull of those social get togethers. As a result of her teaching, Thyatirans young in the faith were being led into sexual immorality and the worship of idols. All this is granting "Jezebel" the benefit of the doubt and casting her teaching in the best possible light. It is also possible that her teaching was similar to that going on in Pergamum and more directly justified sexual immorality and participation in idolatrous worship.

**W**e still have Christians who make all kinds of rationalizations and excuses for fraternizing with the ungodly in worldly places. Some will even point to Christ, the "Friend of Sinners," accused of being a glutton and a drunkard. It is true that God does not want His people to live monastic lives, isolated from unsaved friends and neighbors. He wants us to be salt to them and light. The salt cannot stay in the shaker; the light cannot remain hidden under a bowl. Yet even if it is rubbed into the meat, salt cannot save if it loses its saltiness. Even on a lampstand a light cannot illuminate a room unless it is burning. The danger of the Thyatiran church is that it might lose its message just as it gains a hearing.

"Watch and pray," Jesus told his disciples, "so that you will not fall into temptation" (Matt. 26:41). Unfortunately, they again fell asleep and were unprepared when Jesus was arrested. In a similar way, most of the Sardis Christians have fallen asleep. Jesus writes to rouse them.

Spiritual slumber is dangerous. A drowsiness creeps over us unawares. We relax and sit back, propping up our feet. We start doing the same old things in the same old way, letting the strong currents of unexamined traditions propel us along and gently rock us asleep. We aren't even aware that Satan has stolen onto the boat and is stealing us

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blind—first our effectiveness, then our influence, then our confidence, and finally our salvation.

**J**esus says, “Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die.” Then he turns to those few in Sardis who are still alert, encouraging them to keep marching.

The Philadelphian Christians are doing well. Christ has no criticism, unless it is how weak they are. Still, he focuses on their “open door”—a great opportunity before them, perhaps for evangelism or for service, or both. We must recognize spiritual “seasons”: opportunities that are ours for a while and then vanish. Their Lord ordains that this opportunity will not close for the faithful Christians in Philadelphia. Despite what they are suffering from the non-Christian Jews, they will be spared the persecution about to break out on the rest of the Christians of Asia.

The lesson here is that faithfulness prompts opportunities. Here is no health and wealth gospel, but a gospel of sowing and reaping. Sow a faithful Christian, reap another faithful Christian who follows the first’s example. Sow two faithful Christians, reap a revival in a congregation. Sow an on-fire church, reap a golden opportunity to reach a community—or a region—for Christ. Christ reassures the Christians living in the earthquake epicenter of Asia that He will build them into God’s temple as a permanent, unshakable pillar.

What a contrast between the Philadelphian Christians and those in wealthy Laodicea! Bankers and merchants through whose fingers money is constantly flowing are in danger of forgetting God (see Deut. 8:10-20; 1 Tim. 6:6-10, 17-19). That’s what was happening in Laodicea. Their riches were making them complacent and lukewarm to Christ. Their lackadaisical attitude make their Lord nauseated.

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They acted as if their riches were not God's gifts to them, but the result of their own boot-strap-pulling efforts. Christ diagnoses their spiritual condition as "wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked." He tries to humble them and motivate them to purchase relief from their spiritual impoverishment. The irony is that their spiritual condition is so opposite their physical situation.

**R**elative to the majority of human beings alive in today's world, we in America are wealthy. The easy money and the comfortable life-style, the entertain-me attitude and the self-centered mindset of our culture has a heart-numbing effect that is virtually inevitable. We must beware the indifference to the things of the Spirit to which our society makes us prone. Lukewarm Christians abound in places other than Laodicea and in times more contemporary than the first century. But the solution is still the same. "Be earnest and repent!" says the Great Physician as He tries to control his nausea.

Four times, to the churches of Ephesus, Pergamum, Sardis, and Laodicea, the Lord of the churches calls out, "Repent!" One more time, with reference to the prophetess of Thyatira, He states, "I gave her time to repent." He does not reject His people without first calling them to return to Him. The danger of rejection is obvious; it cannot be denied without contradicting the plain teaching of these and other passages throughout Revelation and the rest of Scripture. But we also see a portrait of a loving Master who calls His wandering servants to return to Him before it is too late. Patient He is, but His patience is wearing thin. If they refuse to turn back and come to Him, He promises to come to them, not as their Deliverer, but as their Judge and Executioner (Rev. 2:5, 16, 22-23; 3:3, 16).

Significantly, as one commentator recently pointed out, Christ does not say to the faithful of any of these churches to separate

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themselves from their erring brothers and sisters, go down the road a half mile, and start a new congregation. He exhorts them to remain faithful, to discipline the erring in their congregations, and to face with courage both the opportunities and obstacles before them. But He never says to pull up stakes and leave.

There may be occasions when pulling out is the thing to do. But it should only be a last resort, not the first response. If something is amiss in your congregation, do what you can to put it right. If someone is sinning, help them to repent (see Matt. 18:15-17). Don't just say, "Adios! I'm history." Give them "time to repent" while you model Christ to them and encourage them. I am convinced that we give up on each other too easily.



## Introduction

A survey of Revelation's geography helps to anchor this prophecy to a particular place, while looking at its historical background links it to a particular time. As with other biblical books, we are not reading fairy tales but the struggles real people faced in the real cities where they lived.

### 1. The Province of Asia

In the 13th century BCE, Mycaenean Greeks came to the western shores of Asia Minor (modern Turkey) in a series of raids that included the famous siege of Troy described in Homer's *Iliad*. Soon after, they settled in towns along the coast, a region that came to be called Ionia. During the eighth to sixth centuries BCE, this region came under the control of the powerful and wealthy kings of Sardis (see Herodotus for the details). In 547/546 BCE, Cyrus captured Sardis, and from that time, the Persians controlled the area until Alexander the great liberated it more than 200 years later. At Alexander's death in 323 BCE, his successors fought each other for its control. In 283 BCE, Philetaerus, the rebellious treasurer of Lysimachus, established his kingdom, making Pergamum his capital. The six kings in his dynasty ruled the Attalid