

No One Knows Seven Churches — Seven Messages for Us!

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Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)

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Background Notes

Key Scripture Texts: Revelation 2-3

Introduction

After seeing the dazzling vision of the risen Jesus, we would expect that John would forge ahead with the fascinating details about the near-term future. But the Lord has other things in mind. Before Jesus gives his people a revelation of *their future*, he must first confront them with a revelation of *themselves*. Not a crystal ball but a mirror is held up for the churches to see. Strangely, *Rev* uses an ordinary vehicle for communicating this truth: a series of *letters*, each addressed to the seven congregations in Asia Minor. Before Jesus offers insight into where his people are going, he must give them an honest assessment of where they are.

We will examine these letters from several angles in what follows. What we will discover is that the letters offer a full-orbed and balanced profile of the Christian community in the first century. Although individually addressed, each letter is really intended to be read by all of the churches. The constant refrain, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches," plainly invites the several congregations to "read each other's mail."

Ben Witherington, in his commentary on *Rev*, labels these two chapters, "Postcards from the Edge."¹ Unlike the setting of the novel/film of the same name, "the edge" for *Rev* is clearly a world in crisis which sweeps the seven churches into its vortex. The focus of the book, as illustrated by the letters, is not merely the satisfaction of curiosity about the future: it reaches far beyond to the character of newly born communities, alternative societies, taking shape in a world gone mad. To borrow a title from an earlier generation, "How Shall We Then Live?"² That is the burden of the letters and our challenge for this week's series.

The Letter Scroll: Letters to the Seven Churches: (2:1-3:22)

2:1 "Write this letter to the angel of the church in **Ephesus**. This is the message from the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand, the one who walks among the seven gold lampstands: 2 "I know all the things you do. I have seen your hard work and your patient endurance. I know you don't tolerate evil people. You have examined the claims of those who say they are apostles but are not. You have discovered they are liars. 3 You have patiently suffered for me without quitting. 4 But I have this complaint against you. You don't love me or each other as you did at first! 5 Look how far you have fallen from your first love! Turn back to me again and work as you did at first. If you don't, I will come and remove your lampstand from its place among the churches. 6 But there is this about you that is good: You hate the deeds of the immoral Nicolaitans, just as I do. 7 "Anyone who is willing to hear should listen to the Spirit and understand what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Everyone who is victorious will eat from the tree of life in the paradise of God.

8 "Write this letter to the angel of the church in **Smyrna**. This is the message from the one who is the First and the Last, who died and is alive: 9 "I know about your suffering and your poverty-- but you are rich! I know the slander of those opposing you. They say they are Jews, but they really aren't because theirs is a synagogue of Satan. 10 Don't be afraid of what you are about to suffer. The Devil will throw some of you into prison and put you to the test. You will be persecuted for 'ten days.' Remain faithful even when facing death, and I will give you the crown of life. 11 "Anyone who is willing to hear should listen to the Spirit and understand what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Whoever is victorious will not be hurt by the second death.

¹ Apologies to Carrie Fisher's novel (1987) and film (1990) of the same name. The lead character, Suzanne Value, battles with addictions and communicates her situation in letter form.

² Francis A. Schaeffer (1976). Republished in 2005 by Crossway Books.

12 "Write this letter to the angel of the church in **Pergamum**. This is the message from the one who has a sharp two-edged sword: 13 "I know that you live in the city where that great throne of Satan is located, and yet you have remained loyal to me. And you refused to deny me even when Antipas, my faithful witness, was martyred among you by Satan's followers. 14 And yet I have a few complaints against you. You tolerate some among you who are like Balaam, who showed Balak how to trip up the people of Israel. He taught them to worship idols by eating food offered to idols and by committing sexual sin. 15 In the same way, you have some Nicolaitans among you-- people who follow the same teaching and commit the same sins. 16 Repent, or I will come to you suddenly and fight against them with the sword of my mouth. 17 "Anyone who is willing to hear should listen to the Spirit and understand what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Everyone who is victorious will eat of the manna that has been hidden away in heaven. And I will give to each one a white stone, and on the stone will be engraved a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.

18 "Write this letter to the angel of the church in **Thyatira**. This is the message from the Son of God, whose eyes are bright like flames of fire, whose feet are like polished bronze: 19 "I know all the things you do-- your love, your faith, your service, and your patient endurance. And I can see your constant improvement in all these things. 20 But I have this complaint against you. You are permitting that woman-- that Jezebel who calls herself a prophet-- to lead my servants astray. She is encouraging them to worship idols, eat food offered to idols, and commit sexual sin. 21 I gave her time to repent, but she would not turn away from her immorality. 22 Therefore, I will throw her upon a sickbed, and she will suffer greatly with all who commit adultery with her, unless they turn away from all their evil deeds. 23 I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am the one who searches out the thoughts and intentions of every person. And I will give to each of you whatever you deserve. 24 But I also have a message for the rest of you in Thyatira who have not followed this false teaching ('deeper truths,' as they call them-- depths of Satan, really). I will ask nothing more of you 25 except that you hold tightly to what you have until I come. 26 "To all who are victorious, who obey me to the very end, I will give authority over all the nations. 27 They will rule the nations with an iron rod and smash them like clay pots. 28 They will have the same authority I received from my Father, and I will also give them the morning star! 29 Anyone who is willing to hear should listen to the Spirit and understand what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

3:1 "Write this letter to the angel of the church in **Sardis**. This is the message from the one who has the sevenfold Spirit of God and the seven stars: "I know all the things you do, and that you have a reputation for being alive-- but you are dead. 2 Now wake up! Strengthen what little remains, for even what is left is at the point of death. Your deeds are far from right in the sight of God. 3 Go back to what you heard and believed at first; hold to it firmly and turn to me again. Unless you do, I will come upon you suddenly, as unexpected as a thief. 4 "Yet even in Sardis there are some who have not soiled their garments with evil deeds. They will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. 5 All who are victorious will be clothed in white. I will never erase their names from the Book of Life, but I will announce before my Father and his angels that they are mine. 6 Anyone who is willing to hear should listen to the Spirit and understand what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

7 "Write this letter to the angel of the church in **Philadelphia**. This is the message from the one who is holy and true. He is the one who has the key of David. He opens doors, and no one can shut them; he shuts doors, and no one can open them. 8 "I know all the things you do, and I have opened a door for you that no one can shut. You have little strength, yet you obeyed my word and did not deny me. 9 Look! I will force those who belong to Satan-- those liars who say they are Jews but are not-- to come and bow down at your feet. They will acknowledge that you are the ones I love. 10 "Because you have obeyed my command to persevere, I will protect you from the great time of testing that will come upon the whole world to test those who belong to this world. 11 Look, I am coming quickly. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take away your crown. 12 All who are victorious will become pillars in the Temple of my God, and they will never have to leave it. And I will write my God's name on them, and they will be citizens in the city of my God-- the new Jerusalem that comes down from heaven from my God. And they will have my new name inscribed upon them. 13 Anyone who is willing to hear should listen to the Spirit and understand what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

14 "Write this letter to the angel of the church in **Laodicea**. This is the message from the one who is the Amen-- the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation: 15 "I know all the things you do, that you are neither hot nor cold. I wish you were one or the other! 16 But since you are like lukewarm water, I will spit you out of my mouth! 17 You say, 'I am rich. I have everything I want. I don't need a thing!' And you don't realize that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked. 18 I advise you to buy gold from me-- gold that has been purified by fire. Then you will be rich. And also buy white garments so you will not be shamed by your nakedness. And buy ointment for your eyes so you will be able to see. 19 I am the one who corrects and disciplines everyone I love. Be diligent and turn from your indifference. 20 "Look! Here I stand at the door and knock. If you hear me calling and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal as friends. 21 I will invite everyone who is victorious to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat with my Father on his throne. 22 Anyone who is willing to hear should listen to the Spirit and understand what the Spirit is saying to the churches."

Structure of the Letters to the Seven Churches

All seven letters have a common structure which provides some important insights into how Jesus relates to these churches.

ADDRESS (“To the angel of the church in . . .”): Scholars disagree over the identity of these angels. Some say they are literal angels who serve the different local churches. Others say they represent the human couriers (“angel” literally means “messenger”) or human leaders of the churches. Or, perhaps human couriers are protected by angels as they carry the letter scroll to the churches.

DESCRIPTION OF JESUS (“The One who . . .”): Jesus identifies himself by referring to one of the aspects of his revelation to John in chapter 1. This self-description is suited to their unique situation (though this is more apparent in some than others). For example, to the church in Smyrna, which is being severely persecuted, he is “the first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life” who can deliver them from the worst that their enemies can do to them. To the church in Pergamum, which is wrongly tolerating false teachers, he is “the One who has the sharp two-edged sword” who will deal with his enemies by his word.

ANALYSIS (“I know your . . .”): Jesus is fully aware of their circumstances, and (like a skilled doctor) his searching gaze diagnoses their real spiritual condition. He is especially aware of their tendency to be deceived by others and/or to deceive themselves about their spiritual condition. With three churches, his analysis is mixed—a combination of praise and criticism. Two churches receive on praise, while the other two receive only criticism.

COUNSEL: Jesus issues commands or authoritative advice that will help the church. Sometimes, this counsel includes encouraging promises (2:10 – “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life”). Sometimes, this counsel includes sobering warnings (2:5 – “Repent . . . or I will remove your lampstand out of its place”). The point is that Jesus doesn't just reveal their spiritual condition, he also offers effective treatment.

INVITATION TO OTHERS TO LISTEN AND LEARN (“He who has an ear, let him listen to what the Spirit says to the churches”): Because Jesus' word is truth, it is applicable to all churches and individuals. The point is that no matter how far removed we may be from these seven churches in space and time, God's Spirit can apply these letters to reveal and treat the spiritual condition of our churches.

PROMISE TO “OVERCOMERS: (“To him who overcomes . . .”): Each letter ends by promising a specific feature of Jesus' kingdom to those who “overcome.” Who are the “overcomers?” Sometimes the Bible uses this term to describe all true Christians (see 1 John 5:4; Romans 8:37; Revelation 21:7). In these letters, however, Jesus seems to be referring especially to those Christians who are faithful to him in the heat of battle, under trial, who fulfill his mission for their lives, even to death. That's why they are promised not only different aspects of eternal life that all Christians receive (e.g., deliverance from God's judgment and eternal life in God's presence), but also special rewards for faithful service (e.g., authority to rule and a crown of honor).

Overview and Lessons

We can group these churches into three general spiritual conditions: mixed (praise and criticism), bad (criticism only), and good (praise only). And we can learn some very important lessons from Jesus' counsel to each of these. To the churches that receive both praise and criticism, Jesus is essentially saying, “You are seriously imbalanced.” They are involved in very common but opposite errors.

To the church in Ephesus, Jesus says, “**You hate, but you don't love.**” He praises them for hating false doctrine (2:6) and discerning and rejecting false apostles (2:2). They knew that truth matters, they knew that spiritual falsehood is rampant and destructive—and they took seriously their responsibility to guard the content of God's Word. And because Jesus is the Truth, he praises them for this. But he rebukes them because they “let go” of their first love (2:4). This refers to the primacy of their love relationship with him and others. It starts

with receiving Jesus' love, it responds with glad praise and thanks to him and overflows in sacrificial love for others (see 1 John 4:11, 16, 19). This is what makes the truth attractive, and this is why Jesus is upset that they're neglecting it, and says they'll lose their witness unless they correct it (John 13:34-35). Some churches can smell heresy a mile away, but there is a coldness and harshness and lack of personal love for Christ and people that is deeply dysfunctional.

To the churches in Pergamum and Thyatira, Jesus says, **"You love, but you don't hate."** He praises them for their love and living faith in him (2:19), but he rebukes them because they have "let go" a false prophetess (2:20) to teach in their church and lead people astray. In the name of love, they are letting go of truth. And the result of this is a personal betrayal of Jesus because they worship false gods and practice destructive sexual behavior. Some churches say, "Doctrine divides, but truth unites—love is all that matters". The problem is that when truth is devalued, people may end up loving a false Jesus and hurting rather than helping others. Love is like a river—without the banks of truth, it becomes a destructive flood or a mile wide and an inch deep. Jesus wants his church to be passionately committed to both his truth and his love! To be faithful to him, the churches need to be biblically knowledgeable and discerning, and they need to be excited about his love and loving others.

To the churches that receive only criticism, Jesus is essentially saying, **"You are dangerously self-deceived."** To the church in Laodicea, Jesus says, "You think you belong to me, but you don't." They confused their material affluence with spiritual life (3:17), but Jesus tells them that they are destitute because they don't know him. Such churches say, "Sure we are Christians—we live in God's country, we have God's material blessing, we were baptized, we belong to a church, we can recite the Apostles' Creed, we don't kill or steal—that's what being a Christian is, isn't it?" Such faith communities need to take Jesus' advice (3:19). He wants to give them true spiritual wealth through a personal relationship with him, and they can have this by opening the door of their hearts and asking him to come in (3:20). To the church in Sardis, Jesus says, "You think you are healthy, but you're dying." They were living off of their past accomplishments and their reputation with other churches (3:1b,2)—but Jesus looks past this and exposes a flabby, decaying faith and compromise with the world-system ("soiled garments"). They were evidently more concerned about conserving what they had (property; financial resources; popularity in the community) than they were concerned about fulfilling their unfinished calling and taking new ground for Jesus. This describes many long-standing, reasonably large churches. The only way for a church to avoid this is by keeping spiritually awake, which requires taking new steps of faith that Jesus continues to put in front of his Church (3:3). Yesterday's faith is inadequate for today's battles.

To the churches that receive only praise, Jesus is essentially saying, **"You are succeeding regardless of what others say."** Of the church in Smyrna, Jesus says that they may be suffering horribly for their faith in Jesus (persecution and impoverishment), so that others look on them as impotent failures. But they are rich in the only way that matters (spiritually), because their suffering has burned away their spiritually deadening reliance on worldly blessing. Of the church in Philadelphia, Jesus says that they have "but little power"—they are not big, financially flush, full of movers and shakers, or politically connected, but they are excited about and committed to sharing Christ with people who don't know him. And because of this, they are connected to the only One that matters (Jesus). He promises to give them the opportunity to reach many, many people.

Value of the Letters

1. They give insight into real conditions existing in real churches who lived in real cities under real conditions at the end of the first century.
2. They symbolize the condition of churches throughout all of church history from the first century until now.
3. They serve as instructive case studies for the modern church which faces the same adversities, falls into the same sins, fulfills the same commands, and follows the same Lord as these representative churches of the first century.

Seven Churches Comparison Chart

CHURCH	DESCRIPTION OF JESUS	COMMENDATIONS	REPROOFS	COMMANDS/ COUNSEL	WARNING	PROMISE TO OVERCOMERS
EPHESUS <i>The Church Who Left Her First Love</i>	<i>Holds 7 stars in right hand (1:16)</i> <i>Walks among 7 golden lampstands (1:12)</i>	<i>I know your deeds, toil, perseverance, can't endure evil men;</i> <i>Test false prophets</i> <i>Endured for My Name's sake</i> <i>Haven't grown weary</i> <i>Hate deeds of Nicolaitans</i>	<i>But I have against you...</i> <i>you have left your first love</i>	<i>Remember from where you have fallen;</i> <i>Repent (2 times)</i> <i>Do the deeds you did at first</i>	<i>or else I am coming to you & will remove your lampstand out of its place</i>	<i>I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the Paradise of God</i>
SMYRNA <i>The Persecuted Church</i>	<i>The First & the Last (1:17)</i> <i>was dead & has come to life (1:18)</i>	<i>I know your tribulation & poverty (but you are rich);</i> <i>blasphemy by synagogue of Satan</i>		<i>Do not fear what you are about to suffer--></i> <i>Be faithful until death --></i>	<i>Devil is going to cast some of you into prison that you may be tested & you will have tribulation 10 days</i>	<i>Shall not be hurt by the 2nd death</i> <i>Crown of life</i>
PERGAMUM <i>The Divided Church</i>	<i>The One who has the sharp 2-edged sword (1:16)</i>	<i>I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is;</i> <i>you hold fast My Name;</i> <i>didn't deny My faith</i>	<i>But I have a few things against you... some hold teaching of Balaam (eat things sacrificed to idols & commit immorality);</i> <i>some hold teachings of Nicolaitans</i>	<i>Repent</i>	<i>or else I am coming to you quickly & I will make war against you with the sword of My mouth</i>	<i>will give some of the hidden manna</i> <i>will give him a white stone</i> <i>a new name written on the stone which no one knows except he who receives it</i>
THYATIRA <i>The Tolerant Church</i>	<i>The Son of God (1:13);</i> <i>has eyes like flame of fire (1:14);</i> <i>feel like burnished bronze (1:15);</i> <i>searches minds & hearts;</i> <i>gives to each according to deeds</i>	<i>I know your deeds... love;</i> <i>faith;</i> <i>service;</i> <i>perseverance;</i> <i>deeds of late greater than at first</i>	<i>But I have against you...</i> <i>tolerate Jezebel --> eat meat offered to idols & immorality</i>	<i>to those who follow Jezebel: repent of her deeds</i> <i>to the undefiled: no other burden but hold fast what you have until I come</i>	<i>will cast Jezebel on bed (of sickness) & those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation;</i> <i>will kill her children with pestilence</i>	<i>(& he who keeps my deeds to the end)</i> <i>give authority over the nations; shall rule them</i>
SARDIS <i>The Dying Church</i>	<i>has seven Spirits of God (1:4)</i> <i>has the 7 stars (1:16)</i>	<i>I know your deeds...</i> <i>a few names who have not soiled their garments</i>	<i>you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead;</i> <i>deeds not completed in sight of My God</i>	<i>wake up;</i> <i>strengthen the things that remain which are about to die;</i> <i>remember how you rec'd & heard;</i> <i>keep it;</i> <i>repent</i>	<i>If not, I will come like a thief & you will not know at what hour I will come upon you</i>	<i>clothed in white garments;</i> <i>I will not erase his name from the book of life;</i> <i>I will confess his name before Father & His angels;</i> <i>will walk with Me in white for they are worthy</i>
PHILADELPHIA <i>The Faithful Church</i>	<i>holy;</i> <i>true;</i> <i>has key of David;</i> <i>opens & no one shuts; shuts & no one opens</i>	<i>I know your deeds... given open door because of little power;</i> <i>have kept My word;</i> <i>have not denied My Name;</i> <i>kept word of My perseverance</i>		<i>hold fast what you have --></i>	<i>To synagogue of Satan: will be made to bow at their feet & know that I have loved you;</i> <i>hour of testing coming upon the whole earth to test inhabitants;</i> <i>I am coming quickly;</i> <i>don't lose crown of life</i>	<i>make pillar in God's Temple;</i> <i>he will not go out from it anymore;</i> <i>write upon him the Name of God, Name of God's city, New Jerusalem; My new Name;</i> <i>crown of life;</i> <i>will keep from hour of testing</i>
LAODECIA <i>The Lukewarm Church</i>	<i>The Amen</i> <i>faithful & true witness (1:5)</i> <i>the Beginning of the creation of God</i>		<i>I know your deeds... you are neither cold nor hot;</i> <i>lukewarm -->;</i> <i>say I am rich, have become wealthy, have need of nothing;</i> <i>wretched & miserable;</i> <i>poor;</i> <i>blind;</i> <i>naked</i>	<i>I advise you to buy from Me:</i> <i>gold refined by fire;</i> <i>white garments;</i> <i>eye salve;</i> <i>be zealous;</i> <i>repent;</i> <i>I stand at the door & knock...open door</i>	<i>will vomit you out of My mouth</i> <i>Those whom I love I reprove & discipline</i>	<i>to sit with Me on My throne as I also overcame & sat down with My Father on His throne</i>

History of the Seven Cities of Asia Minor³

What follows are brief accounts of the “time-space” worlds of these churches. These insights help us understand the burden of each letter, its language, the symbols and the “revelation” coming from the Lord who speaks His timely word to them.

EPHESUS This city was one of the largest and most impressive cities in the ancient world, a political, religious, and commercial center in Asia Minor. Associated with the ministries of Paul, Timothy, and the apostle John, the city played a significant role in the spread of early Christianity. Ephesus and its inhabitants are mentioned more than twenty times in the New Testament. The ancient city of Ephesus, located in western Asia Minor at the mouth of the Cayster River, was an important seaport. Situated between the Maeander River to the south and the Hermus River to the north, Ephesus had excellent access to both river valleys which allowed it to flourish as a commercial center. Due to the accumulation of silt deposited by the river, the present site of the city is approximately five to six miles inland.

Under the Romans, Ephesus thrived, reaching the pinnacle of its greatness during the first and second centuries of the Christian era. At the time of Paul, Ephesus was probably the fourth largest city in the world, with a population estimated at 250,000. During the reign of the emperor Hadrian (AD 117–138), Ephesus was designated the capital of the Roman province of Asia. The grandeur of the ancient city is evident in the remains uncovered by archaeologists, including the ruins of the Artemision (Temple to the goddess, Artemis), the civic agora, the temple of Domitian (AD 81–96), gymnasiums, public baths, a theater with seating for 24,000, a library, and the commercial agora, as well as several streets and private residences. Also discovered were the head and forearm of a colossal statue of the emperor Domitian. Today the Turkish town of Seljuk occupies the site of ancient Ephesus.

The city served as the primary trading center of all Asia Minor. The large port facility provided ample anchorage for ships carrying goods east from Greece and Italy, as well as for those which took to Rome the wares brought overland from Asia and the Far East. A well-laid road linked the port facilities at Ephesus with Tarsus to the east. The road approached the city from the southeast, entering a monumental gateway near the public baths. Remains of the city’s immense theater stand today as a reminder of the great crowd which, in protest to Paul, filled the seats and for several hours shouted, “Great is Diana of the Ephesians!” (Acts 19:34). The city’s temple honoring Diana was one of the Seven Wonders of the world. Known as the Artemision to the Greeks, the temple possessed 127 pillars, each 60 feet high, which held up the roof of the largest all-marble structure in the Hellenistic world. The city was the guardian of the sacred image of Artemis, which was believed to have fallen from heaven (Acts 19:35). The magic arts and mystery cults also flourished there (Acts 19:13-19).

A tradition reflected by Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus (ca. 190), is that John (writer of the book of Revelation) died a natural death in Ephesus, and by Irenaeus (ca. 175–195) that John lingered on in Ephesus until the time of the emperor Trajan (ruled ca. 97–117).

SMYRNA A major city on the West coast of Asia Minor, the modern city of Izmir, Turkey. It had good harbor facilities, was at the end of a major road, and was surrounded by rich farmland. It is the second of the seven churches addressed in Revelation (2:8-11), one of two churches of which the Lord spoke no negative word. (Philadelphia was the other.) Smyrna gave its loyalty to the Romans at an early stage (about 195 B.C.) and never wavered. The Romans often rewarded Smyrna for its loyalty. The city was headquarters for the imperial cult of emperor worship in that area of the empire. Christians were persecuted by Jews (who had a substantial population there constantly informing the Romans of the Christians’ activities) and Romans. Polycarp was a

³ Adapted from: *Holman Bible Dictionary*, Broadman & Holman, 1991; William M. Ramsay, *Letters to the Seven Churches*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904; Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 2001; William Barclay, *Letters to the Seven Churches*, New York 1958.

famous Christian martyr who was burned at the stake in Smyrna about A.D. 156. He was called the “twelfth martyr in Smyrna”. Tertullian and Irenaeus, who talked with Polycarp during his youth, tell us that Polycarp was consecrated bishop of Smyrna by the apostle John. Polycarp’s martyrdom was characteristic of the suffering of that period in church history. This has led many commentators to see Smyrna as representing the post-apostolic church age, an age characterized by persecutions.

The details of Polycarp’s death, captured in print by Eusebius the church historian, remain some of the most moving in the history of the church. He had been ordered to declare “Caesar is Lord” and promised liberty if he complied. In response the faithful martyr replied, “Eighty and six years have I served him and he never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and Savior?” Threatened by wild beasts and fire, he said “You threatened me with fire which burns for an hour, and after a little is extinguished, but you are ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment of eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly.”

Smyrna surrounded a well protected harbor on the Aegean coast at the outlet of the Hermus River. Extensive trade into and out of Asia passed through the city. A famous thoroughfare called The Street of Gold curved around Mt. Pagus like a necklace on the statute of a goddess. The acropolis on Mt. Pagus was called the “crown” or “garland” of Smyrna. During the first century A.D. Smyrna reigned as one of the grandest cities of all Asia. A large temple dedicated to the Emperor Tiberius boasted the close alliance of the city with the Empire. Numerous other temples dedicated to a wide range of Roman deities as well as scores of beautifully adorned public buildings decorated the city. Coins describe the city as “First of Asia in beauty and size.”

Smyrna also boasted of schools of science and medicine. It claimed to be the birthplace of the epic Greek poet, Homer.

PERGAMUM Pliny called it “the most distinguished city in Asia”. Located 15 miles inland overlooking the Caicus River, Pergamum contained the first temple in Asia dedicated to a Roman Emperor, Augustus, in 29 B.C. The city possessed a commanding position on a hill high above the valley. Located on the Upper Acropolis were a large theater, library, agora, palace, barracks, and altar of Zeus. The larger altar area may be that referred to by John as the “throne of Satan” (Rev. 2:13). This altar had a famous frieze around its base depicting the gods of Greece in various combat against the giants of the earth. This symbolized the triumph of civilization over barbarism. The city was well-known as a center of worship for the gods Asklepios, Zeus, Demeter and Persephone, Serapis, Isis, as well as the cult of the emperor. Temples stood there in honor of each.

Pergamum had a fine library of some 200,000 volumes and was the place where parchment was first used (the word “parchment” actually is based on the name of this city). The city was chiefly noted as the religious center of the province of Asia. The pagan temples and idolatry undoubtedly led John to refer to the city as the place “where Satan has his throne” (2:13).

Asklepios was the god of healing whose symbol was the famous serpent even now used by the medical profession. This god was called the Soter (Savior). No doubt, this serpent, a symbol of Satan to early Christians, intensified the Satanic perception of the city.

THYATIRA A city in the Lycus River valley. Although never a magnificent city, Thyatira was the center of a number of trade guilds which used the natural resources of the area to make it a very profitable site. Thyatira had a Jewish contingent out of which grew a New Testament church. One of Paul's first converts from the European continent, Lydia, was a native of Thyatira (Acts 16:14). She probably was a member of a guild there which dealt in purple dye. The church at Thyatira was praised for its works of charity, service, and faith (Rev. 2:19), but criticized for allowing the followers of Jezebel to prosper in its midst (2:20).

This longest letter to the churches is addressed to the least known church. Thyatira was an important manufacturing center located approximately forty miles southeast of Pergamum. The city was situated in a

valley on the road from Pergamum to Laodicea. Thyatira was especially noted for its trade guilds, which were more organized than in any other ancient city. William Ramsay notes that inscriptions mention “woolworkers, linen-workers, makers of outer garments, dyers, leather-workers, tanners, potters, bakers, slave-dealers and bronze-smiths. Their meetings were bound up with acts of pagan worship and immorality. Dye manufacturing was an important industry in Thyatira. The purple dye was made from a root instead of from shellfish. In its early days, Thyatira had a temple dedicated to Tyrimnos, an ancient sun god. Along with the Emperor Tyrimnos was regarded as “the son of Zeus”.

SARDIS The city of the same name was the capital of the province of Lydia and was located in the Hermus River valley northeast of Ephesus. An impressive acropolis overlooks the site. One of the major features there in New Testament times was a temple to Artemis, the goddess of love and fertility.

Sardis was situated in the western part of the Roman province of Asia about thirty miles southeast of Thyatira. The city stood on the northern slope of a mountain with a river flowing at its base. This setting rendered the city almost impregnable. In A.D. 17 the city was destroyed by a great earthquake. Although rebuilt by Tiberius, Sardis never recovered its former glory and importance. This failure to recover (in spite of the incredible infusion of imperial funds) became part of Sardis sad historical reputation.

The ancient city was noted for its fruits and wool. The making and dyeing of woolen garments was the chief industry of Sardis (cf. Rev. 3:4-5). Worship at Sardis had a sexual emphasis and focused on Sybele, a goddess similar to Diana in Ephesus. This deity was known for her power to restore the dead to life. The church was probably founded during the time of Paul’s ministry at Ephesus (Acts 19:10).

PHILADELPHIA Following the Hermus River inland from Sardis one reached Philadelphia, the name commemorating the brotherly love between Attalus Philadelphus and Eumenes. Founded during the second century B.C., the city was set amidst vast vineyards and led in the worship of Dionysius. The terrible earthquake of A.D. 17 was followed by dangerous tremors for the next twenty years, each one debilitating the city further. The apostle John's reference to the giving of a "new name" (Rev. 3:12) may be a wordplay on the proposed dedication of the city as "Neocaesarea" in honor of aid Tiberius sent. Later, the name “Flavia” (the Emperor Vespasian, AD 69-79) begins to appear on coins referring to the city. Despite the gains by Islam in Asia Minor in later years, Philadelphia maintained a continued Christian witness across the centuries.

Philadelphia, located twenty-eight miles southeast of Sardis, was a wealthy trade center in the wine producing district of Asia. The city was situated on a 650 foot terrace above the banks of the Cogamus River at the threshold of a fertile plateau from which its agricultural prosperity was derived. Philadelphia was called “little Athens” because of the magnificence of its temples and public buildings. Dionysus, the god of wine, was the chief deity of the city. The believers at Philadelphia were commended for their deeds, their obedience to God’s word, and their loyalty to Christ (3:8).

It earned the official title “gateway to the East” because it was at the juncture of trade routes leading to Mysia, Lydia and Phrygia. Moreover, the imperial post route from Rome through Troas passed through Philadelphia.

LAODICEA Journeying inland from Miletus, a traveller followed the course of the Meander River until it joined the Lycus. In the center of the valley sat Laodicea. Situated along the major east-west trade route, the city prospered greatly. As the chief city of the wealthy province of Phrygia, Laodicea boasted of a large number of banks. In 51 B.C. Cicero recounted how he stopped to cash drafts at one of the city's banks. The great wealth of Laodicea allowed it to finance its own rebuilding after a destructive earthquake in A.D. 60, refusing help from the Senate of Rome. The city was also known for clothes and carpets woven from the rich, glossy black wool raised in the valley. Laodicea served as home to a medical school renowned for production of collyrium, an eye salve. Revelation makes mention of the riches of the city, admonishing believers to seek instead spiritual gold of eternal worth, and to anoint their eyes with a spiritual salve. John's description of "white garments" to cover

their nakedness contrasts the Laodicean preference for "home-grown" black wool, a symbol of worldly prosperity (Rev. 3:14-18).

This city in southwest Asia Minor lay on an ancient highway running from Ephesus to Syria ten miles west of Colossae and six miles south of Hierapolis. Christian communities existed in all three cities (Col. 2:1; 4:13-16), though the one in Colossae is the best known. Paul wrote a letter to the Laodiceans (Col. 4:16) which has not survived, though some scholars have attempted to identify this missing letter with either *Ephesians* or *Philemon*.

The major weakness of Laodicea was its lack of a water supply. This need was met by bringing water six miles north from Denizli through a system of stone pipes (another sign of Laodicea's wealth).

Laodicea is best known today to readers of Revelation where Jesus criticized Laodicea, using imagery drawn from its daily life (Rev. 3:14-22). First, Jesus said Laodicea is neither cold (like the cold, pure waters of Colossae) nor hot (like the therapeutic hot springs of Hierapolis). Laodicea is lukewarm and provides neither refreshment for the spiritually weary nor healing for the spiritually sick (Rev. 3:15-16). Despite their apparent spiritual uselessness, the Laodiceans were claiming a spiritual wealth equal to their material wealth; and further, they were claiming to have acquired both by their own efforts. In reality, however, the Laodiceans, while they may have had material wealth, were spiritually poor, blind, and naked (Rev. 3:17)--an obvious reference to the textile and banking industry and medical school of Laodicea. According to Jesus, what the Laodiceans needed more than anything else was the true gold, white (not black) garments, and eyesalve that only Christ could give (Rev. 3:18). A true spiritual foundation is laid only in Christ, not human effort.

The Laodicean claim to be rich and prosperous reflects the self-reliant refusal of this city to accept Roman aid for rebuilding after an earthquake of about A.D. 60 (3:17). The charge that the Laodicean Christians were naked, blind, and in need of clothing and eyesalve (3:17-18) reflects the city's well-known school of ophthalmology and its fine garments of raven-black wool of local sheep.

Literary Background to the Letters to the Seven Churches

The expression "**These are the words...**" which introduces each of the letters. Three important OT passages shed light on the connotation of this phrase:

1. (Exodus 19:6) "You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. **These are the words** you are to speak to the Israelites." Compare to Revelation 1:5-6: "...To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, 6 and has made us to be a kingdom and priests.." The letters to the seven churches are written in the spirit of what God spoke through Moses on Mt. Sinai. The giving of the law constituted the people in the new role. As the new law-giver, Jesus affirms his covenant authority to constitute the church as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These words are spoken, not from Sinai, but from heaven where Jesus rules at his father's side.
2. (Deuteronomy 1:1) "**These are the words** Moses spoke to all Israel in the desert east of the Jordan" The Christians of the first-century were "desert" dwellers on their way to the new promised land. These Christians are a new generation, living at the end of first-century. They are geographically situated throughout Asia Minor, on earth, under persecution, isolated from their leader. From the exile in Patmos, John sends the words of Jesus to this generation of Christians. Like Moses, John will soon die, and must leave the final words of God for Israel. Revelation, like Deuteronomy, is a farewell book which seeks to prepare the new generation of God's people for the work ahead of it. The actual title of Deuteronomy, in Hebrew, is "These are the words" (*debarîm*).
3. (Jeremiah 30:4) "**These are the words** the LORD spoke concerning Israel and Judah". Jeremiah was told in 30:2 to write his words in a book, as John was in Rev. 1:11. Jeremiah announced to Israel and Judah that their captivity would be lifted and he would deliver them. "11 I am with you and will save you,' declares the LORD. 'Though I completely destroy all the nations among which I scatter you, I will not completely destroy you. I will discipline you but only with justice; I will not let you go entirely unpunished.'" In a

similar spirit, John addresses the seven churches who require both discipline and deliverance. Jeremiah's prophecy makes reference to the "time of Jacob's trouble", not unlike the tribulation then experienced by the churches. John, like Jeremiah, learns that the suffering experienced by the people of God is a purifying suffering. In order to renew his covenant, he speaks "these words" to the people at the end of the first century. The church also hears the words "I am with you and will save you". Though the whole world around you is destroyed, you will be delivered.

Perspective

The Book of Revelation begins, in chapter one, with the appearance of Lord of the Covenant, Jesus Christ. He appears as the mighty and glorious King, the one who died and now is alive. The parallels between Revelation and the three Old Testament passages just cited are striking. When God appears to Moses in Exodus 19, he comes in fire, smoke and with the sound of a trumpet. Moreover, Moses is told that this revelation will occur "on the third day" (19:11, 15, 16). John's vision of Jesus in chapter one includes references to his resurrected (which of course took place on "the third day"). This arrival of the "third day" is spoken of by John as "the Lord's day" (1:10). These parallels reinforce the reader's impression that like Moses, John is receiving a message from the Lord of the Covenant who comes to admonish and teach his people anew.

In addition, the letters repeat the expression "He who has ears to hear...". This reminds the reader of the following scriptures:

(Ezek 12:2) "Son of man, you are living among a rebellious people. They have eyes to see but do not see and ears to hear but do not hear, for they are a rebellious people.

After explaining God's kingdom through the use of parables ("sower and the seed", etc.), Jesus turns to the crowds who hear him and says, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." (Mark 4:9, 23; Luke 8:8; 14:35)

Jesus explains to his disciples that the parable form of teaching intentionally keeps the general public in the dark while giving anyone the opportunity to pursue further the meaning. In a sense, the parable was Jesus' way of encouraging commitment on the part of any who wanted to be his followers. Only the serious-minded would persist in seeking the meaning of parables. The casual listener who felt no particular attachment to the person of Jesus who not be motivated to press beyond the superficial meaning of what the master taught. The language "he who has ears to hear" invites serious response and is not for the half-hearted respondent to the message.

In a similar sense, the Lord who addresses the seven churches seeks serious involvement. The language of the seven letters contains symbolic references to the reader's own surroundings, but also some rather cryptic allusions to Old Testament ideas. While not strictly parables, these symbols require the same kind of investigation by the hearer. Moreover, the Lord of his church offers additional help in this process of "understanding": he reminds the churches about the Spirit who is always speaking to them. What they need to do is pay attention to what he is saying to each of them through the message of the seven letters.

Seven Churches: Windows into the Life of The Early Church

Recently, our church community studied the book of *Acts*. We learned about the power and witness, the courage and growth of the vibrant early church. At the same time, we cautioned about idealizing and sanitizing the picture of first century Christianity. The early church was not a perfect church. Its flaws were evident in the periodic divisions between Jews and Gentiles, and even among Jews who held to a law-free Gospel and those who insisted on keeping the letter of the law. Faced with persecution, followers of Jesus scattered into surrounding regions, preaching the Gospel wherever they went. Stalwart leaders like Paul and Barnabas had a brief falling out over John Mark. Peter struggled with allowing Gentiles as fellow heirs of the kingdom.

Still, we rightfully magnify the creditable strengths of the early church, while acknowledging its weaknesses. Recall the approach we took in presenting that series: "If we..." we imagined, and then examined ways the early

communities exemplified the life of Jesus, suitable for our imitation. "Influence factor" — we called it — as we formulated each "if" statement.

But what did the church look like, at least in Asia Minor, during the years following the first missionary forays in the 40's and 50's? The answer to that question lies within the seven letters sent to the seven churches recorded in Revelation 2-3. What we find there is no idealized portrait but a realistic appraisal *revealing* both belief and unbelief, commitment and compromise. The emphasis is on the *community as a whole* in its corporate character, living within a largely hostile world.⁴

1. **Suffering.** A common word used in the New Testament for suffering is "affliction" from the Greek *thipsis* which means "pressure." Being a faithful witness under pressure is a theme found in the seven letters (1:9; 2:9, 13). Within John's horizon, persecution was about to intensify, eventually overtake the whole church, and becoming a flood flowing into the *eschaton* — the end (2:10; 3:10; 7:14). Non-Christian Jews and pagans comprise what the letters refer to as "the synagogue of Satan" (2:9, 3:9) and "Satan's throne" (2:13) respectively. It is the devil who puts believers in prison (2:10).
2. **Sectarianism.** Fears *without* in the form of suffering are matched by fightings *within* manifested by divisive movements. Among them are false apostles (2:2) whom some of the churches judiciously "test" in order to reveal the false from the true. We read about cults like the Nicolaitans (2:6, 15) whose creed is the practice of the Old Testament figure Balaam (2:14). They are followed in seriousness by the cult of Jezebel (2:20). Here are two powerful biblical allusions: *opponents* and *seducers* of God's ancient people who appear in contemporary forms (Numbers 22-25; 31:16; 1 Kings 16:31; 18:1-19; 19:1-2). What was Jezebel's guilt? Largely that she introduced pagan gods within the religious life of Israel, while Balaam achieved through deception what he could not accomplish through ritual curses — he enticed Israel to compromise with idolatry. To the early church, these symbols translated into an accommodation with the surrounding culture. We would call it syncretism — combining Christian faith with pagan cultural practice, all in the name of Christian freedom. Paul fought the battles in his churches, as do we today (see 1 Corinthians 8-10; 6:9-20).

But the figures of Balaam and Jezebel also represent the power of charismatic personalities to attract and galvanize followers. Prophets, teachers, mystics, and itinerant sages sought to capitalize on the new Christian movement, drawing off adherents, effectively starting new sects — the birth of the early denominational spirit. Individualistic judgment replaced Spirit-led consensus. A cafeteria-style religious movement challenged the essential catholicity (that is, universality) of a church united under Christ and his Spirit (see 2:2).

3. **Service.** On a more positive note, we hear echoed the words "I know your works..." (2:2, 19; 3:1, 8, 15). This may strike us as odd: we expect to hear "I know your faith..." Of course, *Revelation* does not directly discuss the faith vs. works controversy which flared up in the Pauline churches within the Gentile world. However, we hear about "faithfulness" (2:13, 19; 13:10) and the deeper virtue of "endurance" (2:10, 13; 17:14). The real controversy is not about faith and works but about responsible Christian conduct vs. irresponsibility. It's about being the "servants" of the Lord in a world where a multitude of lords and masters demand allegiance. In 2:20 we hear the risen Lord show concern that "my servants" are being seduced.
4. **Shift.** In our Christian vocabulary we call it "repentance." This act of the will involves a reorientation of one's whole life. Christ reproved some of the seven churches, such as Sardis (3:1-2) and Laodicea (3:15). Eight times the Greek word *metanoia* appears in chapters 2-3. Jesus, the faithful high priest who walks among the golden lampstands makes certain that they are burning brightly; if they are not, he offers a remedy in the form of fundamental change — a shift from old ways of thinking and acting to new ones. Not "chiding" but "change" is the goal. Even a compromised church like Laodicea can "open the door" to Jesus who stands knocking for re-admittance to his own church (3:19-20)!

⁴ See Boring, pp. 91-97.

5. **Stand.** A favorite Greek word among New Testament writers is *hupomonē* which means "patience" or "endurance."⁵ Literally, it means to "remain while under." Under what? For the churches in Asia Minor, the challenge was persecution (1:9; 2:2-3, 19; 3:10). One commentator defines this term as "consistent resistance," thereby correcting the perception that patience is essentially a passive posture toward evil. It is not. In their refusal to recant their testimony, the martyrs boldly faced the flames, the cross and the executioner's sword. There's nothing passive about that (see 2:3, 13; 3:8).
6. **Spirit.** The refrain of each letter invites the churches to "hear" what the *Spirit says to the churches*. As the Lord of the churches requires, each church must have "ears to hear," a not-too-subtle way of asking for open hearts and minds. It was Jesus who used the same words to Israel when he preached and taught the crowds (see Mark 4:9,23 and parallels). The language of "ears" and "hears" is not just about paying attention; it's about responding and deciding. Choices face the seven churches, and the Spirit stands ready to empower those choices.
7. **Sovereignty.** Perhaps 3:21 offers the best summary of a single theme: "Christ is on God's throne and He invites us to join Him there." John writes, "The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne." The concept of the "throne" (Greek: *thronos*) appears forty-three times in *Rev!* The very next scene (chapters 4-5) is set around the throne of God in heaven where the audience gets to glimpse the glory of "the one who sits on the throne." As we study this image next week, we will discover how all of God's people share in His kingdom rule and have His kingdom authority. Here we see what it means for God's people to "live and reign with Christ a thousand years" (see Revelation 20).

Symbolic and Apocalyptic Language in the Letters to the Seven Churches

Sprinkled throughout the seven letters are symbolic images, some of them already appearing the chapter 1. There is good reason for this latter source: the risen Jesus who appeared to John, commissioning him as his prophet to the churches, confronts them with the power of his character. Jesus the "I am" addresses himself to the "you are" of the churches. A considerable portion of each letter is written in pure prose. Yet, other sections contain symbolic references drawn from the Old Testament. The use of symbols is not to conceal but to reveal. They are suggestive not suppressive of meaning. As we have already noted, rich imagery serves to draw out a variety of truth: poetry often succeeds where prose falls flat. Given an image — like "the seven stars" — the human mind will explore its contours and savor its nuances. Moreover, the deeply imbedded links to the Hebrew Bible, remind the audience that God is fulfilling His good word spoken long ago but coming to completion in the present.

In what follows we will examine how such symbolic language operates within the seven letters.

Ephesus: Stars, Lampstands, and the Tree of Life

The universe of the New Testament was perceived differently than the world of modern astronomy. Stars played significant roles as representing heavenly beings and cosmic powers operating within creation. Jesus addresses the Ephesians as the one "holding the seven stars" in his hand. Earlier, in 1:20b, he explicitly identifies these stars as the "angels of the seven churches." Connecting *angels* and *stars* would not have been a reach for a New Testament audience, especially one familiar with the function of angels as divine emissaries and rulers within the cosmic order. The book of *Daniel* associates angels with specific nations and referring to them as "princes" (Hebrew: *sarîm*, Daniel 10:13; 12:1). God, according to this model, has well-placed angelic figures who act as His governing agents, even at times fending off the attacks of counter-agents, presumably sent by Satan (10:20-21). Angels also function as protectors of God's people when they face the "beasts" unleashed on them by the Gentiles (Daniel 3:28; 6:22). The stars which shine in the heavens become fitting symbols for these angelic princes, their brightness revealing an inner majesty given them by God and fitting them for their role.

⁵ Fioeranza, p. 4.

New Testament passages which speak about angels stress their messenger roles as well, as Hebrews 1 illustrates. Angels announced the birth of Jesus to his parents. They also appear as "hosts" (i.e. "heavenly armies") to the shepherds, acting as both protectors and proclaimers of the divine word. After all, God's kingdom was coming in the person of God's Son, and he is accompanied by his royal attendants. When a "star" guides the magi to find the Christ child, it functions as a heavenly luminary — "a light to the nations."

When Paul commissions young Timothy to fulfill his pastoral role to the churches, he writes:

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the **elect angels** I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality (1 Timothy 5:21).

Such angels remain active rulers in God's kingdom, not only over the nations, but also over the churches. Yet they remain wholly subject to Jesus, who holds them, as stars, in his "right hand."

To the Asiatic churches, the power of the heavenly bodies was immense (see Bruce Malina's work in our bibliography). They had their own astrological theories, as did the Jewish people (there was a Jewish horoscope). Unfortunately they, like their new age counterparts, placed far too much importance on appeasing these powers of the heavens. Fate, in the Christian worldview did not rest with stars but with Jesus, the risen one. After all, he was the "star above all stars," even as he was "King of kings and Lord of lords." By using this symbol, Jesus is saying to his churches: I am sovereign over the angelic princes assigned to protect and serve each one of you.

Lampstands, as we have briefly noted, conjure up images of the Jerusalem Temple where the seven-branched menorah stood in a special chamber called the *holy place*. However, under the auspices of the New People of God, these lamps are no longer hidden away within the curtain of a Temple in Jerusalem, but are strategically placed to be "the lights of the world" throughout Asia Minor and the world. No longer stationary and affixed to a single candelabra, they have "branched out" into the world which has become their mission field. The whole world is destined to become the Temple of God, just as the whole world has become God's holy land. Under the power a single symbol, *Rev* has integrated worship, mission, and the renewed people of God. The seven churches have become lampstands in God's new temple — which Temple they are (see 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; Ephesians 2:21).

And the first Temple was the Garden of Eden, the earthly place where God Himself lived among His first-created humanity (see Ezekiel 28:13). The first humans were priests in that Temple, caring for it and charged with protecting it from intruders. But having failed in that responsibility, humans were denied immediate access to the "tree of life," the symbol of eternal life — eat of it and they would live forever (see Genesis 3). Jesus tells his churches that they may return to Eden where the fiery swords of the angels are at last pushed aside (see Genesis 3:24), making way for God's restored people to once more share in kingdom blessings — life evermore. Such a symbol brought comfort and encouragement to a church under siege, beset on every side with threats of death.

Smyrna: Crown of Life and Synagogue of Satan

The Greek language has several words for "crown," depending on the circumstances of its bestowal. In this case, the symbol derives from *stephanos*, the wreath or garland placed on the head of one who competed in the games and won. Its extended meaning is the according of honor or glory for an achievement. The church at Smyrna was under persecution but endured "to the end" of its spiritual race. Calling it a "crown of life," the writer uses an appositional genitive in Greek which conveys the idea that the essence of the crown *is life*: "a crown, that is, life." A natural transition in meaning allows us to also see "crown" as referring to *rule with Christ* in his heavenly kingdom, a reality already begun for those who died the martyr's death. Chapters 4-5 will elaborate on this present kingdom rule.

Among the writings of the church fathers is the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* (17:1) where, after Polycarp's death, he is given "the crown of immortality" (*ton tēs aphtharsias stephanon*) (also in 19:2). Similar language occurs in the *Similitudes* of Hermas (8.3.6).

Jews and Christians had a complicated relationship in the first century. We read about the "synagogue of Satan" in 2:9 and 3:9, consisting of those who "claim to be Jews though they are not." Philip L. Mayo has devoted an entire monograph to the church and Judaism in the Apocalypse of John.⁶ His research is excellent, but unfortunately cannot be surveyed adequately in these notes. What we can conclude about both Smyrna and Philadelphia is that these two churches were in some way in conflict with the Jewish communities in those cities. Their synagogues mounted accusations against the Christians, leading to persecution by the local Roman authorities. Such acts of betrayal resulted in counter-claims by the Christians that the Jews who act this way are not worthy to be called Jews at all, but have instead become agents of Satan or, as the letters characterize them, they have become a "synagogue of Satan." The Greek word for Satan literally means one who opposes or accuses another, and this has implications.

Jesus warned that his followers would be flogged in the synagogues and then handed over to the Gentiles. For example:

¹⁷ Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, ¹⁸ and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles (Matthew 10:17-18; 23:34; Mark 13:9; Luke 12:11; 21:12).

One prominent case which occurred during Jesus' ministry involved the man born blind whom Jesus healed in John 9. The following texts reveal the sequence of events:

(His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone should confess Jesus to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue) (John 9:22).

42 Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; 43 for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God (John 12:42-43).

During the hours before his trial and death, Jesus told his disciples:

They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God (John 16:2).

And so the escalating hostility between the Jesus movement and official Judaism reached a critical point with the ejecting of Christians from the synagogue.

By contrast, the Christians did not reject Jews because of ethnicity or religious heritage. Indeed, the apostles always went to "the Jew first" (Romans 1:16; 2:9-10; throughout *Acts*) and then to the Gentiles. How could they do otherwise? They themselves *were Jews* and Jesus *was Jewish* as well! However, when certain Jews actively opposed the Christian movement, snitched on Christians to Roman magistrates, and threw Christians out of the community, then the hostility smelled like the work of the devil, and that is why John uses this powerful metaphor, "synagogue of Satan."

Paul would draw a careful distinction between Israel and the *true* Israel or the *new* Israel. In one place he wrote:

6 But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For **not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel**, 7 and **not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring**, but "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." 8 This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring (Romans 9:6-8).

Within the Christian churches of Asia Minor there were Jewish people who truly followed Jesus as the Messiah. Together with the Gentiles who embraced the Gospel, they constituted the "Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16). Those who belligerently attacked the churches did not belong to true Israel at all, but, at best, to a false parody of Israel — faithless Israel.

⁶ Philip L. Mayo, *Those Who Call Themselves Jews*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series. Pickwick Publications, 2006.

Pergamum: Sword, Satan's Throne, Hidden Manna, White Stone, and New Name

When the image of the sword is placed in someone's mouth, it usually indicates judicial power — the judgment of the court. Christians were going to their deaths because of the complicity of Jewish informants and the capacity of Roman justice to do whatever it chose against purported threats to its authority. The Empire of Caesar and the Kingdom of Christ could not coexist. As noted in our discussions of its historical features, Pergamum represented the power of Rome in the provinces. And it was in the provinces that Roman justice was dispensed. However, the sovereign word of God is supreme over Caesar's judicial death-sentences on Christians. The image of the heavenly court comes from Daniel 2:37-38; 5:18-21. When Christ brings to completion his kingdom triumph, he appears in Revelation 19:15-21 with the same sword to smite the nations and bring their courts' decrees to nothing. On the last day, the sword of Christ would vindicate the people of God. His word would be final and Satan's throne filled with darkness (Revelation 16:10). The connection between sword and "word" occurs in Hebrews 4:12, but is actually rooted in the Old Testament, namely, Isaiah 11:4 and 49:2.

Jewish Christians would immediately recognize the image of the manna: God's special food which kept Israel fed during their forty year sojourn in the desert, prior to occupying the land of Canaan. The mysterious appearance of this "bread from heaven" bore witness to God's provision for His people before they finally found their promised residence in *the land*. By comparison, the New People of God are also sojourners and pilgrims who await the final consummation when new heavens and new earth become the restored holy land for all creation (see 1 Peter 2:11; Hebrews 11:13). As pilgrim people, they must rely wholly on God for spiritual food and drink. For the persecuted church in a place like Pergamum ("Satan's throne," the emperor's authority directed against them), food and drink was commonly denied them — *hidden* from them. They were, in the words of Jesus, hungry and thirsty (Matthew 25:35-44), sharing with him in his Messianic sufferings. There was a Jewish tradition that "Jeremiah hid the manna in the ark before the temple was destroyed and that it would be revealed again when the Messiah came (Exodus 16:32ff in conjunction with 2 Maccabees 2:4-7)."⁷ The rabbis contended that the manna which appeared in the wilderness to Israel had been "hidden in the high heavens...from the beginning" of creation (*Targum Ps.-J* Exod. 16:4, 15) and would feed Israel at the "end of days" (*Targum Neof.* 8:16).⁸

Whenever something is "hidden" in the biblical tradition, it is intended to be revealed later on. Within the traditional Passover celebration there is a similar hiding ritual. The *afikoman* is prepared during the fourth part of the Seder, *Yachatz*. During this ritual, the leader of the Seder takes the middle piece of *matzo* out from the stack of three whole *matzot* on the Seder table. He breaks the *matzo* in two, returning the smaller piece to the stack and putting aside the larger piece to be eaten later during *Tzafun* ("Hidden", the twelfth part of the Seder, which immediately follows the main meal). This is the *afikoman*, which is wrapped in a napkin and then hidden. Jews familiar with Passover would connect the hidden manna with the *afikoman* and anticipate that, at the end of days, God would once more reveal the hidden manna, bringing it out for the nourishment of His people — unto eternal life. Messianic Jews discern a cryptic reference to the burial and resurrection of Jesus. One website suggests:

As believers in Yeshua as Messiah, we see extra meaning in the *Afikomen*. *Afikomen* is actually a Greek word that means, "that which comes last". Some people, however, translate it as, "he will come again." The *Afikomen* is the middle of the three matzot that remind us of the tri-unity of G-d - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The *Afikomen* is broken - as Yeshua was "broken" when He was executed - and then wrapped in a cloth - as Yeshua's body was wrapped for burial. Then, the *Afikomen* is hidden for a while - as Yeshua was hidden in death for three days - before retuning to complete the Seder - as Yeshua returned to life from death.⁹

⁷ Beale, p. 252.

⁸ Bruce Malina explores the linguistic roots of manna in *Palestinian Manna Tradition*, Leiden: Brill, 1968, p. 75-77.

⁹ <http://www.messianictrust.org.uk/kids-pesach/the-afikomen.htm>.

It is possible to see the resurrection of the martyrs in this symbol as well. Though hidden by death, their resurrection will become their "coming again" which happens "at last" when Christ returns, sword in his mouth to render righteous judgment on behalf of his followers.

In conjunction with the "hidden manna" is the "white stone." From Exodus 16:31 and Numbers 11:7 we learn that manna resembled "white bdellium stones," comparable to "rock crystal." According to the Rabbis (*B. Yoma* 75a), manna was "round...and white like a pearl." Jewish tradition claimed that precious stones fell simultaneously with the manna (*Midrash Ps.* 78:4). *White* suggests purity, righteousness and holiness (see Revelation 19:8-9). Since the present context for Pergamum is a judicial one, we are inclined to connect the white stone with the practice of using black and white stones to cast votes for conviction or acquittal in court (see 4 Maccabees 15:26; Acts 26:10). Similarly, "yes" or "no" decisions reached by "casting lots" often involved using white and black stones, respectively. In the Old Testament, the High Priest carried two objects in a pouch behind his twelve-gemmed breastplate (one stone each for all the tribes): they were called the *Urim* and the *Thummim*. They likely functioned as symbols for truth and justice, but also as "decision stones," much like the white and black stones employed by the courts. The difference: Urim and Thummim were considered sacred oracles whose verdicts came from God Himself who divined His will through the oracular function of the two objects. Unable to arrive at a righteous decision any other way, Israel left the whole matter "up to God" who rendered His will through the medium of the two stones.

Combining these various references, a picture emerges of a decision rendered by God in the interest of truth and justice which overturns the verdict of the Empire. Faced with Caesar's "No!" the Christians trust God to render a favorable decision of acquittal which sets aside the ruling of the Empire. Though Satan's Throne is in their midst, God's throne is nearer still and will have the final word in the interest of their vindication.

Thyatira: Eyes of Fire, Feet like Bronze, Deep Secrets of Satan, and Morning Star

The vision in chapter 1 disclosed a glorified Jesus (once dead, but now alive forevermore) whose brightness and majesty caused John to "fall at his feet as though dead" (1:17). "His face shone like the sun," John wrote (1:16). Light imagery commonly gets applied to God and His associates. But fire symbols are equally conspicuous. We tend to equate fire with destruction and judgment, and certainly can find cases where that is its precise meaning in Scripture. However, fire got other billings among the ancients, particularly representing the purifying work of God in the life of His people. Moreover, God is explicitly called "a consuming fire" (Deuteronomy 4:24; 9:3; Isaiah 33:14; Hebrews 12:29).

In the Greek tradition, Heraclitus (c. 500 B.C.E.) was known as the "flux and fire" philosopher. He claimed that fire is the primary physical element, and from it all things come into existence. Through fire all things come into being and then later pass out of existence. A symbol of perpetual change, fire transforms all other things without being changed itself. One famous quote attributed to him says: "This world, which is the same for all, no one of gods or men has made; but it was ever, is now, and ever shall be eternal fire...Fire lives the death of air, and air lives the death of fire; water lives the death of earth, earth that of water. Measures of it kindling and measures of it going out." A certain balance — a conservation of mass/energy — is implicit in this view affecting the four elements: water, air, fire, earth. Fire is not a destructive force, therefore, but a *transformative* one. God as *logos*, says Heraclitus, guides the whole process.

The Jewish tradition is rich with statements which contain the phrase "the eyes of Yahweh." Commonly, we find that so-and-so "did that which was right/evil in the eyes of Yahweh," meaning that under the scrutiny of God's righteousness, they either had His approval or fell under His judgment. For example, when the Bible makes an assessment of the various kings who ruled over Israel, it regularly employs this language (see 2 Kings 12:2; 14:3; 15:3, 34; 16:2; 18:3). In this regard, we also have passages like this one:

For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him (2 Chronicles 16:9).

The New Testament generalizes with:

For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil (1 Peter 3:12).

For John, the vision of Jesus with fiery eyes shares some of these ideas. Piercing everything they see with their transformative gaze, the eyes of Jesus penetrate the darkness, the deceitful and the delusional. His glance means radical change. Once Christ sees the condition of his churches, he transforms them by his gaze.

Closely tied to "eyes of fire" is the symbol, "feet like bronze glowing in a furnace" The qualifier "glowing in a furnace" implies that the bronze has gone through a process rendering it highly reflective and pure. Bronze was used for making mirrors in the ancient world because it could be finely polished (compare also Ezekiel 1:7; 40:3). The emphasis falls on the molten and glowing state of the bronze while still in the furnace, in preparation for casting in molds. Temperatures reach close to 2,000° during that phase of preparation. Bronze is an alloy formed from combining copper and tin. So significant was the invention of bronze manufacture, it shaped an entire "age" in human history: the Bronze Age¹⁰, which, in the Eastern Mediterranean, began as early as 3300 B.C.E. and extended as late as 1,000 B.C.E. in some areas.

Within the Hebrew system of worship, bronze material was used for making items in the Tabernacle. Of special interest is the altar of burnt offering, the so-called holocaust altar, where sacrifices were constantly offered and entirely consumed. Able to withstand high temperatures (it takes high temperatures to make the metal!), bronze was an appropriate alloy for such rigorous use. Articles for the Tabernacle made of bronze were located in the outer section under the open sky. Once we move inside the two-room sanctuary (holy place and most holy place), everything is made of gold instead. Outside, the altar of burnt offering and the laver all suggested the rigorous process of sacrifice for sin, and the ordeal of animal victims dying in place of the guilty. Priests washed their hands in the bronze laver, removing the dirt and soot accumulated from hours laboring at the altar of burnt offering.

How does the imagery of bronze apply to the feet of Jesus? Curiously, bronze appears at the *base* of objects in the Old Testament: the bases of pillars (Exodus 26:27; 27:17-19; 38:10, 11, 17, 19); of the basin for washing the priests' hands (Exodus 30:18; 38:8). In John's vision, Jesus has feet of bronze. Ordinarily, the feet of Jesus refer to the place where people fall down to thank him (Luke 17:16), worship him (Matthew 28:9) or to seek his help (Matthew 15:30; Mark 5:22; 7:25; John 11:32). Mary anointed the feet of Jesus with her ointment and wiped them with her hair. Into Jesus' feet the Roman soldiers drove a single nail when they hung him on the cross. Defeated enemies symbolize their submission by being placed under the feet of the victor (Matthew 22:44; Mark 12:36; 1 Corinthians 15:25, 27; Hebrews 1:13; 10:13). On the last day, all things will be placed under the feet of Jesus (Ephesians 1:22; Hebrews 2:8). Sitting at someone's feet meant you acknowledged him as a teacher and committed yourself to learn from him (Luke 10:39).

Jesus passed through the fiery ordeal of suffering and death: we walked through the "fire" of the cross and came out the other side in resurrection life. God the Father vindicated His son, having raised him from the dead. Jesus was tested and proven to be the "faithful witness" (*pistos martus*, 1:5). At Jesus' feet John falls as one who died. He is Lord and Judge by virtue of this fiery trial through which he passed — the trial of the cross. His fiery bronze feet symbolize the judgment of the cross and the proven character of the one who endured it.

"The depths of Satan" or "the deep secrets of Satan" translate the Greek phrase, "*ta batha tou Satana*." The word *bathus* can mean "deep" in opposite to high; deep or thick, as in mist, woods, or clouds; violent, as applied to a storm; large or abundant; deep thoughts or secrets; far advanced with reference to time. Bible scholars lean toward the more nuanced "deep secrets" because of the prevalent teachings throughout Asia which stressed

¹⁰ In regard to the actual term, "Bronze Age", it was coined by Christian Thomsen in 1816. Thomsen was a Danish museum curator who used this term as part of a museum classification scheme to describe items excavated from the earth during a certain era. Later on, however, scientists, specifically geologists, decided to use Thompson's term to categorize rock layers that developed during different geological time frames. Once in use by scientists, the general public came to accept, and to use, the term as well.

forms of deep and dark mysteries — religious beliefs which captured the popular imagination. Early Gnostic philosophy claimed to have knowledge (*gnōsis*) which only the initiated might possess, having undergone rites or training. By contrast, Jesus brings *revelation* not concealment; he removes those things which hide so that he might reveal the truth about God, the world, human beings, and *the end of all things* — *the* eschaton. Christianity is not a secret society meant for only a few chosen souls able to share in its mysteries. Instead, its message is about "the deep things of God" which he reveals by His Spirit to those with ears to hear. Paul said it best when he opposed the "depths of God" to the "depths of Satan":

9 But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him"- 10 these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. 11 For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. 12 Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God (1 Corinthians 2:9-12).

Finally, to the Thyatirans, Jesus promises to give "the morning star." The Greek phrase is *ton astera ton prōinon*. Several Old Testament passages seem to lie behind this metaphor:

Psalms 2:7-8 ⁷ I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you. ⁸ Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.

Numbers 24:17 ¹⁷ I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth.

2 Peter 1:17-19 ¹⁷ For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," ¹⁸ we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. ¹⁹ And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts,

When the morning star appears, it happens just before the dawn — before the sunrise. Venus is the morning star in Graeco-Roman astronomy, and as both heavenly body and goddess she was the symbol of sovereignty in the ancient world. Perhaps that is why Jesus associates the morning star with the promise of rule (2:28-29). This association happens in the *Numbers* passage: star=scepter. In Christian parlance, Jesus is the morning star who rises from the dead, just ahead of the dawn (see John 20:1). Before the sun rises, Jesus rises, even as Venus rises (at least to the observer's eyes!) before the daylight. The resurrection is the lamp shining in a dark place — the place of death. And the resurrection rises in the hearts of God's people even in the midst of a dark world.

Sardis: Seven Spirits, White Clothing, Coming Like Thief, and the Book of Life

The image of the "seven spirits" derives, of course, from the opening vision (1:4) and appears again in 4:5 and 5:6. The image appears in a Trinitarian context in 1:4, along with Father and Son. This has led some to surmise that the correct rendering of this expression is "seven-fold Spirit," referring to the multi-functional roles of the Holy Spirit. A reading of Isaiah 11:2 reveals this seven-fold usage: the Spirit in seven-dimensions, as it were:

1. Spirit of Yahweh
2. Spirit of Wisdom
3. Spirit of Understanding
4. Spirit of Counsel
5. Spirit of Power
6. Spirit of Knowledge
7. Spirit of the Fear of Yahweh

One Holy Spirit is expressed in seven unique attributes.

Later in Revelation 4:5 this seven-fold Spirit is represented by seven lamps burning before the throne. In 5:6 the imagery shifts to "seven eyes" belonging to the Lamb (=Jesus), suggesting that the seven-fold Spirit is intimately connected with the risen Jesus. That was the import of Isaiah 11 when Messiah announces that "the Spirit of Yahweh is on me..." (11:1). Actually, the symbol of "seven eyes" originated from the book of

Zechariah (3:9) where the "eyes" refer to God's awareness of everything which takes place throughout His creation (4:10b). Put simply, "the Spirit knows..." and endows this wisdom and understanding on his chosen one, the Messiah, who in turn communicates it to the churches. Now, in Revelation 3:1, Jesus addresses the Sardis congregation as one who has the seven-fold Spirit. Sardis has a reputation of life but is actually dead. Into such a church, the Spirit comes to breathe life.

"White clothing" reminds us of the ancient Christian practice of giving white robes to persons at the time of their baptism. Having removed their old clothes, symbols of their former sinful life, they put on white clothing as a symbol of forgiveness of sins and the righteous verdict declared over them by God — a verdict made because of the finished work of Christ on the cross. Changing clothes as a ritual act can be found in the consecration of Old Testament priests (Leviticus 6:9-11; 8:1-10; 16:1-4; *Zechariah* 3:5). Revelation 6:11 identifies the righteous martyrs as clothed in white robes, symbols of their resurrection (compare 2 Corinthians 5:1-10).

Since white was usually associated with "purity," the promise made to the Christians in Sardis was that God will purify them. Further, based on 6:11, Jesus may also be telling them that they will receive a resurrection body at death, as symbolized by their baptism.

"Thief" language points to the occurrence of an unexpected injurious event. For Jesus to come as a "thief in the night" (see Matthew 24:43; 1 Thessalonians 5:2) is not a source of hope but of deep concern. This is judgment language not "rapture" language. Those who teach otherwise fail to grasp the full context and sense of the metaphor. Thieves come to do damage not to bring good news. A close parallel is the image provided by Jesus in Matthew 24 (and Luke): "Two shall be grinding at the mill; one shall be taken and the other left..." The "taking" does not refer to "taking to heaven" or "taking to be with Jesus" but "taking in judgment." A careful reading of the surrounding context will reveal this. What Jesus tells Sardis is that judgment awaits those who do not respond to his counsel.

Lastly, we consider the image of "the book of life." In the ancient world, cities would keep records of all their living inhabitants. This census listing was sometimes called the "book of life" because it contained the names of those who were, in fact, "alive" and residents of the city at the time. The Old Testament, in Malachi 3:16, refers to a "book of remembrance." Elsewhere (Exodus 32:32; Psalm 139:16; Isaiah 4:3; 65:6; Ezekiel 13:9) we read about God having one or more books in which He records entries. Moses appealed to Yahweh to save Israel from their sins and blot his name from the book (Exodus 32:32-34). Parallels appear in Mesopotamian literature in which the deeds of the human beings are kept in one or more books.¹¹

In Jewish tradition we read about the *Sefer HaChaim* where God keeps the names and deeds of the righteous. This book is opened by God on *Rosh HaShanah*, along with the Book of the Dead. References in Ezekiel 4 seem to suggest the marking of the righteous by chosen scribes. The non-canonical writings, *Jubilee* and *Enoch*, similarly elaborate on the use of these two books (Jubilees 36:10; Enoch 104:1; 81:4; 89:61-77; 90:17-20; etc.).

The immediate background to this reference in *Rev* is Daniel 12:1-2 where the righteous dead are raised to life — the ones whose names are in the book of life.

Philadelphia: Key of David, Open Door, Temple Pillar, New Name, and New Jerusalem

References to "keys" appear early in *Rev*, appearing first in 1:18: "...I hold the keys of death and Hades." The Greek word is *kleis*: "a bar, bolt, key, catch, hook, hook, tongue of a clasp, collar-bone, rowing bench, or

¹¹ Enkidu, in the *Shipuru* tablets, comments about these books. See John H. Walton and Mark William Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, InterVarsity Press, 2000, p.811.

narrow pass." The related verb is *kleiō*, meaning "to shut, close." Occurrences throughout the New Testament include:

1. Christ gives the *keys of the kingdom* to his followers, who in turn "bind" or "loose," presumably by the confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God (Matthew 16:19).
2. Jesus accuses the Jewish leadership of "taking away the *key of knowledge*," thereby locking themselves and others out of the kingdom (Luke 11:52).
3. Later in *Rev* John sees the opening (9:1) and closing (20:1) of the place where Satan is bound.

However, the main Old Testament text which explains the usage in 3:7 comes from Isaiah 22:22:

22 And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.

The wider context of Isaiah 22 belongs to another generation when Judah fought for its life against the encroachments of the Assyrian army (701 B.C.E.). The "his" and the "he" of this verse refers to the newly installed prime minister in the King Hezekiah's court, a man named Eliakim. By God's direction his predecessor, Shebna, had been demoted, allowing for new leadership to oversee day-to-day operations during the siege of Jerusalem. In the ancient world, the vizier (or prime minister) acted on the king's behalf:

All affairs of the land passed through his hands, all important documents received his seal, all the officials were under his orders. He really governed in [the king's] name...¹²

This was the position held by Joseph in the court of Pharaoh (see Genesis 40-44; 45:8). By using this biblical allusion, *Rev* is saying, in effect, Jesus has been given "all authority in heaven and on earth." In particular, he has the authority to enter the heavenly court and to act on behalf of God Himself. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus carried the royal seal and the divine keys for opening and shutting the official rooms of God's kingdom. According to 3:8, this authority held by Jesus is being used to provide an "open door" to the churches so that no one can shut it. Open doors offer access. We may have an allusion to the official title given to Philadelphia: "gateway to the East" (as noted above), because it was at convergence of trade routes to several adjacent regions, including the imperial route to Rome itself. Jesus is telling his churches that by virtue of their position they have been granted unusual access to important parts of the Empire. How will they use this "open door"?

The phrase "open door" appears in several New Testaments passages:

1. A master's servants stay awake so they can open the door for his return (Luke 12:36).
2. The master shuts the door to slothful servants and will *not* open it (Luke 13:25).
3. Paul asks that people pray for God to open a door for the word so that he may declare the mysteries of Christ (Colossians 4:3).
4. Those who open the door, allowing Jesus to enter, will share table fellowship with him (Revelation 3:20).
5. John sees a door "standing open in heaven" (Revelation 4:1).

It is reasonable to find a connection between the Christ who has "the key of David" and the "open door" which he places before the churches. When we consider that 4:1 introduces a two-chapter scene in heaven and that the prominent symbol of the "open door" appears in that context, it seems likely that the open door of 3:7 shares a similar meaning. Jesus is telling the churches that as God's vizier — the son at his right hand — he has the authority to give his followers access to the most sacred precincts of the kingdom, namely, the presence of God. This includes sharing in God's royal rule as his "kingdom and priests" (see 1:6). This is consistent with the language of 3:9 where the enemies of Christ's church are made to "come and fall down" at its feet, and acknowledge that the church is the beloved of Christ.

The image of the "Temple pillar" (3:12) suggests a transformed understanding of what the Temple will one day look like. If we are correct in dating *Rev* prior to 70 C.E., then the Temple — Herod's temple — in Jerusalem was still standing. As you will recall from our study of Matthew 24, that Temple would one day fall to the Roman armies, having already fallen under the judgment of God for its unfaithfulness. Jesus' Temple action on

¹² Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, Eerdmans, 1997, p. 130.

Palm Sunday prefigured that destruction. There would no longer be an earthly Temple "made by human hands." The Temple would consist of human beings built together into a living holy temple (see 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:21).

This new Temple has its origins in heaven itself where the pattern for it is found (see Revelation 7:15; 11:19; 14:15, 17; 16:17; Exodus 25:9, 40; Numbers 8:4; Acts 7:44; Hebrews 8:5), and as the book of *Rev* ends, we learn that the "Temple is the Lord God Almighty" himself (21:22). And so to be a pillar in the temple of "my God" means to become one with God Himself who is our true dwelling place "throughout all generations" (see Psalm 90:1).

When 3:12 says that Jesus will "write" on his people "the name of my God" — a "new name" — we are no doubt being told about a new sense of belonging which comes with being part of Christ's church. The idea of putting a written mark on someone is derived from the prophet Ezekiel. The following passage provides the general idea:

4 And the LORD said to him, "Pass through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it." 5 And to the others he said in my hearing, "Pass through the city after him, and strike. Your eye shall not spare, and you shall show no pity. 6 Kill old men outright, young men and maidens, little children and women, but touch no one on whom is the mark. And begin at my sanctuary." So they began with the elders who were before the house (Ezekiel 9:4-6).

These instructions were given to scribes whom God called for this task. The mark ensured protection for God's true people when the rest of Israel failed to obey Him, on the eve of Jerusalem's fall in 586 B.C.E.

The idea of "new name" appears in other settings:

1 For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet, until her righteousness goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a burning torch. 2 The nations shall see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory, and you shall be called by a **new name** that the mouth of the LORD will give. 3 You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God (Isaiah 62:1-3).

Names indicate identity and personhood. The concept of "name" is virtually equivalent to the idea of "person" in the ancient world. In point of fact, early Christians faced an identity crisis for a variety of reasons. Once the Christian community ceased to be wholly Jewish, it lost something of its uniqueness and recognition within the larger culture.¹³ As we have seen above, Jewishness no longer applied to a group that was largely Gentile, ethnically. The Roman Empire didn't quite know what to do with the Christians, as evidenced by the letters of Pliny to the Emperor Trajan.¹⁴ The Jewish people had special arrangements with Rome, allowing them to worship only one God without the use of images. They could forego the outright worship of the Emperor by offering a sacrifice on his behalf in the Temple. No such *de jure* rules applied to Christians. Their very existence seemed to be suspect and seditious. Having declared Jesus is Lord and Savior, by implication they seemed to be saying that Caesar is not. Because no ethnic identity bound them together (they were both Jews and Gentiles!), Rome could hardly lump them together as a single racial group.

Faced with this crisis of identity, Jesus promises to give them a new identity, that is, a new name, as Isaiah had long ago promised. And that name would come from "the mouth of Yahweh" Himself. Who are we? Isaiah affirms, "a crown of beauty in the hand of Yahweh" and "a royal diadem in the hand of your God." John would tell his audience in his Gospel, such persons are given to authority "to be called children of God" (1:12).

Cities were culturally complex entities. The city had a long tradition within Greek society. Places like Athens and Sparta were considered "city states," having nation-like status within a larger Greek culture and politic. Jerusalem also had a venerable history as a city. The choice of this city was connected with David's taking of the environs of Mount Jebus. Believing that God had chosen him to find a place where God's name could dwell (see background for this concept in Deuteronomy 12:11; 14:23; 16:2, 6, 11; 26:2; Nehemiah 1:9), David

¹³ See Witherington, pp. 108-109.

¹⁴ *Letters* 10.96-97,

dedicated his conquest to what would become Jerusalem, capital of a united Israel. Also referred to as Zion, the city's reputation was "city of God," and was celebrated as such by the poets of Israel (see Psalm 46:4; 48:1, 87:3). The plan was for a city to reflect the glory of God as a witness to the nations around it. "Glorious things of these are spoken, O city of God!" (Psalm 87:3). When the pagans saw Jerusalem, they should see something of Yahweh's true character and eventually come to acknowledge Him as their God.

When Jesus tells his churches that they will bear the name of the city of God, he is not talking about earthly Jerusalem, but the new city of God comprised of his followers, the church. In a powerfully visualization, the writer to the Hebrews dramatizes the appearance of this city and identifies it with the church:

22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Hebrews 12:22-24).

Paul echoes these thoughts:

But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother (Galatians 4:26).

In this letter to Philadelphia, Jesus refers to this city as "coming down out of heaven from my God," a depiction repeated in the closing chapters of *Rev* (see 21-22). He offers his followers a glimpse of their future, living within the new city, bearing the new name, together forming the new Temple of God. This "city" is not a place we go when we die, but instead the place which one day will come to earth where a restored humanity will live together in the glory of God's eternal kingdom.

Laodicea: Lukewarm Water, Refined Gold, and Eye Salve

We have already discussed these three images in the section on "Histories" above. Taken together, they reveal a church in a state of fundamental decline. Like the water which was piped into the city, leaving it "neither cold nor hot," the Christians of Laodicea lacked a defining commitment in the midst of a compromised culture. The effect on the church's witness is devastating. Hot water or cold water each have their expected impact on those who come to drink it or bathe in it. Towns like Hierapolis with hot water having medicinal benefits, or like Colosse with cold water, pure and drinkable — these both delivered on their promised reputation. Who, on the other hand, would care for lukewarm water? Give us something we can live and die for, might be the reaction of a seeker.

"You cannot serve two masters," Jesus once told his disciples (Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13). This reminds us of what Elijah told Israel in the famous Mount Carmel incident:

And Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." And the people did not answer him a word (1 Kings 18:21).

Spiritual fence-straddling is in view here. Sadly, its pronounced mark is that "the people did not answer him a word." So with Laodicea. To what do we attribute this fatal condition?

"Full...in need of nothing..." A false sense of self-sufficiency prevented the Christians from making any choices at all. Nothing depended on deciding, for the city needed nothing. By contrast, Paul would ask, "Who is sufficient for these things?" (2 Corinthians 2:16), answering his question, "not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us" (3:5), and then gratefully acknowledging the words of Jesus, "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Corinthians 12:9). Such God-dependent humility is absent from the church in a city which prided itself on rebuilding after an earthquake without any help — even from Rome!

"Full," to be sure, but not of the Holy Spirit. The tragedy of self-sufficient pride is that it fails to see its own weakness and deficiency. It *has* gold, but *needs* gold *refined* in the fire. It is blind but needs a salve more potent than *collyrium* produced in its medical school.

Concluding Thoughts

In the closing sentences of his letter to Laodicea, Jesus clearly widens his audience to include all the churches:

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me (Revelation 3:20).

If we limit ourselves to the immediate context, Jesus finds himself locked out of his own church. He who has the keys to everything discovers that self-sufficient Laodicea leaves him standing outside! Institutional religion can become ossified and wholly dependent on structures of its own making. Having enshrined its own internal practices, it imagines that it has everything under control. Not even the Lord himself need stop by any longer. Ancient Israel had the same problem near the end of its national existence. Idols came to symbolize manmade religion to the extreme. The gods Israel worshipped were the ones they made. Laodicea is no different.

Still, what institutions *fail to do*, weak as they are through the flesh, Jesus *does* by issuing his call, this time to individuals: "If anyone hears my voice and open the door." It would be a mistake to limit the door to only individual hearts, though they are surely included. Christ seeks individuals within his own church who are willing to open the door once more, allowing him to come back in — *to his church*. That's all it takes: one or two people, perhaps, who open the door and invite the Lord back into his own church. Throughout history such individuals did precisely that: Savonarola, Luther, Wesley, and other choice servants of God. When it seems like the last days are closing in and all is lost, someone opens the door.

The seven churches are, to be sure, real historical congregations, living in the first century and facing real first century problems. Lying in their immediate future was the "great trial" which would try those who lived within the Roman Empire (3:10). The letters are intended to counsel, rebuke, correct and encourage these congregations so that they might be ready. All are invited to hear the message that is given to each. We are included in that invitation. In every generation, there are churches which share the concerns and characters of these seven Christ communities. Christ likewise invites us to eavesdrop on his words to them. "He who has hears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Glory to God. Amen.

A Select Bibliography: *Revelation*

The following list of works represents a cross-section of scholarship and different points of view. I have largely limited the selections to works which deal with historical, cultural, social and theological issues. Absent are works which focus on the sensational aspects of applying *Revelation* to current events — an enterprise which becomes dated the moment it leaves the writer's pen. These are books I have read and studied across several decades of studying the book of *Revelation*.

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Digger Deeper: *No One Knows — Seven Churches — Seven Messages for Us!*
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of *No One Knows — Seven Churches — Seven Messages for Us!*, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website <http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org>, or pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the **Information** desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. Carefully read this week's selection from Revelation 2-3: "Letters to Seven Churches." As you read, imagine yourself a member of each congregation. What five messages strike you as especially significant for our time, and suggest why.
2. Each letter has a stock outline: 1) Jesus identifies himself; 2) Jesus commends; 3) Jesus corrects; 4) Jesus commands/counsels; 5) Jesus warns; 6) Jesus promises. Using this general structure, build a table applying the outline to each church.
3. What churches seem to have "missing sections"? In each case, offer an explanation for the omission.
4. Using either the *Background Notes* or a Bible Dictionary, familiarize yourself with each city mentioned in these chapters. What connections can you see between the city and its history, culture or other relevant features? In what ways does Jesus tailor his words to each Christ community?
5. Notice the way Jesus introduces himself to each church. See if you explain each Jesus description. Look for connections to chapter 1. How is each description appropriate for each church, based on that church's character or situation?
6. Explain the repeated expression, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches." Read the following passages to shed light on it: Ezekiel 3:10; 12:2; 40:4; 44:5; Zechariah 7:11; Matthew 11:15; Mark 4:9, 23; Luke 8:8; 14:35).
7. Respond to this statement: "Jesus sent letters to seven churches so that they might be heard by every church." In what ways are the seven churches like every church? Or, every church like the seven churches?
8. Jesus begins each letter with "These are the words..." Compare with Exodus 19:6; Deuteronomy 1:1; Jeremiah 30:4. What force or significance do these opening words have?
9. In general terms, what are the greatest strengths and the greatest weaknesses of the seven churches? Identify some contemporary parallels in the life of churches today. How might Jesus counsel us in our church?
10. What dangers face churches which fail to listen to what the Spirit tells them?
11. How does Jesus strengthen and encourage the churches by making promises to them?
12. In what ways, does Jesus ask the churches to *change*?
13. What evidence do the letters give us that the surrounding culture had negatively influenced the churches?
14. Since the churches face a future filled with trials (see Revelation 3:10), how do the letters from Jesus prepare them for what lies ahead? For what lies ahead of us?