



# Letters to the Churches

Future Events Sunday School

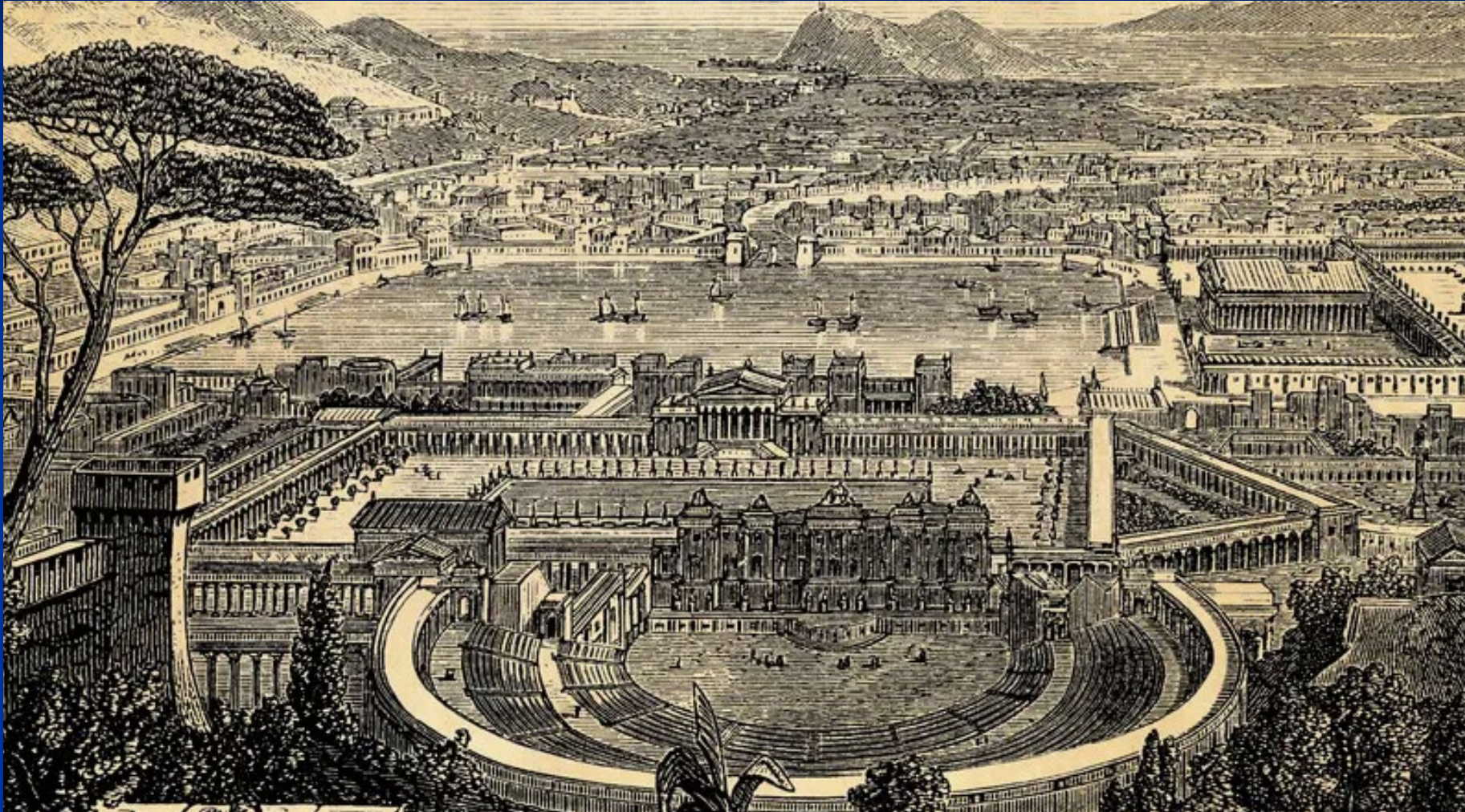
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# Introduction to the Seven Churches

“I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying: ‘Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.’ Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters.” (Revelation 1:10-15)



# Ephesus — The Mother City of Asia



1. Population estimated at 200,000 to 250,000 people
2. One of its theaters had 25,000 seats
3. People came to Ephesus from all over the known world
4. Temple to Greek fertility goddess Artemis was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world

# The Church at Ephesus—part 1

- “The word Ephesus means ‘desirable’, and in many ways it was certainly a desirable place to live. In the ancient world, Ephesus was a center of travel and commerce. Situated on the Aegean Sea at the mouth of the Cayster River, the city was one of the greatest seaports of the ancient world.”
- “On Paul’s second missionary journey (A.D. 52), he visited Ephesus after leaving Corinth, and evidently planted the church there (Acts 18:19).
- “On Paul’s third missionary journey (A.D. 54-56), Paul spent between two and three years teaching in Ephesus (Acts 19:8-10). He spent his time addressing false doctrines and pagan practices. Paul’s teaching in the rented school of Tyrannus was so successful that those who practiced magic brought their books and burned them as an act of repentance (Acts 19:18-20). As the sale of silver idolatrous images began to fall off, the silversmiths rioted because of their loss of business (Acts 19:26-41). Shortly after this riot was settled Paul left for Macedonia. It was during this stay that he wrote 1 Corinthians.

# The Church at Ephesus—part 2

- “Several months later (A.D. 57) Paul met with the Ephesian elders on the nearby island of Miletus and said farewell to them (Acts 20). Their mutual love is evident as these tenderhearted men weep over what God has done – and they know they will not see Paul again. As Dr. Luke records their conversation and prayer it is evident there is increasing maturity in the faith. The picture now is of a church that has been carefully nurtured to the point of vitality.”
- “About a decade after the church had been started, Paul wrote the letter to the Ephesians commending their faith and love (A.D. 62). A careful reading of this epistle shows that they had done well. They appeared to be devout in their faith, well organized, and busy in sharing the content of the gospel and doctrines of faith. During these early years they had been growing, expanding and doing the will of God. Jews and Gentiles, from several ethnicities and nationalities, had come together to form “one new man,” (2:15), “one body” (2:16). They were multiethnic as well as diverse in their socioeconomic make-up. Paul commends their sincerity in the final sentence of his letter: “Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ with incorruptible love” (Ephesians 6:24).”

# The Church at Ephesus—part 3

- “In Paul’s first epistle to Timothy (mid-60’s) we begin to see some evidence of doctrinal drift: “As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus so that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines, nor to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than furthering the administration of God which is by faith” (1 Timothy 1:3-4).
- “Tradition says that Ephesus became the home of the Apostle John (mid-late 60’s). This may or may not be true, but circumstances make it very possible. He was supposed to have taken Mary, the mother of Jesus, there to live (cf. John 19:26-27). John wrote three letters (1st, 2nd, and 3rd John), probably no later than the early A.D. 90s. He wrote from Ephesus and to the churches mentioned in Revelation 2:8–3:22. The church by that time had some difficult problems and had apparently undergone a church split. False teachers had arisen in the church who claimed to have deeper knowledge of the things of God.”

# The Church at Ephesus—part 4

- “It was probably during the reign of Domitian (81-96 A.D.) that John was banished to Patmos. During the reign of Trajan he was released and died according to Irenaeus (an early church historian). Tradition says that at a very old age John, too feeble to walk, would be carried into this church’s assembly and would admonish the members, as little children, to love one another. During this period the Lord gives His assessment of the Ephesian church through the apostle John (Revelation 2:1-7). He compliments them on their good works, but rebukes them for leaving their first love of Christ Jesus (Revelation 2:4). He commands immediate action – repent, remember, and repeat (the first works) (Revelation 2:5).”
- “We have no way of knowing whether they corrected their problem for a season, but, sadly, the church died sometime during the second century. In later centuries Ephesus was a leading city for the councils of the early Roman church.”

From: <https://kingsharbor.wordpress.com/2015/09/11/a-brief-biblical-history-of-the-church-in-ephesus/>

# Messages to the Churches

- To the Invisible Church (the world-wide body of Jesus Christ that only includes believers)
- To the Visible Church in Revelation 2-3 (local groups of professing believers saved or not)
- Revelation 2-3 shows the messages of Jesus Christ to seven visible churches in the area of modern day Turkey (five churches are warned, two are not, something good is found in six churches, nothing good is found in the seventh church which deserves his rebuke)
- Each message describes a characteristic of the Messiah according to the vision of the Son of Man in Revelation 1: Ephesus-holding seven stars in his right hand, Smyrna-died and rose to life, Pergamum-holding sharp two-edged sword, Thyatira-eyes like flame of fire and feet like burnished bronze, Sardis-has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars, Philadelphia-has the key of David to open and shut doors, Laodicea-the faithful and true witness
- All seven messages contain the phrase, “I know”. Messages to Ephesus, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea include, “I know your works...” The message to Pergamum includes, “I know where you dwell.” The message to Smyrna includes, “I know your tribulation and your poverty...”
- All seven messages contain the phrase, “he that overcomes”, followed by a promise to the individual church.
- All seven messages contain the phrase, “he that has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” for subsequent readers such as us.



# Interpreting the Letters to the Visible Churches

- Some statements in the messages can be true only of the individual church addressed.
- Some statements in the messages can hardly be limited to that particular church or not be true of that church at all. An example is the promise “to keep the church of Philadelphia from the hour of trial... which is to come upon the whole earth”. The time is long past when that promise would apply to that particular church.
- Two areas of agreement: the seven churches are real churches existing in John’s time; the seven churches exist as types throughout the church age. Each letter refers to a particular church or to a type of church. “No matter what part of church history one may turn to, he will find all seven types of churches, and they will continue to exist until the rapture”.
- The seven letters do not describe seven periods of church history but all seven church types exist today; at the rapture, the believing church is taken to heaven while the unbelieving “church” remains on earth.
- All seven letters follow the same general outline of topics: specific destination for the letter, description of the Messiah, a commendation to the church, a condemnation to the church, an exhortation, and a promise. Not all the letters include all of these points.

# Viewpoints about the Letters to the Churches

- **Preterist** (past): the events in Revelation have already occurred and the messages to the churches have already been fulfilled
- **Futurist**: the events and messages will be fulfilled in the future. The letters are about future events.
- **Historist**: the events and messages represent some sort of general outline of on-going history from Jesus' apostles to the end of time. The letters are an outline but nothing more specific than that.
- **Idealist**: no past or future or on-going history, only a symbolic triumph of good over evil. The letters are only literary passages to enhance the rest of Revelation.
- **Historical, literal, prophetic**: "Conditions in the seven churches provide a description of Jesus' church through its 2,000 year history. The apparent progression of history in these chapters is too incredible to be an accident, but this progression is a secondary interpretation which supplements the primary interpretation of these chapters as messages to the churches of John's day."

# The Visible Church Age—the Seven Churches

- **Apostolic:** Ephesus (desired) (reflects the birth of the church on Pentecost in 30 to death of John in 100 AD) (Revelation 2:1-7)
- **Persecuted by the State:** Smyrna (myrrh as embalming substance) (reflects Roman persecution lasting from about 100 to 313 AD) (Revelation 2:8-11)
- **Married to the State:** Pergamum (thoroughly married) (reflects the official state religion from Constantine's reign in 313 to about 600 AD) (Revelation 2:12-17)
- **Dark Ages:** Thyatira (continual sacrifice) (reflects Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation of bread and cup as perpetual sacrifice of Christ each Mass from about 600 – 1517 AD) (Revelation 2:18-29)
- **Reformation:** Sardis (those escaping) (reflects those escaping from the Roman Catholic Church from about 1517 to 1648 AD) (Revelation 3:1-6)
- **Missionaries Sent:** Philadelphia (brotherly love) (reflects sharing the good news of Christ Jesus from about 1649 to 1900 AD) (Revelation 3:7-13)
- **Apostate:** Laodicea (people ruling) (reflects church rule by man instead of God from about 1900AD to the present) (Revelation 3:14-22)

# Smyrna

- Smyrna means “myrrh” which was used for embalming the dead (John 19:39-40). According to a historical-literal-prophetic interpretation, the church at Smyrna represents the period of Roman persecution of Christians between 100-313 AD.
- Jesus tells this church that he is the first and the last, he died and lived again. So even though he died violently on a Roman cross, he lives again because of the resurrection. Many people in Smyrna will die violently and yet will live again because they too will be raised to life.
- Although followers of Christ in this church may die violently once, they will not die the second time—the second death. However, their persecutors will die once and then again in the second death.

# Pergamum

- Pergamum means “thoroughly married”. This church was located where Satan’s throne is—a major city with many temples including one devoted to the Greek god of medicine, Aesculapius—a serpent son – a figure of a man holding a serpent entwined staff. This city included medical prescriptions where people were lowered into snake-infested pits for treatment. Pergamum was also the eastern center of Roman Caesar worship.
- This church was commended for the faith of Antipas (“against all”) who was martyred for Christ.
- Some people in this church believed in the teachings of Balaam, who enticed the Israelites to corruption through sexual immorality and intermarriage with the Midianites (Num. 22-24).
- During the reign of Constantine, people all over the Roman world were baptized into church without personal faith in Christ. These people brought their idols with them and mixed teaching about Christ with their pagan practices.
- Also some in this church permitted the teachings of the Nicolaitans who continued their sin practices and assumed that God would forgive them because of grace.

# Thyatira

- Thyatira means “continual sacrifice” which describes the false doctrine and the practices of the church during the dark ages. When a priest consecrates the bread and the wine, they are said to become the real body and blood of Jesus and so He is re-sacrificed.
- Other false doctrines introduced into the church:
  - Justified before God by works, not simply grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone
  - Baptismal regeneration in which a person is saved by baptism
  - Worship of images
  - Forbidding priests to marry
  - Confession of sins to a priest who declares forgiveness of those sins
  - Purgatory as a place of confinement and refinement before being accepted into heaven
  - Transubstantiation where bread and wine are changed into the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ and so he is re-sacrificed each time the church meets. The lay members of the church receive the wafer or body of Christ, while the priests receive the cup also because of the belief that real blood might be accidentally spilled by lay people.
  - The sale of indulgences in order to reduce a person's time in purgatory
  - Mariolatry—the worship of the virgin Mary as deity—the “mother” of God

# Jezebel in the Church at Thyatira

- “But I have this against you, that you suffer the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess; and she teaches and seduces my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed to idols” (Rev. 2:20).
- “In the OT, Jezebel was the name of a Sidonian princess who became the wife of Ahab, incited heresy and lured Israel away from God to idols (1 Kings 16:31-33). She introduced the pagan religion of Baal worship into Israel that surpassed all previous sins of idolatry in the Northern Kingdom because her religion focused on sexual immorality. In the church at Thyatira, Jezebel introduced pagan worship focused on idolatry and fornication supported by the ten false doctrines listed above. Jezebel and her children will be cast into tribulation. They will suffer physical violence and death as part of God’s judgment. The woman Jezebel thus became a very real picture of what the church became during the period of the Dark Ages. It introduced a paganism—a religion of little similarity to the previous New Testament church.

# Thyatira-Cast into Great Tribulation

“Behold I cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of her works. And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he that searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your works” (Rev. 3:22-23).

- Unlike the true church, the children of Jezebel (followers of her teachings) will go into tribulation during the reign of the Antichrist. Jezebel’s children are viewed as part of the counterfeit religion of Satan.
- The true church is urged to hold fast to what is pure.
- Those who overcome will have a place in the messianic kingdom and will have authority over the nations. Those in the true church will receive the morning star—Yeshua (Rev. 22:16).



# Sardis

- Sardis means “those escaping”. This church can represent the church of the reformation—which began in 1517 when Martin Luther wrote “A Disputation of the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences (a.k.a “The 95 Theses’).
- This church has a reputation of being alive but is dead (Rev. 3:1). It corrected teachings of the Roman Catholic Church and developed good creeds based on solid biblical doctrine. Nevertheless there was no spiritual vitality because the reformers did not sever church from the state.
- After breaking away from the previous state church in Rome, these reformed churches became state Lutheran churches in Germany/Norway/Sweden/Denmark/Finland, Anglican churches in England, Presbyterian churches in Scotland, Dutch Reformed churches in the Netherlands and Swiss Reformed Churches in Switzerland (Zwingli-German, Calvin-French).
- The lack of personal faith in Christ Jesus as Lord and Savior which corrupted the church at Pergamum also corrupted the church at Sardis. Children born during the Reformation in these countries were baptized into the state church yet without personal faith in Christ. In one or two generations, the state churches included mostly unsaved people. A dead church will be unprepared when the rapture of the church occurs and since its members are mostly unbelievers, they will be left behind.

# Philadelphia

- Philadelphia means “brotherly love” which symbolizes the church during the great missionary movement from 1700 to 1900 when followers of Christ such as: John Wesley, David Brainerd, Jonathan Edwards, Hudson Taylor, Adoniram Judson, George Muller, William Carey and the Moravian believers shared the gospel around the world.
- In May 1792, William Carey challenged his congregation to expect great things from God and attempt great things for God. While the French Revolution seemed to overthrow Christian government, British followers of Christ had begun praying in 1784 for revival which would spread the gospel of Jesus Christ to “the most distant parts of the habitable globe.”

From <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-9/winning-world-carey-and-modern-missionary-movement.html>

# Outreach to Jews by the Church at Philadelphia

- During the years 1700-1900 Jesus opened the door to his workers in countries around the world. “The Philadelphian church was faithful in making use of these opportunities.”
- “By 1900 about 250,000 Jews had become believers in Jesus Christ. They had been re-grafted into their own olive tree” (Rom. 11:24)
- However, “some say they are Jews but are not” (Rev. 3:9):
  - The Mormon Church claims that Native Americans are descendants of a lost tribe of Israel that moved to the Americas about 600BC.
  - Jehovah’s Witnesses claim that only an anointed remnant of 144,000 (Rev. 7:5-8) (“spiritual Jews” who have replaced Israel) can ever go to heaven and rule with Jesus.
  - Christian Science (1879) introduced Jews to Jewish Science (1916) which views God as positive energy accessed through right thinking to bring physical and spiritual health because disease is seen as a mental error that needs right attitudes to bring healing.
- However, the Philadelphian church will lead some from these cults to Christ.
- The Philadelphian church will not go through the tribulation that the church of Thyatira will enter. This is not a promise that can be limited to Philadelphia, because this local church has long since passed away.

# Laodicea

- Laodicea means “people ruling”; this church is ruled by man because it believes it needs nothing from God and has abandoned God. This church has no commendation from God because it is entirely unsaved.
- The letter refers to those people known as cold (not believers), lukewarm (claim to believe but do not) and hot (claim to believe and are saved). The lukewarm are rich in worldly goods, deceived, spiritually poor, blind, naked—a good description of an apostate church.
- The apostate church has departed from truth it once declared to believe. The Bible says, “But the Spirit expressly says that in later times some shall fall away from the faith” (1 Tim. 4:1a). The Greek word for “falling away” is *aphistēmi*. The noun form of this verb is *apostasia*. Before the tribulation begins, the apostasy must come first. The church becomes apostate in the closing days of its history.

# Character of the Apostate Church

- The source of apostasy is demons since apostates have given in to seducing spirits and are preaching doctrines of demons (1 Tim. 4:1b-3).
- People will hold to a form of godliness but deny the power thereof (2 Tim. 3:1-5).
- False teachers will deny Jesus Christ; they will follow their lustful, wanton desires (2 Pet. 2:1-22)

# The Traits of the Apostates

- Their teachings are destructive heresies (2 Pet. 2:1): they deny the Trinity (1 John 2:22-33); they deny the incarnation of Jesus Christ (1 John 4:3); they deny the Messiah's second coming (2 Pet. 3:3-4); they deny the inspiration of the Scriptures and the authority of the Scriptures (Rom. 1:18).
- They mock the fundamentals of the faith such as: verbal inspiration of the Scriptures, the virgin birth, the substitutionary death of the Messiah, the physical bodily resurrection of the Messiah from the dead (Jude 17-19, 2 Pet. 3:3-4).
- They create schisms or separations that split the church (Jude 19).
- This present age of apostasy formed in Europe in with German rationalism which denied the inerrancy of the Scriptures. In the US, the incoming president of Union Theological Seminary in 1891 gave his inaugural speech in which he made reason and the church equal in authority with the Scriptures and those who die unsaved will have a second chance of salvation.

From: Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps of the Messiah*, 2022, 71-73.

# Recent Apostasy-Practical Destructive Heresies

- The Bible no longer viewed as final authority in determining divine truth, but life experience now viewed as equally valid. The experiences, signs and wonders that have infiltrated the church supposedly establish the authenticity of God's word. However, the Bible claims to be God's word and has no need human life experiences, miracles or signs to establish its truth.
- Paul and Peter made God's Word their final authority (Acts 17:1-4, 2 Pet. 1:16-21).
- False teachers will be able to do many things in the name of a counterfeit Jesus (Matt. 7:22-23). They use Jesus' name, prophesy events that come to pass, cast out demons, perform mighty works such as miracles of healing. Yet Jesus says, "I never knew you."
- Paul tells the Corinthian believers in Christ that they could be deceived by sensational language, signs and wonders and leave the simplicity and purity that is in Jesus Christ. Paul warns them about accepting another Jesus of the same kind, another gospel of a different kind, another spirit of a different kind. He is saying that another Jesus of the same kind sounds like and seems like the Jesus of the New Testament but is actually a carefully disguised counterfeit so it is important to discern who is who by the word of God (2 Cor. 11:3-4, 13-15).
- Paul tells Timothy that people will fall away from the faith by listening to seducing spirits and doctrines of demons (1 Tim. 4:1).

# God's Written Word Sufficient for Godly Life

- A focus on spiritual experiences among believers in Corinth showed they were concerned with physical needs and activities rather than God's written truth. "I have applied all these things (being judged by God) to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another" (1 Cor. 4:6).
- The church must test any new developments by the written word of God. If the experience goes beyond what is written in the Bible, then it must be rejected.
- Those like Timothy who seek to live godly lives will be persecuted; health is not the sign of a godly life. As time passes more false teachers will deceive others. So what will protect Timothy from being deceived? Paul encourages Timothy to continue in what he has learned and been trained in the Scriptures. Timothy is to make his home in the Scriptures, rather than personal experiences no matter how supernatural they seem. The Bible alone is sufficient to make Timothy spiritually mature and complete for every good work (2 Tim. 3:12-17).



# Followers of Christ in a Time of Apostasy

- Avoid fellowship with apostates—teachers of apostate doctrines that deny the Trinity, the virgin birth of Christ, the deity of the Son and the second coming of Christ (2 John 7-11).
- Apply church discipline to those who proclaim destructive heresies (Gal. 1:8-9).
- Avoid worship with unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14 to 7:1). Five aspects: no partnership, no fellowship, no accord, no sharing, no agreement.
- Since believers are the temple of God, they are not to place themselves in a worship situation with unbelievers.