

2. Warnings against Immorality and False Teaching at Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, and Thyatira (Revelation 2)

The seven churches receive individual messages via their angels (messengers) in chapters 2 and 3. Just as the seven spirits (or sevenfold spirit) represent the full limit of the Holy Spirit of God, so the seven churches represent the **full nature** of all churches for all time. This is the measure of the Holy Spirit given to Jesus, the Christ in John 3:33-34:

33 "He who has received His testimony has set his seal to this, that God is true. 34 "For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God; for He gives the Spirit without measure.

God's mystery, the sevenfold spirit, the fullness of time, and the seven churches are characteristically the same for all churches of all time. SYNECDOCHE is the figure of speech used here: In this sense the seven churches of Asia are all churches of all time.

syn-ec-do-che: a figure of speech by which a part is put for the whole (as fifty sail for fifty ships), the whole for a part (as society for high society), the species for the genus (as cutthroat for assassin), the genus for the species (a creature for a man), or the name of the material for the thing made (boards for stage). Merriam Webster Online Dictionary. 2005.

By the very nature of the figure, churches are composites of some or all churches in both their strengths and/or their weaknesses. The meaning for us is clear: we must take to heart the commands of the Lord to these churches as they apply to our own congregations.

To the Church in Ephesus: a Loveless Church (Revelation 2:1-7)

Revelation 2:1-3

2 *"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:*

The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this:

2 *I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; 3 and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary.*

The first letter is to the messenger of the church of Ephesus. The Lord identifies himself as the speaker by selecting one of the identifying phrases used in the vivid description of him in chapter 1:12-15. For the church of Ephesus, he uses, "These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands." He begins, "I know your deeds." Some of the deeds are good:

Deeds and toil

Perseverance

Intolerance of wicked men

The testing of false apostles

Perseverance and endurance of hardships for my name

Not growing weary

Revelation:2:4-5

4 *'But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. 5 'Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place — unless you repent.*

First look provokes, "What a church." How can this not be a sound congregation? Yet, they had forsaken their first love, according to the Lord himself:

John 8:42: 42 Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and have come from God, for I have not even come on My own initiative, but He sent Me.

John 14:15: 15 "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.

John 14:23-24: 23 Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him.

John explains how we must live in love in 1 John 4:16-17:

16 We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. 17 By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world.

First love is the love of espousal. The image of the church as the bride of Christ repeats throughout the Revelation:

Revelation 19:7: 7 "Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready."

Revelation 21:2: 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband.

Revelation 21:9: 9 Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and spoke with me, saying, "Come here, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb."

Revelation 22:17: 17 The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost.

Revelation 2:6-7

6 'Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.'

The Lord gives them a choice. Repent and do the things that they did from the beginning or he will remove their lampstand from its place. In their favor was their hate of the practices of the Nicolaitans.

NICOLAITANS: (nik-o-la'-i-tanz) Nikolaitai): A sect or party of evil influence in early Christianity, especially in the 7 churches of Asia.

1. The Sect: Their doctrine was similar to that of Balaam, "who taught Balak not to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit fornication" (Rev 2:14-15). Their practices were strongly condemned [the Lord], who praised the church in Ephesus for "hating their works" (Rev 2:6), and blamed the church in Pergamum for accepting in some measure their teaching (Rev 2:15). . . . Reference is probably made to their influence in the church at Thyatira also, where their leader was "the woman Jezebel, who calleth herself a prophetess" (Rev 2:20; compare verse 14). No further direct information regarding them is given in Scripture.

3. Nicolaitan Controversy: The problem underlying the Nicolaitan controversy . . . concerned the whole relation of Christianity to paganism and its usages. The Nicolaitans disobeyed the command issued to the Gentile churches, by the apostolic council held at Jerusalem in 49 AD – 50 AD, that they should refrain from the eating of “things sacrificed to idols” (Acts 15:29). Such a restriction . . . was yet necessary to prevent a return to a pagan laxity of morals. To this danger the Nicolaitans were themselves a glaring witness, and therefore John was justified in condemning them. In writing to the Corinthians, Paul gives warning against the same evil practices, basing his arguments on consideration for the weaker brethren (compare 1 Cor 8). *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* from Simcox, “Revelation” in the Cambridge Bible; H. Cowan in Hastings, Dictionary of the Bible (five volumes), article “Nicolaitans”; H.B. Swete, The Apocalypse of St. John, lxx ff, 27, 28, 37. (from International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia, Electronic Database Copyright ©1996 by BibleSoft).

In Revelation 2:14-15, the teachings of the Nicolaitans are laid out:

14 'But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality. 15 'So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

In verse seven, the spirit becomes the spokesperson, where before the speaker was clearly the Lord Jesus. The unity of the godhead is evident: John had written in John 1:1-2, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. Paul added in Eph 6:17, “Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” Thus the Spirit and the Christ speak with one unified voice.

The ones who overcome receive the right to eat from the tree of life which God placed in the middle of the garden in Genesis 2:9, and guarded from man in Genesis 3:22-24. In Revelation, the tree of life becomes central to the Lord’s promise to the saved:

Revelation 22:1-2: Then he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb, 2 in the middle of its street. On either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

Revelation 22:14: 14 Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city.

Revelation 22:18-19: 19 and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book.

Jesus established the meaning of the “water of life as John recorded:

John 4:10-11: Jesus answered and said to her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water."

John 4:13-14: 13 Jesus answered and said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again; 14 but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life."

John 7:38-39:38 "He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.'"

The Bible uses the word *paradise* three times. Jesus answered the thief on the cross in Luke 23:42:

42 And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!" 43 And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise."

Paul described the third heaven as in Paradise in 2 Corinthians 12:1-4:

2 I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago — whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows — such a man was caught up to the third heaven. 3 And I know how such a man — whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows — 4 was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak.

Hebrews 4:14 similarly describes the ascended savior:

14 Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.

In our present text in Revelation 2:7, the Lord said:

7 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.'

The type or shadow is the Old Testament representation of the antitype in the New Testament. Here the type, for which paradise is the antitype, is the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2:8-9:

8 The Lord God planted a garden toward the east, in Eden; and there He placed the man whom He had formed. 9 Out of the ground the Lord God caused to grow every tree that is pleasing to the sight and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

To the Church in Smyrna: a Persecuted Church (Revelation 2:8-11)

Revelation 2:8-11

8 *"And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write:*

The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this:

9 'I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 'Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life. 11 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.'

The Lord describes himself as the first and the last, who died and came to life again. The main characteristic of this church was their persecution from both afflictions and poverty. Yet they were rich. The reference was to spiritual riches. In chapter 3:17, the church at Laodicea was poor and naked—just the opposite. Their persecution came from “those who say they are Jews and are not.” They were of the synagogue of Satan. Synagogue is an assembly. The phrase repeats in chapter 3:9 to the church in Philadelphia. Satan is a word found most often in Job of the Old Testament and throughout the books of the New Testament. The meaning of the word Satan is made every clear in the Revelation:

Revelation 12:9: 9 And the great dragon was thrown down, the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. 10 Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying,

Revelation 20:1-2: 20 Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. 2 And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years.

Satan, devil, dragon, and serpent all refer to the same evil being. In the face of the devil, suffering, and imprisonment, they are not to be afraid but suffer even unto death.

The ten days indicates a limited time for the persecution. Their reward is the crown of life. James 1:12 describes this blessing:

12 Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.

Paul looked forward to the same crown in 2 Timothy 4:8:

8 in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.

The crown can be lost as in Revelation 3:11: "I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, so that no one will take your crown."

Finally, he who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death of which the *Revelation* speaks:

Revelation 2:11: He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.

Revelation 20:6: Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years.

Revelation 20:14-15: Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.

Revelation 21:8: But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.

To the Church in Pergamum: a Compromising Church (Revelation) 2:12-17)

Revelation 2:12-13

12 "And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this:

13 'I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells

The Lord describes himself with the figure of "him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. An ancient writer described Pergamum as being "given to idolatry more than all Asia. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* speaks of the city:

The high hill behind it was adorned with numerous temples, among which was the great temple to Zeus, who was called Soter Theos, the Savior God. Pergamum was the first city in Asia to erect a temple to Augustus. It was famous for its medical schools; and Asclepius, god of health, symbolized by a serpent, was worshiped there. Ramsay says, "Beyond all cities in Asia Minor, it gives the traveler the impression of being the home of authority.

How appropriate, then, that here, as we are told, was Satan's throne. (from, Electronic Database. Copyright (c) 1962 by Moody Press).

Pergamum had good things to their account:

You remain true to my name.

You did not renounce your faith in me.

They were faithful in spite of persecution that led to the death of the faithful servant Antipas. The city where Satan lives and where Satan has his throne emphasizes the total desecration of the people. This statement places the locus of evil in Asia Minor and not Rome. It was from these cities and temples the underlying principles of the Epicureans and Stoics invaded Rome, sought refuge in the Roman Catholic Church, infiltrated the Reformation churches, and traversed the Atlantic Oceans to find a resting place in the churches of latter day revelation and the new age churches of the 20th and 21st centuries. We can only understand the Revelation, if we recognize "where Satan dwells.

Revelation 2:14-15

14 'But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality. 15 'So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

Their compromising nature is apparent in the things the Lord had against them—things with which they knowingly went along:

You have people who hold the teaching of Balaam (eating food sacrificed to idols and committing immorality. (Numbers 23; 2 Peter 2:15; Jude 17).

You have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

Repent or I will come with the sword of my mouth (the word of God as in Hebrews 4:12 and Revelation 1:16.

Revelation 2:16-17

16 'Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth. 17 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.'

The Lord promises a reward for overcoming: "I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it." The Lord made the hidden manna figure very clear in John 6:31-35:

31 Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'

32 Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. 33 For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

34 "Sir," they said, "from now on give us this bread."

35 Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.

Isaiah prophesied about a new name in Isaiah 62:2:

2 The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will bestow.

In Revelation 3:12, the Lord promises the church of Philadelphia in Revelation 3:12-13:

12 'He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore; and I will write on him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God, and My new name.

Was the new name *Christian* (slave or servant of Christ)? The New Testament uses the word only three times in Acts 11:26, Acts 26:28, and 1 Peter 4:16 (see also Phil. 1:1). By now, *Christian* has lost its specific meaning and finds only general use; i.e., a Christian nation. Religious individuals go by denominational names and not the general name *Christian*. Receiving the name, *Christian* means that we are uncompromising slaves of Christ. Only members of the Lord's church so faithfully go by this name, Christian. The idea that it was given as a derogatory name is inconsistent with the facts, since neither Jews nor Gentiles would so elevate Jesus as the Christ.

To the Church in Thyatira: a Corrupt Church (Revelation 2:18-29)

18 "To the angel of the church in Thyatira write:

Revelation 2:18-23

18 "And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write:

The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze, says this:

19 'I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first. 20 'But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. 21 'I gave her time to repent, and she does not want to repent of her immorality. 22 'Behold, I will throw her on a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds. 23 'And I will kill her children with pestilence, and all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts; and I will give to each one of you according to your deeds.

The Lord addresses the church in Thyatira with words of the Son of God whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. As in the previous letters, this letter begins with the strengths of the church, recognizing love, faith, service, and perseverance. They are doing more than they did at first. However, they tolerate Jezebel, who like her Old Testament namesake misled the church into sexual immorality and idolatry:

JEZEBEL: In Rev 2:20, we read of Jezebel, "the woman Jezebel, who calleth herself a prophetess"; . . . as Moffat (Expositor's Greek Testament) aptly renders, "that Jezebel of a woman alleging herself a prophetess." Some members of the church at Thyatira "under the sway of an influential woman refused to separate from the local guilds where moral interests, though not ostensibly defied, were often seriously compromised. Her lax principles or tendencies made for a connection with foreign and compromising associations which evidently exerted a dangerous influence upon some weaker Christians in the city." (from International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia, Electronic Database Copyright (c)1996 by BibleSoft)

"That woman Jezebel" might be translated "that Jezebel like woman," creating a figurative connection to the Old Testament Jezebel (1 Kings 16-21). Jezebel of the Old Testament killed God's prophets and led the people into idolatry and immorality. Having given her followers time to repent, the Lord promises destroy them in Revelation 2:22-24:

22 'Behold, I will throw her on a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds. 23 'And I will kill her children with

pestilence, and all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts; and I will give to each one of you according to your deeds.

The result of the Lord's actions will be a message to all the churches, illustrating that this and other lessons are to all churches. All the churches now know that the Lord will repay each according to their deeds.

Revelation 2:24-29

24 'But I say to you, the rest who are in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not known the deep things of Satan, as they call them – I place no other burden on you. 25 'Nevertheless what you have, hold fast until I come. 26 'He who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, TO HIM I WILL GIVE AUTHORITY OVER THE NATIONS; 27 AND HE SHALL RULE THEM WITH A ROD OF IRON, AS THE VESSELS OF THE POTTER ARE BROKEN TO PIECES, as I also have received authority from My Father; 28 and I will give him the morning star. 29 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

There were those in Thyatira that did not hold to Jezebel's teaching. Associated with her teaching are Satan's deep secrets (things). One commentator observed: "Her followers 'prided themselves upon their enlightened liberalism (verse 24).'" Many today still think that they can commune with false religion and immorality and maintain their spiritual connection to the Lord.

He, who overcomes and does the Lord's will, will receive his blessing of authority over nations—an authority described by David in Psalms 2:4-9:

4 He who sits in the heavens laughs,
The Lord scoffs at them.

5 Then He will speak to them in His anger
And terrify them in His fury, saying,

6 "But as for Me, I have installed My King
Upon Zion, My holy mountain."

7 "I will surely tell of the decree of the Lord:
He said to Me, 'You are My Son,
Today I have begotten You.

8 'Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance,
And the very ends of the earth as Your possession.

9 'You shall break them with a rod of iron,
You shall shatter them like earthenware.'"

The morning star (Christ) actually rises in the hearts of those who overcome as described in 2 Peter 1:19:

19 So we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts.

This is the promise to the church at Thyatira in Revelation 2:28: "28 and I will give him the morning star." In name and purpose and brilliance, churches that overcome are one with Jesus—the bright and morning star—of Revelation 22:16:

16 "I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star."