



The Last Word

A Bible Study on Revelation by Stan Key

SESSION 3. SEVEN LETTERS TO SEVEN CHURCHES (2:1–3:22).

I. Introduction to the Seven Churches.

A. A look at the map and a lesson from history.

1. The map shows us that these churches in Asia Minor (today, Turkey) form a kind of circuit. John apparently intended that his book (and each letter to each church) would be read as a kind of **circular letter** by each church.
2. History tells us that none of these churches (?) exist today. Does this mean that their lampstand was **removed?** (2:5).



B. The real Senior Pastor.

In these letters, Christ is **inspecting** his church(s): observing, warning, encouraging, etc. Each letter has the same basic structure:

1. *Greeting and introduction:* The letter is addressed to the angel¹ of the church and Jesus Christ is identified (titles and names) as the author.
2. *Body:* The works of the church are recognized and either praised or criticized.
3. *Conclusion:* The letter closes with a plea to hear what has been said and a promise to those who **overcome / conquer**.

C. A seven-fold message for each church.

Though each letter is worthy of individual study in and of itself, the real message contained in these letters is found in viewing them **all together**. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches (plural)” (2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22).

D. Seven stages of history?

Many popular interpretations of chapters 2–3 are a form of **Dispensationalism** that claims the 7 churches represent 7 eras of history. The conclusion is usually that we live in the Laodicean age. I see no biblical basis for such an approach.

II. The Seven Churches.

A. Ephesus (2:1–7). The **successful** church.

Historical Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acts 18:1–41; 20:17–38 and the book of Ephesians. • Heresy and pseudo-apostles (Nicolaitans). • Persecution.
Titles of Christ	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The one who holds the 7 stars in his right hand. • The one who walks among the 7 lampstands.

¹ Robert H. Mounce believes that the “angel” is not some sort of guardian angel for each church or some ruling official of the congregation but rather “its prevailing spirit” (p. 66).

Commendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I know your toil and endurance (<i>hupmeno</i>). • I know you cannot bear those who are evil. • I know how you have tested those who claim to be apostles. • I know how you endure patiently and bear up. • I know how you hate the works of the Nicolaitans. <p>This church was:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Busy in ministry. 2. Steady in adversity. 3. Solid in theology.
Rebukes	You have abandoned the love you had at first.
Commands	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Remember from where you have fallen. 2. Repent. 3. Resume the works you did at first.
Promises	The one who conquers will be granted to eat of the tree of life which is in the paradise of God.
Threats	If you don't repent, Jesus will remove your lampstand.
Major Theme	Love—Is our relationship with Christ characterized by love?
Message for Us	Am I doing the right things for the wrong reasons?

B. Smyrna (2:8–11). The **persecuted** church.

Historical Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persecution (synagogue of Satan). • Poverty. • Demonic activity.
Titles of Christ	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The first and the last. • The one who died and came to life.
Commendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I know your tribulation. • I know your poverty... but you are rich! (cf. 3:17). • I know the slander you are experiencing. <p>Some of the slanderous things said against Christians in the 1st century included (see Matthew 5:11–12):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You are cannibals (eat flesh and drink blood). • You are immoral (love feasts). • You are unpatriotic (refuse to say “Caesar is Lord”). • You are anti-family (children leave parents, a wife leaves a husband, etc.). • You are atheists! (don't worship Zeus, Diana, etc.). • You are arsonists (talk of the end of the world... Nero blames Christians for the fire in Rome).
Rebukes	None. Suffering and persecution tend to purify the church!
Commands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not fear what you are about to suffer. • Be faithful unto death.

Promises	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you are faithful, you will be given the crown of life. • The one who conquers will not be hurt by the 2nd death.
Threats	None
Major Theme	Persecution—the world around us hates what we represent.
Message for Us	Suffering for Christ is a privilege . God knows! And he will reward our faithfulness. Better to be poor and not know you are rich (2:9) than to be rich and not know you are poor (3:17).

C. Pergamum (2:12–17). The **heretical** church.

Historical Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You dwell where Satan’s throne is. • Antipas had been martyred for his faith.
Titles of Christ	Him who has the sharp two-edged sword.
Commendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You hold fast my name (we can hold on to Christ only because he first holds on to us. See 2:1). • You did not deny the faith even in the midst of great adversity.
Rebukes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some of you hold the teachings of Balaam. • Some of you hold the teachings of the Nicolaitans. <p>These false teachings condone things that Christ will not tolerate:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sexual immorality. 2. Worshipping Christ plus idols.... Syncretism.
Commands	Repent!
Promises	The one who conquers will be given: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hidden manna. • a white stone with a new name written on it.
Threats	If you don’t repent I will come and make war against you with the sword of my mouth.
Major Theme	Heresy—a half truth is often more dangerous than a lie.
Message for Us	The sharp, two-edged sword in Jesus’ (see Rev. 1:16; 2:12,16; 19:15,21; Heb. 4:12–13; Eph. 6:17) mouth will either: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expose our hearts and save us (like a surgeon’s scalpel). • Or condemn us (like an enemy’s weapon).

D. Thyatira (2:18–29). The **tolerant** church.

Historical Context	A “prophetess” (Jezebel) has a huge influence in the city and is “seducing” followers of Christ to practice sexual immorality and eat food sacrificed to idols (syncretism).
Titles of Christ	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Son of God. • The one who has eyes like a flame of fire. • The one who has feet like burnished bronze. • The one who searches mind and heart.
Commendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I know your love. • I know your faith. • I know your service. • I know your patient endurance. • I know you are doing more good works now than formerly.
Rebukes	You tolerate that “prophetess” Jezebel, who teaches “the deep things of Satan”. God’s concern is not so much with Jezebel and her followers. He will take care of them personally (vv. 21–23). His concern is with the church that tolerates this stuff!
Commands	Hold fast what you have until I come.
Promises	The one who conquers and keeps the faith until the end: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • will be given authority over the nations. • will be given the morning star.
Threats	God will throw all the disciples of Jezebel into great tribulation and eventually kill them... unless they repent.
Major Theme	Tolerance that remains silent when God’s people practice sexual immorality and syncretism is intolerable . God seems to be almost more angry over the church’s tolerance of sin than the sin itself!
Message for Us	Churches tend to resemble either Ephesus (2:2–4) where there was truth without love... or Thyatira (2:19–20) where there was love without truth. Oh where can we find a church that is strong in both?

E. Sardis (3:1–6). The **deceived** church.

Historical Context	There is no indication that this church was experiencing any persecution from the outside or heresy on the inside. Everything looked good.
Titles of Christ	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The one who has the 7 spirits of God (the 7-fold Spirit). • The one who has the 7 stars.
Commendations	There are a few persons in your church who have not soiled their garments... they are worthy to walk with me in white. Even though the church is spiritually dead there are a few members who are spiritually alive (the remnant).
Rebukes	You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead !

Commands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wake up! • Strengthen what remains and is about to die. • Remember what you received and heard and keep it. • Repent.
Promises	<p>The one who conquers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • will be clothed in white garments. • his name will never be blotted out of the Book of Life. • Jesus will confess his name before his Father.
Threats	If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief... and you will be unprepared.
Major Theme	You can't judge a book by its cover and you can't judge a church by its activities, programs, or doctrinal statement.
Message for Us	<p>At least six times the New Testament specifically warns us about the danger of self-deception: "Do not be deceived." These verses help us to form six questions of self-examination to help us determine if we are dead when we think we are alive:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do I consider myself to be wise? (I Cor. 3:18–20). 2. Is there unconfessed sin in my life? (I Cor. 6:9–11). 3. Are my social relationships drawing me toward God or away from God? (I Cor. 15:33). 4. Do I imagine that I am immune from the consequences of sinful choices? (Gal. 6:7–8). 5. Am I living in any willful disobedience to the known will of God? (James 1:22). 6. Do I control my tongue? (James 1:26).

E. Philadelphia (3:7–13). The **missionary** church.

Historical Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God has given this church a golden opportunity for ministry and cultural impact ("I have set before you an open door"). • The synagogue of Satan (false Jews).
Titles of Christ	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The holy one. • The true one. • The one who has the key of David (can shut and open doors).
Commendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You have kept my word and not denied my name... though you have little power. • You have patiently endured hardships and trials.
Rebukes	None
Commands	Hold fast what you have so that none may seize your crown.

Promises	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The nonbelieving world will soon come and bow before you and will understand that I have loved you! • I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the world. • I am coming soon. • The one who conquers will: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ become a pillar in the temple of God. ○ have the name of God written on him. ○ have the name of the New Jerusalem written on him. ○ have Jesus' new name written on him.
Threats	None
Major Theme	Jesus has the power to open doors and close them.
Message for Us	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When Jesus opens a door... step forward in faith. • When Jesus closes a door... accept it in humble submission.

F. Laodicea (2:14–22). The **mediocre** church.

Historical Context	The church has become routine, normal, habitual. The movement has become a machine, the organism has become an organization.
Titles of Christ	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Amen. • The faithful and true witness. • The beginning of God's creation.
Commendations	None
Rebukes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were one or the other. • You are lukewarm... nauseating. • You don't know your true condition. You think you are rich and have no needs but in reality you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked. Blindness to our true condition is the cause of lukewarmness.
Commands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Buy gold from me... so you can be rich. • Buy white garments from me... so you can be clothed. • Buy eye salve from me... so you can see. • Be zealous! • Repent!
Promises	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I reprove and discipline the ones I love. • I'm knocking at the door... if you open it, I will come in. • The one who conquers will sit with me on my throne.
Threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To be spit out of Jesus' mouth. • Reproof and discipline.

Major Theme	Jesus is looking for followers full of zeal and fiery passion. Lukewarmness makes him nauseous.
Message for Us	<p>Beware Goldilocks Christians! Those who want a faith that is not too hot, not too cold, but tepid and lukewarm.</p> <p><i>The greatest danger to Christianity is, I contend, not heresies, heterodoxies, nor atheists, nor profane secularism.—no, but the kind of orthodoxy which is cordial drivel, mediocrity served up sweet... In the world of mediocrity in which we live it is assumed that only crackpots, fanatics, and the like should be deplored as offensive, as inspired by Satan, and that the middle way is the right way.... What nonsense! Christ is of another mind: mediocrity is the worst offense, the most dangerous kind of demon possession, farthest removed from the possibility of being cured.... This kind of religion is nothing but a deception. (Soren Kierkegaard. Provocations. p. 16).</i></p>

III. Do we have ears to hear what Christ is saying to the churches?

- A. Jesus Christ is to be found “**in the midst of**” and “among” the churches (1:13; 2:1), even though many of them are sinful, heretical and dysfunctional.
- B. Christ is not limited to one church. Each individual church can only **partially** reveal who he is in his fullness. It takes all the churches to manifest his glory.
- C. The Gospel puts us in a community. “Me and Jesus” is not a Biblical way to think! Jesus taught us to pray, “Our Father...” The fact of the matter is that we normally go to heaven or to hell **together**. But though each member is part of a bigger family of faith, we each still have personal and individual responsibility. One can be **lost** in a good church. One can be **saved** in a bad church.
- D. The church is a lampstand. Her role is to carry the light of Christ to the nations. This means she is **to expose** what lurks and slithers in darkness. The church is to be the conscience of the world (Babylon). She is to be counter-cultural.
- E. The **destiny** of the world (Revelation 4–22) is determined in church... not in Washington, Wall Street, Hollywood, Harvard, the Pentagon, etc.
- F. The New Testament in general and these letters in particular assume that there is only **one church** in each city.
- G. The challenge of doing church in an evil empire is really defined by a small number of obstacles and hindrances that are present in every age in every place:
 1. **Bad theology** (heresy, false prophets, etc.).
 2. **Persecution** (John 15:18–16:4).
 3. **Temptation to sin** (especially to sexual immorality and idolatry/syncretism).
- H. Church life today seems very different than church life in John’s day. Notice the things so prevalent in our typical contemporary church experience that are **not even mentioned** in these letters to the 7 churches:
 1. Organizational realities (buildings, committees, finances, constitutions, etc.).
 2. Leadership (pastors, elders, deacons, boards, etc.).
 3. Programs (Sunday School, youth group, worship teams, ministries, pot-luck dinners, small groups, etc.).

- I. When the church falls short of what she ought to be and what she ought to do, the solution is always simple: **Wake up!**
 1. Remember.
 2. Repent.
 3. Do the works you did at first.

TABLE TALK

1. Which of the seven churches is most like your church?
2. In the first century, the major heresies troubling the church related to the Nicolaitans, Balaam and Jezebel. What heresies are troubling the church today?
3. What is God asking you to do?

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches!

Bibliography

Mounce, Robert H. *The Book of Revelation: The New International Commentary of the New Testament*. Revised. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997.