

## 4. Seven Churches

Jesus sent seven letters to seven churches located in a Roman province, called Asia. In each letter Jesus urged us to pay attention saying, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” Jesus was saying something like, “If you have an ear, my expectation is that you will listen!” He repeated this expectation seven times, once in each letter.

### JESUS URGES US TO “HEAR” THE MESSAGES TO THE CHURCHES

Church	Verse	The plea to listen
Ephesus	2:7	<i>He who has an <u>ear</u>, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.</i>
Smyrna	2:11	<i>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.</i>
Pergamum	2:17	<i>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.</i>
Thyatira	2:29	<i>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.</i>
Sardis	3:6	<i>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.</i>
Philadelphia	3:13	<i>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.</i>
Laodicea	3:22	<i>He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.</i>

Jesus did not provide this urge to listen to warn about invading armies or even nuclear war. This emphasis is to focus our attention on seven letters. In general, Jesus first encouraged the church by recognizing positive attributes. He then discussed a need for improvement. However, Smyrna and Philadelphia did not receive any correction, while Laodicea did not receive any praise.

### SEVEN MESSAGES

Church	Commendation	Criticism
Ephesus	Rejects evil, perseveres	Little Passion
Smyrna	Gracefully bears suffering	None
Pergamum	Keeps the faith of Christ	Idolatry, immorality, bad doctrine
Thyatira	Love, service, faith, patience	Idolatry, immorality, bad doctrine
Sardis	Some have kept the faith	Dead
Philadelphia	Perseveres in faith	None
Laodicea	None	Indifferent

These letters may appear outdated however their value transcends time. Some of the practices and doctrines described are no less peculiar than beliefs and traditions of contemporary churches. For example, countless contemporary churches practice idolatry by teaching people to kneel before statues of wood or stone. Even though members refer to these statues as “icons” many are treated as idols (Exodus 20:4-6).

## Church History

Jesus could have sent a letter to any of a hundred first-century churches. He did not select many prominent churches, such as Antioch, Alexandria, Jerusalem, or Rome. It is widely thought that Jesus selected these specific churches for at least one reason: when placed end-to-end these letters describe worldwide church history, starting at the first century and ending with the primary church of today.

### PREDOMINANCE OF EACH CHURCH

Church	Description	Predominance Began
Ephesus	Second generation (complacent)	95 AD
Smyrna	Martyrs (persecuted, alive)	100 AD
Pergamum	Catholic (compromised doctrine)	312 AD
Thyatira	Catholic (misguided)	
Sardis	Catholic (dead)	
Philadelphia	Protestant (missionary, alive)	1517 AD
Laodicea	Protestant (complacent)	1900 AD

The past two thousand years all seven church types have continued to exist to one extent or another. Today the contemporary church is largely complacent (Laodicea) in nature. However, God's people are found in other conditions. Believers who make scripture interpretation subject to human tradition belong to the Pergamum, Thyatira, or Sardis church. Believers living in countries that execute Christians are part of the Smyrna Church.

## Ephesus

*“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. (Revelation 2:1-7)*



Ephesus Theater –  
- Location of Acts 19:24-34 events

Ephesus was a typical church during the latter part of the first century. Many sincere believers today identify with this church. Ephesus was a home to Paul for two years (Acts 19:9-10) and led by Timothy. This church was also home to the Apostle John.

Ephesus was doctrinally sound; its membership *tested* false teachers and *found them false*. This was a hard-working church—with strong deeds, *hard work and perseverance*. Yet the Ephesus Church had lost its passion. Jesus said, *Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love*. The following outlines what it means to lose your first love.

- I value praise from people more than praise from God.
- I am callous in the way I treat a Christian brother.
- I choose not to witness because I fear rejection.
- My leisure-time thoughts do not turn to God.
- I do not cheerfully give to God's work.
- I become complacent to sin.
- I am slow to forgive.

Because the Ephesus Church did not repent, severe religious persecution began. This persecution was the central theme of the subsequent church, located at Smyrna. Suffering rekindled passion within the church, which prevailed the next two centuries.

## Smyrna

*“To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death. (Revelation 2: 8-11)*

Smyrna was a beautiful city and the second largest in Provincial Asia. However, the large Jewish population meant that Christians were persecuted. The Smyrna Church produced countless martyrs. Jesus said to this church, *“I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich!”* The Smyrna Church predominance between 95 AD and 312 AD paralleled the story of the original Smyrna Church. Refusing to worship Caesar, martyrs unwaveringly laid down their lives, as replacement new believers continually came forward. The Roman Empire martyred an estimated five million believers. Some believe that Christians were fed to wild animals inside the Roman Coliseum.

Smyrna is described as suffering for *ten days*. Some historians note that between 95 AD and 312 AD a total of ten Roman emperors persecuted Christians. Other historians state that there were ten waves of persecution against Christians. Jesus had no criticism of this church. Satan eventually gave

up trying to destroy the church from the outside; instead, he chose to become active in church leadership. The new strategy was to destroy the church from the inside; that is the story of the following three churches.

## **Pergamum**

*“To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. I know where you live—where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city—where Satan lives. Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, 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. (Revelation 2:12-17)*

The teaching of the *Nicolaitans* became preeminent. Historians translate “Nicolaitans” to mean, “to rule over the laity”—in other words, to rule over non-pastoral members of the church. The first-century church at Pergamum accepted Roman dominance, even the worship of emperors. The Pergamum Church was loyal to the rulers of earth, and not to the eternal King.

The Pergamum time in history saw the rise of Pontiffs, as religious leaders created high-ranking positions in order to rule over God's people. However the second king of Rome (Pompilius 753–673 BC) initiated the College of Pontiffs centuries before Christ. Constantine, a Roman emperor ruling from Constantinople (Istanbul Turkey), made the Catholic Pontiff preeminent. At the time of Christ's birth another Roman emperor, Augustus Caesar, was Pontiff. Those who hold the title of "Pope" walk on a path established by ruthless Roman emperors.

Jesus said Pergamum was *where Satan has his throne*—a possible location of this "throne" was an ornate altar honoring pagan gods. German engineers moved this altar to Berlin between 1878 and 1886. It was placed in the Altes Museum, and later moved to an adjacent building, the Pergamum Museum. These locations are significant because Hitler gave rousing speeches to hundreds of thousands of people from a platform built on the steps of the Altes Museum. After this altar was moved to Berlin that city became a focal point for World War I, World War II, and the extermination of Jews. Berlin also was the place of greatest confrontation (the Berlin Wall) during the Cold War.



On a platform built over the steps of the Altus Museum - Hitler addressed massive rallies of up to a million people.

## Thyatira

*“To the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first. Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds. Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan’s so-called deep secrets (I will not impose any other burden on you): Only hold on to what you have until I come. To him*

*who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations — ‘He will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery’ – just as I have received authority from my Father. I will also give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (Revelation 2:18-29)*

A false prophetess nicknamed Jezebel claimed to know deep secrets of God. Today this corresponds to Catholic doctrine, dogma, and traditions, which routinely contradict scripture. During the Thyatira Church period, Roman Catholic Church leaders trivialized the authority of scripture and turned to man-made traditions. Jezebel also taught Christians to indulge in sexual immorality, which deeply harmed the Thyatira Church (1 Kings 16:28-19:2).

In a similar manner Roman Catholic Church leaders committed sexual immorality—a problem that continues into modern times, with priests homosexually molesting altar boys. An Associated Press report quotes Richard Sipe, a former Benedictine monk and priest, as saying that priest sexual abuse is a centuries-old problem, “The Vatican is in the know and has documented its knowledge throughout the centuries.” Two former monks, along with an active Catholic priest, compiled a 300-page document. The authors wrote, “It is a calculated cover-up of epic proportions.” The authors further stated that, “Vatican officials have known about sex abuse by priests going all the way back to the fourth century and have consistently kept quiet about it.” Ancient documents maintained by the Catholic Church prove sexual immorality during the Thyatira Church period.<sup>1</sup>

Credible sexual molestation lawsuits have implicated Pope Benedict XVI. For example, plaintiffs in Houston Texas cited a May 18, 2001 letter that he wrote while serving as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In a letter to bishops around the world concerning child molestation, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger wrote that cases of this kind are subject to “pontifical secret.” The lawsuit alleged that Ratzinger was responsible due to his active cover-up of child molestation. The Pope avoided requirements to testify at any trial because he later gained immunity as a head of state.<sup>2</sup> Jesus criticized *the eating of food sacrificed to idols*. In other words, bread is used in the practice of idolatry. Today in the Catholic sacrifice of the mass, bread is offered to God—for the practice of idolatry. Catholics accept bread consecrated by their priests as actually being Christ in physical form. People kneel before communion bread, which makes that bread an idol.

## Sardis

*“To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief and you will not know at what time I will come to you. Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. (Revelation 3:1-6)*

The fifth church period in history corresponds with the church at Sardis. Among the people on earth, this church had a *reputation* of being alive; but Jesus says this church was dead. A church is dead when building the reputation of church leaders becomes more important than building the *reputation* of God. The reputation for being alive can be seen in the impressive cathedral construction in Europe. Everything was done for the glory of the “one true church.” Honor was also given to its papal leader, who was called “the” representative of Christ on earth. While the reputation of the Roman Catholic leaders was zealously protected, precious little was done for the glory of God.

There can be no greater condemnation of a church than for Jesus to pronounce it dead. Sardis is the Catholic Church, in great need of reformation. Philadelphia tells of the success that came from the Protestant Reformation.

## **Philadelphia**

The Protestant Reformation began the time of Philadelphia pre-eminence. The Philadelphia Church includes a remnant of faithful believers who passionately serve God today. Philadelphia is a Greek word that translates as “brotherly love.”

*“To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of him who is holy and true; who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews, though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth. I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God;*

*and I will also write on him my new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.* (Revelation 3:7-13)

The Gutenberg printing press in the fifteenth century increased the availability of Bibles to ordinary people. Through cruel inquisitions, popes fought those who believed scriptures possessed ultimate authority. Catholic leadership murdered Protestant believers; the charge for which believers were burnt at the stake was called "heresy." (John 16:2) There have been attempts to minimize this event, similar to efforts to deny the Jewish holocaust. While King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella established the Spanish Inquisition in 1478, Spain did not definitively abolish this religious terrorism until 1834. Accountings today use phrases like "greatly exaggerated" to describe execution totals, or do not reference earlier estimates. Biased historians dismiss execution estimates greater than a few thousand. As administrator of Inquisitions, the Catholic Church maintained the records.

What is historically verifiable is that Protestant believers eventually fled to America; the Pilgrims were not Catholic. In 1790, the United States named Philadelphia Pennsylvania its capital city. Larger than any other city in the colonies, both the Declaration of Independence and United States Constitution were signed at Independence Hall. The overall Philadelphia Church provided a worldwide missionary outreach. A remnant of Philadelphia believers continue to serve God today. Because these believers continue to keep God's command to *endure* persecution *patiently*, Jesus will act upon his promise to keep this church from the *trial that is going to come upon the whole world*. This

protection means that Philadelphia believers will not suffer through the end-times.

## **Laodicea**

The Laodicea Church predominance began about 1900, with a wealthy church membership predominately interested in its own comfort and security. Members enjoy their place in society and are proud of their religion. Laodicea is a church with much religion—but little passion.

*“To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, ‘I am rich: I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”*

(Revelation 3:14-22)



Hot water brought in from Hierapolis was lukewarm upon arrival in Laodicea.

Laodicea is the primary end-times church; it is the preeminent church in western civilization today. Laodicea places its founder on the outside; Jesus said to this church, *I stand at the door and knock*. Many Christians today have wealth. Yet their spiritual poverty caused Jesus to say they were *neither cold nor hot*, but *lukewarm*. Laodicea is an educated church, smart enough to avoid complete complacency, and therefore is not cold. However, instead of passionately applying that knowledge, to make Laodicea hot, members apply their God-given talents to sustain their own comfort. Laodicea is a weak church that is lacking credibility and intensity.

Laodicea has sufficient communication tools to reach entire the world with the gospel, but is largely ineffective. The Laodicea Church is compromised; its members have bought into another religion. This religion sets our priorities and demands our loyalty. This is an infrequently recognized religion, called Secularism. The Laodicea Church believes it possible to passionately care about both God and money. In fact, a person is capable of loving only one or the

other. Jesus said, *“No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money. (Matthew 6:24)*

Laodicea sees itself as rich and that members *do not need a thing*. Jesus answers saying in effect, “you need everything!” Jesus says this kind of church makes him sick. He will spit (literally “vomit”) this church out his mouth. Jesus’ warning of discipline for the Laodicea Church will one day touch millions of believers.

## **The End-Time Church**

Today believers identify with a denomination, such as Baptist or Lutheran, or claim a non-denominational status. God also categorizes believers; every believer is a member of one of the seven churches of Revelation. The Philadelphia Church has a bright future. Jesus promised it protection: *I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth (Revelation 3:10)*. The only hour of trial that affects the whole world is the end-times. In contrast, Jesus warns the Laodicea Church: *those whom I love I rebuke and discipline (Revelation 3:19)*.

Many scholars anticipate the same future for both Laodicea and Philadelphia church members; that shared future is an early rapture. However, it is reckless to state with certainty that a group of believers promised discipline will share the same future as believers promised removal from earth for the entire end-time period.

## TWO FORCASTS

Church	Promise or Warning	Implication
Laodicea	<i>Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline.</i> (Revelation 3:19)	Faces discipline, not an early rapture.
Philadelphia	<i>I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world</i> (Revelation 3:10)	Participates in the early rapture.

### Notes:

1. Doyle, T; Sipe, R; Wall, P. Sex, Priests, and Secret Codes: The Catholic Church's 2,000 Year Paper Trail of Sexual Abuse. Volt Press. Santa Monica. 2006.
2. In the United States District Court for the Southern District of Texas Houston Division, Civil Action No H-05-1047. 2005