



THE BOOK OF REVELATION

3: THE CAST - THE SEVEN CHURCHES

THE SEVEN CHURCHES

Revelation is first and foremost addressed to the seven churches in Asia Minor (1v4), many of which had been founded during Paul's missionary activity centred in Ephesus (Acts 19v1,10; Col.1v7; 4v7-16). In every case the specific communication to each of the churches is addressed to the 'angel of the church...'

- An actual angelic being. This is what the word 'angel' means in the rest of Revelation and so the suggestion is that this is an angelic guardian of each church. However, in what sense would the Lord Jesus write a letter to an angel and these angels are encouraged for example, to 'repent', which would seem to make no sense.
- The word 'angel' also means 'messenger', so are these the church leaders who will be God's messengers to the churches and who will communicate God's words to them?
- The 'angels' are not so much entities (celestial or earthly) but represent the presiding 'spirit' of the churches.

If this is so, then one can see how this might be reflected in some of the individual letters.

- Ephesus, a legal centre, had become so focussed on the 'fine print' and on rooting out untruths and imposters, that it had lost its first love.
- Pergamum and Thyatira were centres of Emperor worship and full of trade guilds, all dedicated to pagan deities, where to get on was to compromise, and the churches have become compromisers.
- Sardis had twice been captured in the past due to the inattentiveness of its sentries and was still basking in the glory of a past age. And so it is told to 'Wake up!' or to 'Be Watchful!'
- Laodicea was famously wealthy and self-satisfied and so was the church.

Question: What is the prevailing spirit or spirits of our community and how much has the church taken on those same attitudes and now reflects them? What is the prevailing 'spirit' of our churches?

EPHESUS 2v1-7

'After that there arose a great disturbance about the Way... 'Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!' (Acts 19v23,28).

Ephesus was by far and away the most important of the seven cities addressed in Revelation, with a population estimated to have been about a quarter of a million.

Political – it was the seat of the proconsular governor of Asia.

Commercial – it was situated on the mouth of a river flowing out to the Aegean and on the confluence of three great trade routes.

Legal – it was the site of the Roman assize courts where important trials were heard.



Religious – a centre of imperial worship and with many, many temples, the most notable of which was the great temple to Artemis.

Ephesus was also a centre of 'Ephesian letters', magical charms and spells.

Acts 19 and Ephesians 6 both give a good flavour of what it was to be a believer in Ephesus and also the hold of these pagan religions and magic practices.

Christianity had perhaps come to Ephesus through the ministry of Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18v18-22) in around AD 52. Paul also stayed there for two years, to be followed by Timothy (Acts 19v8,10; 1 Tim.1v3) and it is thought that after his release from exile in Patmos, John possibly moved to live in Ephesus.

2v1: The One holding the 7 stars and the 7 lampstands (angels / messengers / spirits of the churches and the churches themselves 1v20) holds the churches firmly and sovereignly in His hand.

2v2-4: The Church has suffered 'hardships', presumably external opposition but the main danger comes from within, from the ranks of self-styled apostles. Rightly and diligently the Church has tested their doctrine, life-style and the fruit of their ministry (cf Mt.7v15-23). But in so doing they have lost their 'first love'. This return to a 'first love' was something to which the Lord continually called His people (Jer.2v2) and it is a love first and foremost for the Lord but then (inevitably) for His people. Right doctrine is important but it becomes dry, sterile and potentially even life denying, if it is divorced from love. They were busily defending the truth but they had forgotten the One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life...

2v5: That this really matters is clear from what the Lord goes on to say: that unless they repent, the church will cease to exist, either literally, or simply that it will exist as a church in name only.

2:6: However their striving for orthodoxy has not been entirely in vain and they have identified and opposed a sect within their ranks, the self-styled Nicolaitans or 'Victory People'. They will appear later on in the church at Pergamum and would appear to be a group who claimed to be so spiritual that indulging in food dedicated to idols and in immorality could not touch them and indeed as evidence of their super spiritual nature, they took part in both to demonstrate how 'holy' they were!

2v7: To the one who overcomes is granted the right to eat from the 'tree of life', which both references the Garden of Eden but also looks forward to the new Jerusalem and to the tree of Life giving healing to the nations (22v1-2). A place of perfect and restored relationship with God.

SMYRNA 2v8-11

'The first of Asia in beauty and size' (inscriptions on coins).

Once again a prosperous and beautiful city linked by sea and by road, with a famous library, theatre and sporting stadium. It had a population of around 200,000 and was a centre of Emperor worship among many deities that were worshipped there. With both a vigorous allegiance to Rome and a large Jewish population, it was a hard and challenging place in which to be a Christian.

2v8: Once again Jesus is identified by the vision in chapter 1. In the face of persecution and possible death (v.10), Jesus is the One who died and came to life again. Consequently the 'second death' (v.11), a rabbinic expression for the destruction of the wicked in the next world, will not touch them (20v6; 21v8).

2v9-10: Poverty and persecution faces the church, a persecution which will last for 'ten days', which commentators either take to mean a short period of time or an extended period of time! But either way, Jesus is in control and the suffering, however short or long, will come to an end.

The enemy of this church is not so much self-styled apostles but self-styled Jews, those who adhere to all the outward shows of their faith but are uncircumcised in their hearts (Rom.2v28-29). The reality is that their place of worship is not the house of God but a synagogue of 'Satan'. The acropolis on top of the mountain that overlooked Smyrna was known as the 'crown / garland of Smyrna' but in reality it is to the overcomer that the real 'crown' (better 'garland' or 'wreath'), of the victorious competitor is promised.

PERGAMUM 2v12-17

'By far the most distinguished city in Asia'. (Pliny).

Built on a cone shaped hill, the city dominated the surrounding valley, its very name meaning a 'citadel'. Once again a prosperous city with the royal buildings and the great altar to Zeus, the most impressive of all. It was the centre of four of the most important pagan cults of the region, those of Zeus, Athene (the patron deity), Dionysios and Asklepios, the god of healing, known as the 'saviour' and whose symbol was the snake. The temple to Asklepios drew pilgrims from all around and has been described as 'the Lourdes of the province of Asia'. The city was also foremost among those promoting the imperial cult and the Emperor Augustus had given permission for a temple to be built, 'to the divine Augustus and the goddess Rome.'

2v12-13: Jesus holds the two-edged sword (1v16), the true symbol of authority and the power over life and death, in contrast to the power to execute without recourse to Rome, the 'right of the sword', granted to the Roman proconsul. In the face of persecution and even martyrdom (where Antipas is graced with the same description that is given to Jesus, of 'faithful witness' 1v5; 2v13), the church has kept the faith in a city described as 'where Satan has his throne and where he lives.' This may be a particular reference to the altar to Zeus, or to the imperial cult, or to the worship of Asklepios. A suggestion is that the actual shape of the hill and city seen as one approached it, might suggest a throne. Whatever the precise understanding, it is clear that in the Lord's eyes, Pergamum is a centre for demonic power and activity. Spiritual warfare is real (cf 2Cor.6v7; 10v3-5; Eph.6v10-18)!

2v14-16: The church also faced a threat from within, from a self-styled prophet, symbolically called Balaam. It was Balaam who used the pagan Moabite women to seduce the Israelites both literally but also away from their love and faithfulness towards God (Num.25v1ff; 31v16). The reference to food sacrificed to idols and to sexual immorality most probably refers to foods eaten at trade guild feasts, which would be dedicated to idols, or to the participation in city wide pagan festivals, where sexual immorality might be part of the religious ceremonies or simply come from the general moral laxness associated with the celebrations. Along with the Nicolaitans, they are called to repent or to be judged and punished.

2v17: To those who overcome is promised the hidden manna and the white stone with a new name written on it. The hidden manna may simply be the promise of a pure, holy and spiritual food, in contrast to the food offered to idols and may perhaps reference back to Jesus as the Bread of Life and the true manna from heaven (Ps.78v23-25; Jn.6v32-35). Alternatively it may be a reference to a Jewish legend that just before Solomon's Temple was destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar, Jeremiah hid the pot of manna that had been stored in the ark of the covenant at the foot of Mount Nebo, ready for it to be revealed when the Messiah came.

The white stone most probably refers either to the fact that jurors would place a white pebble in an urn to return a 'not guilty' verdict; that white stones were given out to the population by the Emperors in Rome to guarantee a supply of corn for every household; that a white stone was often used as an invitation card to a banquet. The 'new name' known only to the Lord and to the believer signifies surely the intensely personal and intimate love of and knowledge of each Christian by their Saviour.

THYATIRA 2v18-29

The smallest and least important of all the churches receives the highest praise!

Established as a frontier town, it had grown and prospered under Roman rule. It had a large number of trade guilds, with their associated pagan practices and was the home town of Lydia, the first convert in Europe and trader in luxury purple cloth (Acts 16v14f). The patron of the city was Apollo, the sun god and later the cult of emperor worship was added, so that both the Emperor and Apollo were regarded as divine and as 'sons of Zeus.'

2v18: But it is the true and only Son of God who speaks to the church, one whose eyes are blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze (1v14-15). The eyes speak of a holy and penetrating gaze and the feet speak of strength and stability (and being of bronze, particularly relevant to a town well-known for bronze production).

2v19: The church is praised for its love and faith which has produced service and perseverance, and greater than at first.

2v20-24: The threat facing this congregation is a self-styled prophetess, symbolically called Jezebel. Jezebel was the wicked wife of King Ahab (1 Kngs16v29ff; 2 Kngs 9v30ff) who had vigorously promoted the cult of Baal. Coming from within the church's ranks and drawing disciples after her ('those who commit adultery with her...her children'), she appears to be a woman who claimed to be speaking the words of God, ('who calls herself a prophetess'). In reality she is speaking out the 'deep things' not of God but of Satan (v.24). The message that she seems to be teaching was that it was possible to accommodate pagan practices and yet be a true believer. The challenge of how to live as a Christian in the world and the very real dilemma of pursuing a trade within a guild dedicated to a pagan deity, was one that Paul addressed in 1 Cor.8. In the case of 'Jezebel', Jesus is not fooled and the warning is stark. Either there is repentance or there is judgement, sickness and death. This may refer to Paul's warning about eating the Lord's Supper in 1 Cor.11v27-32. You cannot share in God's banquet and a pagan banquet and expect there to be no consequences.

2v26-28: To the overcomer is promised a share in the authority of the Messiah (Ps.2 was very early on taken as referring not just to a king but to the Messiah). It is not so clear as to what the 'morning star' refers, although in 22v16, Jesus Himself is referred to as the 'Morning Star', which comes in the context of judgement upon the wicked and reward for the righteous, (the ruling and dashing of 2v27?). Alternatively Daniel speaks of those who lead many to righteousness shining like the stars forever (Dan.12v3), but perhaps it is better to link the 'morning star' with the other time that it is referenced in Revelation and not look elsewhere for its meaning.

SARDIS ^{3v1-6}

'A perfect model of inoffensive Christianity'

Once a great and powerful city, it now traded on past glories and had declined in wealth and importance over the years. Its geographical location made it a natural citadel, although twice in the past it had been captured due to the inattentiveness of its guards. Silver and gold coins were first minted in Sardis and once it had been very wealthy, ruled over by none other than Croesus himself.

3v1: The seven spirits and stars (cf 1v20; 2v1) may mean that the Lord holds everything about the churches in His hand of love but also of authority. Their fate is in His hands, which is why they need to hear what the Spirit is saying to them.

3v1-3: Faced neither by persecution nor by false teaching, the church was spiritually comatose and had simply gone to sleep, just as those sentries had done in the past – and look what had happened then! So they are to 'wake up' or 'show themselves watchful' and remember, repent and obey. Otherwise the Lord will come like a thief in the night (cf Mt.24v42-44; 1 Thess.5v2; 2 Ptr.3v10) and who knows what they might lose? This is not the Second Coming but a localised coming in judgement.

3v4-5: To the overcomer is promised clothes of white. The white robes that the martyrs wear is a rebuke to this comfortable, unthreatened and unthreatening church (6v11) but these are also the pure clothes of heaven (4v4; 7v9,13-14). Consequently their citizenship is safe and secured in the new Jerusalem. The 'book of life' refers to Moses' prayer in Ex.32v32-33 (and see Ps.69v28; Dan.12v1) and it is thought that if a criminal's name was

removed from a civic register then he stopped being a citizen of that town. Most wonderfully of all, those 'few people' who have held true to Jesus, will find that He holds true to them and that he will confess them as His own before the Father (Mt.10v32; Lk.12v8).

PHILADELPHIA 3v7-13

'The gateway to the East'

Situated on a junction of major trade routes, Philadelphia was a prosperous town, its wealth derived from commerce, industry and agriculture. It boasted many temples and religious festivals and had originally been founded as a 'missionary city' from which to export Greek culture to the surrounding area. Along with Smyrna it is the only church to receive unqualified praise.

3v7: 'Holy and true' is set in contrast to the lies about Jesus that emanate from the Jewish community's 'synagogue of Satan' (v.9). The 'key of David' further emphasises the Messianic credentials of Jesus and reminds the church that it is Jesus who has complete control over who does or does not enter the new (and true) Jerusalem, the city of David. The original reference goes back to the time of Isaiah, where a godless steward was replaced by a godly one (Isa.22v15-25).

3v8: The 'open door' may refer to missionary activity and opportunity (1 Cor.16v9) but perhaps more likely to the fact that although the door to the synagogue might be literally closed to them (Jewish converts having been excommunicated), the door to God's city and Temple stood wide open to them.

3v9-10: Their faithful endurance and witness will be vindicated and they will be kept safe from the persecution which is to come.

3v11-12: Their reward is a 'crown' (victor's wreath) (cf 2 Tim.4v6-8) and the promise of being a 'pillar' in God's temple, i.e. permanent, secure and strong (cf Gal.2v9; 1 Tim.3v15), not a bad promise in a city vulnerable to earthquakes! The name of God and the name of Jerusalem and 'my new name' all speak of belonging securely to God and of being guaranteed citizenship in heaven and of the special and intimate relationship that each believer has with the Lord Jesus.

LAODICEA 3v14-22

'Laodicea arose from the ruins [of a destructive earthquake] by the strength of her own resources...' (Tacitus).

Laodicea was located on two important trade routes and by Roman times had become very wealthy, a wealth based on agriculture, textiles and banking.

Its textile industry produced a famous black wool and also a particular and distinctive woven tunic.

Its medical school produced an ointment manufactured from nard for the ears and a very famous eye salve.

However its weakness was a lack of an adequate water supply which had to be piped in from springs lying some six miles to the south. The church was founded perhaps by Epaphras (Acts 19v10; Col.4v12) and Paul wrote a letter to them (Col.4v15-16).

3v14: The 'Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation'' ('the God of truth' Isa.65v16), speaks of One who is almighty (cf Col.1v15f) and who stands not simply as a witness to the Truth but as a witness against the church. And not least because 'witness' and 'martyr' are the same word in Greek and what sort of courageous witness are they offering?

3v15-18: Some six miles away lay the healing hot springs of Hierapolis, which flowed out over a steep escarpment some 300 ft. high and a mile wide, just opposite Laodicea. Over those six miles the foul tasting hot water became

lukewarm and anyone unwary enough to take a sip would indeed spit it out of their mouth. Although this lukewarmness could be seen as a description of the temperature of their faith and that the Lord would rather have someone passionately committed or even passionately opposed – at least then (like Paul) you have something to work with, the meaning may be somewhat different. Situated between the hot springs of Hierapolis and the cool streams of Colossae, perhaps the Lord is saying to the church at Laodicea that they neither refresh the spiritually thirsty nor heal the spiritually sick.

The critique of the church continues to be equally devastating. Although Laodicea is famous for its wealth, the Laodicean church is wretchedly poor; famed for its fine tunics and black wool, the church is stumbling about naked and needs to obtain white clothes; famous for its ear medicine the church is spiritually deaf and needs to 'hear' what the Spirit is saying; famous for its eye salve, the church is blind; famous for rebuilding itself unaided and needing nothing and no-one, the church's pride needs to be transformed into repentance and humility. But even these words are said purely out of love, that they may repent and be forgiven. It is when God stops speaking to us that we really need to fear (v.20).

3v20-21: And yet the humility of Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who waits outside *His* church and knocks for admittance! And to the one who responds is promised fellowship and to the humble, a place on the throne of the Godhead.

HE WHO HAS AN EAR TO HEAR, LET HIM HEAR WHAT THE SPIRIT SAYS TO THE CHURCHES...

Although these messages from Christ are to specific churches, in specific contexts and separated from us by many years, the challenges remain the same.

1. Loss of our first love – Ephesus
2. Fear of suffering – Smyrna
3. Doctrinal compromise – Pergamum
4. Moral compromise – Thyatira
5. A 'safe' faith that disturbs and challenges no-one - Sardis
6. Failure to endure and to hold fast – Philadelphia
7. Pride, complacency and spiritual blindness – Laodicea

WHAT IS THE SPIRIT SAYING to the Church and to the Congregation of which we are a part?

WHAT IS THE SPIRIT saying to you and to me?