

## The Seven Churches of Revelation (2:1-3:22)

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**I. THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF REVELATION.** The church order in Revelation is an ancient travel route beginning at port of Ephesus & ending at Laodicea.

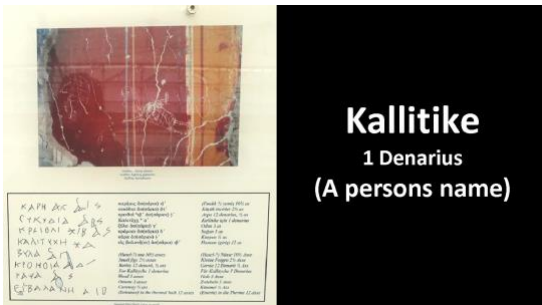
- A. **Ephesus:** Church that abandoned their first love (**Rev. 2:1-7**)
- B. **Smyrna:** Church that was faithful in Persecution (**Rev. 2:8-11**)
- C. **Pergamum:** Church that compromised beliefs. (**Rev. 2:12-17**)
- D. **Thyatira:** church that tolerates false Prophets (**Rev. 2:18-19**).
- E. **Sardis:** The church that was Spiritually Dead (**Rev. 3:1-6**).
- F. **Philadelphia:** The church that Patiently endured (**Rev. 3:7-13**).
- G. **Laodicea:** Church that was active without use (**Rev. 3:14-22**)



## II. THE DISPENSATIONAL VIEW

A. **Beliefs:** Dispensational Theology is a relatively new view, about 200 years old, which divides history into multiple eras called "dispensations." This view says in each dispensation, God interacts with His chosen people, the Jewish people, in different ways. The seven churches in Revelation are seen as representing seven distinct ages in human history, culminating in a new heaven and earth. This is a type of "Futuristic" view of Revelation.

### B. Dispensational (Futurist) Divisions of History:



**1. Ephesus - Apostolic Church (AD 30-100)** Early Christian church under the apostles characterized by missionary work and spreading the gospel.

**2. Smyrna - Persecuted Church (AD 100-313)** Era of Roman persecution, including notable events such as the Martyrdom of Polycarp and many other early Christians.

**3. Pergamum - Compromising Church (AD 313-590)** Period following the Edict of Milan, where Christianity was legalized by Constantine, leading to the compromises with pagan practices.

**4. Thyatira - Corrupt Church (AD 590-1517)** The Medieval Church, dominated by the rise of the Pope and the Catholic church, marked by widespread corruption and the sale of indulgences.

**5. Sardis - Dead Church (AD 1517-1700)** The Reformation and post reformation period, where the Protestant Reformation led by figures like Martin Luther sought to reform the church, yet some movements became spiritually lifeless over time.

**6. Philadelphia - Missionary Church (AD 1700-1900)** The Great Awakening and subsequent missionary movements, marked by a revival of evangelism and global missionary work.

**7. Laodicea - Lukewarm Church (AD 1900-present)** Modern era characterized by spiritual lukewarmness, materialism, and a general decline in doctrinal purity and fervor.

### C. Some Problems with this view:

- 1. There have been more people martyred for Christ in the last 100 years than all centuries combined. That makes it difficult to see Smyrna as an age in early church history.
- 2. Many of the evils and shortcomings in these churches are present in history and churches today.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> John F. Walvoord *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* Moody Press, Chicago, IL., 1966. Pg. 51.

3. Revelation is the combination of three Genre's, Apocalyptic Literature, Prophecy and An Epistle to churches in the Asia Minor region. The genre determines the approach to how the section is seen.

- a. **Revelation 1:4** John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come
- b. **Revelation 22:20** He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! <sup>21</sup> The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all. Amen.



### III. THE CHURCHES AND CHRIST'S MESSAGE:

- A. The letters are reproof, rebuke and reassurance from Jesus.<sup>2</sup>
- B. Christ encourages the churches to witness, warns them against compromise, and exhorts them to overcome compromise in order to inherit eternal life.<sup>3</sup>
- C. Greco-Roman World & Sexual unrestraint. **Hold to the teachings of Balaam (Revelation 2:14 cf. Jude 11, 2 Peter 2:15 Numbers 22-24) , Tolerate Jezabel (Revelation 2:20 cf. 1 Kings 16:31; ch 18-21 & 2 Kings 9)**

### IV. REPEATED PHRASES IN THE LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

#### A. "He who has an ear, **let him hear** what the Spirit says to the churches."



1. Written **7 times (Revelation 2:7, 2:11, 2:17, 2:29, 3:6, 3:13, 3:22)**.
2. The Old Testament is alluded to over 400 times in Revelation. These people were familiar with the Old Testament.
3. The concept goes far beyond auditory hearing. In Judaism and early Christianity, it was equivalent to obedience as well. To hear carried with it the unspoken expectation to obey. Jesus is expecting his church to listen, hear and respond to his instruction and correction with total and instant obedience.
4. **Revelation 3:19** Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent.
5. The corrective Christ is a loving Lord and forgiving father and his correction is a sign of our connection
6. **Hebrews 12:6** Because the Lord disciplines the ones he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his sons.

#### B. "I know your deeds"

1. Written **7 times (Revelation 2:2, 2:9, 2:13, 2:19, 3:1, 3:8, 3:15)**.
2. The Lord wants you to know "He Knows".
3. Another Jewish concept embedded in Revelation.
4. **"To Know"** means to understand through experience.
  - a. "Adam knew Eve" **Genesis 4:1**
  - b. "Know the LORD" **Jeremiah 31:34**
  - c. "Before I formed you in your mother's womb, I knew you." **Jeremiah 1:15**
5. Jesus knows, Jesus has seen, Jesus has witnessed, Jesus has encountered your "good deeds"

#### C. **To the one who Overcomes** νικῶ Literally "victorious".

1. Written 7 times (**Revelation 2:7, 2:11, 2:17, 2:26, 3:5, 3:12, 3:21**).
2. **Nike:** The Winged personification of "victory"
3. **Athena Nike:** Celebrating Athens victories over Persia and other enemies.
4. **The Olympic Crowns:** Vines and vegetation that withered or "Perished"
5. **Leocadia: Revelation 3:21** 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.

<sup>2</sup> Walvoord, pg. 53.

<sup>3</sup> G.K. Beale & Davide Campbell *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI. 2005. Pg.53.

- a. **Co-regency's of Rome** always failed.
  - i. **Year of the Four Caesars:** In 12 months of 68-69 A.D. it was called “The year of the 4 Caesars” 68-69 AD Servius Sulpicius Galba, Marcus Silvius Otho, Aulus Vitellius and Titus Flavius Vespasianus.
  - ii. **Tetrarchy:** Four men used to rule over the Roman Empire (Failed Miserably)
- 6. **Philadelphia: Revelation 3:11** “I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.”

**General Comments about the churches:**

- D. The letters are reproof, rebuke and reassurance from Jesus.<sup>4</sup>
- E. Christ encourages the churches to witness, warns them against compromise, and exhorts them to overcome compromise in order to inherit eternal life.<sup>5</sup>

Five Commended

Two only criticized

The Churches of Sardis and Laodicea had not experienced persecution at the time these letters were written?

Two only complimented

The Churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia were experiencing persecution

The Church of Thyatira

**Grave of 8x Olympiad**

Thyatira had a lot of heart not head

Thyatira had a lot of heart not head

Nicolaitan: A Gnostic group

**Dispensationalism & Covenant Theology:**

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<sup>4</sup> Walvoord, pg. 53.

<sup>5</sup> G.K. Beale & Davide Campbell *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI. 2005. Pg.53.

Covenant Theology:

### Dispensational Theology

- **Believes:** Is a newer view, 200 years old. It maintains history is divided into multiple ages called “dispensations.” In these divisions, God interacts with his chosen people, the Jewish people, in different ways. The seven churches of Revelation represent seven ages in human history culminating in a new heaven and earth. This is a version of the “Futuristic” view of revelation but not the only futuristic view. Some would see Revelation as a disclosure of end times but not agree with the church representing ages of history or God changing how he interacts with his chosen people.
- **History:** Dispensationalism began in Dublin Ireland. A dentist, doctor and lawyer were also studying at Trinity college in Dublin Ireland. They began home Bible studies as a nondenominational gathering that relied on scripture alone and often spoke of prophesy. They evolved into the “Plymouth Brethren” church. John Nelson Darby popularized the view. The Schofield Study Bible distributed the teachings. It took root in the United States with DL Moody and several people who eventually founded a college known today as “Dallas Theological Seminary.” The “Pentecostal” movement gravitated to this view having a strong emphasis on Eschatology (The study of end times). Modern momentum to the movement came through people such as Hal Lindsay’s book “*The Late Great Planet Earth*” Dwight Pentecost, John Walvoord. While this view lost momentum in academic circles it continued to have success in commercial, cultural and political success.
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The Churches and Revelation:

<https://www.christianity.com/wiki/end-times/what-do-the-7-churches-in-revelation-represent-summaries-and-explanations.html>

# The Seven Churches in Revelation & Their Symbolism

## 1. The Church of Ephesus

### The Church that Has Abandoned Its Love for Christ and His Teachings ([Revelation 2:1-7](#))

**Summary and Explanation:** Ephesus was Asia's prominent commercial and cultural center. Christ's letter to the church of Ephesus praises the congregation for its "deeds...hard work...and perseverance," and for rejecting false [apostles](#) ([Revelation 2:2-3](#)).

Despite its hard work and doctrinal integrity, Christ faults the community for having "forsaken the love [they] had at first" ([Revelation 2:4](#)). This "forsaken love" can mean that the Ephesians had become less devoted to Christ or that the work they did was no longer motivated by love for one another. The letter to the church of Ephesus does offer the community hope if they repent and rekindle their love for Christian living ([Revelation 2:5-7](#)).

**Significance Today:** The lesson in the letter to Ephesus teaches that truth and love must go hand-in-hand. A church that upholds doctrinal [purity](#) at the expense of showing love is just as flawed as a church that upholds congregational harmony at the expense of truthful teachings. Instead, Jesus reveals that a church fashioned in His image must teach God's Truth in love.

## 2. The Church of Smyrna

### The Church that Remains Faithful Amidst Persecution ([Revelation 2:8-11](#))

**Summary and Explanation:** Smyrna was home to a large Jewish community hostile to Christians. The Bible notes that slanderous accusations by Jews against Christians had led to Christian persecution by Roman authorities ([Acts 14:2](#), 19: [Acts 17:13](#)).

Christ's revelation to the church of Smyrna commends the community for its material poverty but its spiritual wealth, and acknowledges its wrongful persecution ([Revelation 2:9](#)). Christ does not reprimand this church but warns of impending imprisonment for some of its members, urging them to remain



faithful “even to the point of death” and remember the promise of their “victor’s crown” ([Revelation 2:10](#)).

**Significance Today:** Like the church of Smyrna, Christians are persecuted worldwide in obvious and insidious ways. This letter warns all Christians that although we may suffer greatly, the length of tribulation will be short compared to the promise of eternal life.

### 3. The Church of Pergamum

#### The Church that Compromises Its Beliefs ([Revelation 2:12-17](#))

**Summary and Explanation:** The city of Pergamum was renowned for its pagan practices. The letter to the church of Pergamum lauds the congregation for upholding its faith despite the city’s pervasive pagan influences ([Revelation 2:13](#)). The letter then addresses the church’s sin by denouncing some of its members for following false teachings that brought about religious and moral compromise ([Revelation 2:14-15](#)).

The Lord calls on the community to repent or risk the judgment that will emanate from the “sword of [His] mouth” ([Revelation 2:16](#)). Those who repent will be given the “hidden manna” that is the grain of Heaven ([Psalm 78:24](#)), and a “white stone” or cl

	CHURCH	DATE (APPROX.)	MEANING OF NAME	COMPLAINT	COMPLIMENT	PROMISED REWARD
1	EPHESUS	A.D. 31–100	Desirable, Lovely	Lost first love	Hate deeds of Nicolaitans	Tree of Life
2	SMYRNA	A.D. 100–313	Sweet fragrance, Myrrh	None	Rich in good works	Crown of Life, Escape second death
3	PERGAMOS	A.D. 313–538	Height, Elevation, “By marriage”	Tolerance of Baalism, idolatry, and immorality	Not denied Christ’s name or faith	Hidden manna, White stone, New name
4	THYATIRA	A.D. 538–1500s	Perfume of labor, Sweet savor of sacrifice	Tolerance of “Jezebel,” idolatry, and immorality	Good works, love faith, and patience	Power over the nations
5	SARDIS	A.D. 1500s–1790s	Those escaping or remaining	Dead works	A few are not defiled	White raiment, Book of Life
6	PHILADELPHIA	A.D. 1790s–1840s	Brotherly love	Little strength	Kept Christ’s Word; Not denied Him	Kept from the hour of trial, Pillar in temple, Name of God
7	LAODICEA	A.D. 1840s–Second Coming	Judging of the people or a just people	Lukewarm experience, Spiritually poor, blind, and naked	None	Sit with Christ on His throne, Sup with Christ

can slate with a new identity in Christ ([Revelation 2:17](#)).

**Significance Today:** Like the Christians in Pergamum, it's easy to normalize the non-Christian behavior of those around us and allow that behavior to dilute our values ([1 Corinthians 15:33](#)). But the Bible urges us to “not conform to the pattern of this world” but be transformed by the renewal of our mind in accordance with God’s Word ([Romans 12:2](#)).

#### 4. The Church of Thyatira

The Church that Follows False Prophets ([Revelation 2:18-29](#))

*Recommended*



[Why Is Jesus' Parable of the Vineyard Still Relevant Today?](#)

**Summary and Explanation:** Thyatira was a wealthy commercial city. Jesus’ letter to the church of Thyatira praises it for growing in faith and service ([Revelation 2:19](#)). The church’s downfall was its devotion to a false prophet that led some members to commit idolatry and immorality ([Revelation 2:20](#)). Although the false prophet remained unrepentant, Jesus affirms that the congregation can still repent by turning away from the prophet’s ways ([Revelation 2:21-22](#)).

The Lord reminds us in this revelation that He will repay each of us according to our deeds ([Revelation 2:23](#)). The payment for sin is death. However, those who persevere in faith will receive a share of Christ’s messianic authority over all nations and triumph over death ([Revelation 2:26-28](#)).

**Significance Today:** Just as some in the church of Thyatira were led astray by a false prophet, Christians today fall prey to cult leaders, occult practices, and other false teachings. To share in Christ's victory, we must avoid these "so-called deep secrets" of Satan ([Revelation 2:24](#)) and hold firm to Christ's teachings.

## 5. The Church of Sardis

### The Church that is Spiritually Dead ([Revelation 3:1-6](#))

**Summary and Explanation:** Sardis was a city that had endured two surprise attacks despite its fortifications. Our Lord faults the church of Sardis for maintaining an outward appearance of being "alive," while actually being spiritually dead ([Revelation 3:1](#)). Alluding to the city's history of prior surprise attacks, Jesus warns the congregation to "wake up," and repent, lest he "come like a thief" to bestow His judgment ([Revelation 3:2-3](#)).

Those in the church of Sardis who heed Christ's warning will be "dressed in white," a symbol of purity and victory, and will be acknowledged in Heaven's Book of Life ([Revelation 3:5](#)).

**Significance Today:** Christians can fall into the trap that ensnared the church in Sardis if we merely go through the motions of practicing our faith without feeding our spirit. We can avoid becoming "the living dead" by engaging in our faith through Bible study, prayer, and fellowship.

## 6. The Church of Philadelphia

### The Church that Patiently Endured Despite Weaknesses ([Revelation 3:7-13](#))

**Summary and Explanation:** Philadelphia was home to a synagogue community hostile to Christians. Christ praises the church of Philadelphia for remaining faithful in the face of trials despite their limited strength ([Rev. 3:8](#)).

Jesus does not reproach the church of Philadelphia, but he condemns its persecutors. ([Revelation 3:9](#)). Christ promises that if Philadelphia's congregants remain faithful to Him, He will protect them from the "hour of trial" and make them pillars in God's heavenly temple ([Revelation 3:10-12](#)).



**Significance Today:** The message to Philadelphia shows us the blessings that come when we maintain our faith despite life's tribulations. In fact, those who persevere despite weaknesses will stand strong as pillars in Heaven.

## 7. The Church of Laodicea

### The Church with a Lukewarm Faith ([Revelation 3:14-22](#))

**Summary and Explanation:** Laodicea was a prosperous industrial and commercial center. Jesus' letter to the church of Laodicea wastes no time denouncing the congregation for its lukewarm faith, threatening to "spit" the congregation out of His mouth ([Revelation 3:16](#)).

Christ scolds this church for allowing its economic prosperity to cause it spiritual bankruptcy and reveals that, despite its economic wealth, only He can provide spiritual wealth ([Revelation 3:17-18](#)). Those in Laodicea's church who open the door to Christ will share in His Heavenly banquet and have the right to sit with Him on His throne ([Revelation 3:20-21](#)).

**Significance Today:** Like the church of Laodicea, it's easy to become complacent in our faith during times of abundance. Christ warns us in this revelation that he will "spit out" lukewarm disciples. Instead, Jesus urges us to keep seeking the Lord's face even after His hand has bestowed riches in our lives.

### Sources

[Biblestudytools.com](#), New International Version.

[Biblestudytools.com](#), "Book of Revelation Summary."

[Biblestudytools.com](#), "Why These Seven Churches."

[Biblestudy.org](#), "The Meaning of Numbers: The Number 7."

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*Dolores Smyth's work has appeared in numerous faith and parenting publications. You can find her on Twitter [@LolaWordSmyth](#).*

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**EDITOR'S NOTE:** *This previously written article has become a resource for many seeking to understand if the Coronavirus pandemic is an End Times plague. We hope it can direct you toward scriptural truths about plagues and a study of the Book of Revelation. In addition, the following articles may offer more encouragement for all to remember as we face the trials of COVID-19 together:*