

Revelation Chapter 2 Handout

The letters to the seven churches are a distinct unit of seven within the book of Revelation. Other sevenfold units are the seven seals, the seven trumpets and the seven bowls of God's wrath. Because the number seven denotes divine completeness as a whole the seven letters form a whole unit which has a message to the church universal; there are more than seven churches in Asia, for example Colossi has been omitted.

The promises at the end of each letter follow an historical order. The tree of life refers back to Eden; the second death to the fall; the hidden manna to the manna in the desert; the white stone to the engraved stones on the high priest's shoulder and breastplate; the rod of iron to Moses holding the rod of God for the defeat of Amalek (Ex 17:8); the white raiment to the garments of the priests; the pillar in the temple to those in the temple of Solomon; and the sitting on the throne to Solomon's reign in glory and peace.

There are three ways to consider these letters:

- 1. As a description by the Lord of the state of the seven churches of believers then existing (preterist).*
- 2. As a prophetic foreview of the Christian age then commenced and to conclude at the coming of the Lord (historicist).*
- 3. As a revelation of the moral characteristics of churches found always throughout the age (idealist).*

Ephesus

1 To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

Angel: Possibly the angel of the church means to the spirit of the church, that is, symbolising the churches. It could also mean guardian angel or elder. We should note here that it is Jesus himself dictating the letters to the seven churches, John is the amanuensis. As with Revelation itself (see 1:1) the letters claim direct divine authorship rather than divine inspiration of a human writer. It is appropriate that the last letter to the church which would sustain the church through trials and tribulation over the coming centuries should come with the highest authority. It is Christ's own evaluation and description of the condition of the churches together with His remedy for any defects.

Ephesus was the leading city in Asia and the first port one would arrive at after leaving Patmos. It had a population of 250,000 and was a thriving sea port. It had the Temple of Diana, one of the seven wonders of the world. It was also a center of worship for the goddess Roma and the Emperor. There was a great deal of cult prostitution. All highways coming from Asia to Rome went through the city.

The church at Ephesus was founded by Paul where he reasoned with the Jews, he left Priscilla and Aquila there (Acts 18:19). Paul came back to Ephesus and found some disciples who had not received the Holy Spirit, they had only been baptized into John's baptism, when they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus the Holy Spirit came upon them (Acts 19:1-7). Paul spoke in the synagogue for three months (Acts 19:8) and then in the lecture hall of Tyrannus for 2 years (Acts 19:9-10). Then there was a disturbance because of the fertility goddess Artemis who brought the Ephesians wealth through making silver images of her (Acts 19:23), they were afraid

that through Paul's preaching about Christ they would lose business. Paul left Timothy at Ephesus (1 Tim 1:3). He said good-bye to the elders of Ephesus at Miletus before going to Jerusalem (Acts 20:17-38) where he warned them that savage wolves will come in among them (Acts 20:29).

He also wrote to the Ephesians a long letter from which it is clear that they were a mature church. It is also thought that the apostle John and Mary, Jesus mother, settled at Ephesus. Some two-and-a-half centuries after Paul preached in Ephesus, the city hall was converted into a church and later used by the Council of Ephesus, which in 431 AD formally accepted the teaching that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine.

These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands:

Him who holds: This is a repetition of his self designation from 1:13 and 1:16. A reference to his self designation is repeated for each of the seven churches. He holds the seven stars in his right hand, the seven stars are the seven angels of the church, this probably means that he determines the destiny of the churches. He walks among the seven churches and therefore he knows them intimately.

2 I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false. 3 I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary.

I know your deeds, a commendation, common to all the churches except Smyrna (I know your affliction and your poverty) and Pergamum (I know where you live - where Satan has his throne). Jesus is one who knows our condition because he walks among the seven lampstands. They had hard work (kopos) and perseverance; Paul commended the Thessalonians because of their work produced by faith, their labor (kopos) prompted by love (agapao) and their endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess 1:3). The church in Thyatira is commended for their love and faith, service and perseverance (2:19).

Patient Endurance: The church was already under pressure. In a place like Ephesus there would be great pressure to conform to the temple requirements to give worship to one of the gods or goddesses worshipped there.

Claim to be apostles: They had taken heed of Paul's warning to them when he left the elders that false prophets would arise out of their midst, Acts 20:28, 2 Cor 11:12. These men would be like savage wolves among a flock of sheep, they will distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them, Paul warned them to be on their guard against such false prophets. The Ephesians had tested the doctrine of these men and their lives and found them to be false. Jesus tells us that we will recognize false prophets by their fruit, that is their lives and the results of their doctrine. In 1 Thess 5:21 we are to test everything and hold on to the good, in 1 Cor 14:29 when two or three prophets speak the others should carefully weigh what is said. 1 John 4:1 warns us to test the spirits to see whether they are from God. 2 Peter 2 and Jude give descriptions of these people: they introduce destructive heresies, they exploit the people with stories they have made up, they will have shameful ways, they follow their own sinful ways and despise authority, they are bold and arrogant. They change the grace of our God into a license for

immorality, these men are grumblers and faultfinders; they follow their own evil desires; they boast about themselves and flatter others for their own advantage. In particular they are greedy for money.

4 But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

I have this against you: There is a strong rebuke coming for those who in this faithful church. Abandoned the love: they had deeds but not their love for each other and Jesus as at first. The word used for love is agape a stronger form of love rather than phileo which is brotherly love. Agape most characterizes the love that Christ has for us which is a deeply committed love and which depends more on the nature of the giver than the attractiveness of the one loved (cf. eros the love between lovers). We are to love one another as Christ has loved us (John 13:34), agape love and not just brotherly love. It is likely that they had lost their initial love for Christ which resulted in a lack of love for each other. This is the great test for the saints, do they love one another (1 Cor 13:3, John 13:35). Their testing of everyone to see whether they are false apostles or false brethren had created an atmosphere of mutual distrust in which love could not grow (Mounce).

5 Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

Jesus now gives three steps to recovery:

- i. Remember your former condition (stop and recall your love in the past, realise your current position and compare to how you used to be).*
- ii. Repent (change your direction, stop doing the negative)*
- iii. Do the things you did at first (do the positive, repentance is not just turning from wrong but also doing what is right).*

Repentance does not merely involve us in stopping doing bad things but learning to do good things (Isa 1:16-17). We are to produce fruit in keeping with repentance (Mat 3:8). 'Do the things you did at first' their love was to be practical (1 John 3:16-18, James 2:14-17. The positive thing is to love one another as Christ loved us (John 13:34-35, Rom 13:8, 1 Pet 1:22, 1 John 3:11 ff.). A survey of the term 'one another' in the NT indicates that in practise this means: agreeing with one another, forgiving one another as God forgave us, being patient with one another, encouraging one another, spurring one another on toward love and good deeds, not judging or slandering one another, offering hospitality to one another.

Remove your lamp stand: Warning that the church will die if they do not repent. There is no church at Ephesus today. The KJV has 'come unto thee quickly' which emphasizes the suddenness of his judgment and that therefore they should repent quickly (cf 2 Pet 3:9).

6 Yet this is to your credit: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

Nicolaitans:, not much is known other than in the book itself, though there are references in the works of the early church fathers which refer to a couple of people as founders (the deacon Nicholas of Antioch and Nicholas the Bishop of Samaria. Their beliefs led to lives of unrestrained indulgence. There is a play on words here because the name Nicolaus can be derived from the two Greek words, nikan, to conquer, and laos, the people. Balaam can be derived from the two Hebrew words, bela, to conquer, and ha'am, the people. The two names, then are the same and both can describe an evil teacher, who has won victory over the people and subjugated them to poisonous heresy (Barclay). This has been used as a basis for no ordained clergy other

than those who are elders led by the Holy Spirit. This is so because it means that no one should lord their power over another.

Which I also hate: Jesus did not like the Pharisees and the wealthy who wanted to lord it over others. "Be not ye called Rabbi; for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, even Christ. But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant," (Matthew 23:8-11).

7 Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.

Listen to the Spirit: meaning that you listen through John's words and through one's heart.

Everyone who conquers: Once again this is a personal rather than a corporate challenge. In the letter to each church there is a promise to the one who overcomes, meaning he who conquers, Rom 8:37. From the contents of the letter, the person who overcomes is the one who repents of his lack of love and finds his first love again.

I give permission: Rewards are part of God's purposes in motivating his people and in Revelation we see the rewards of the overcomers and the rewards of the cowardly, one leads to eternal life the other leads to the second death. Lang remarks that Ephesus had toiled and endured, and as to the body of their labors, the external efforts, they had not grown weary. But the inner life had felt the strain; in heart affection to Christ they had lapsed and fallen. The inner man needed renewing. He who repented, and found again this inward invigoration of love to Christ, and so overcame personally the general defeat, should be blessed correspondingly in the day of reward -- he should find permanent strength and satisfaction in the fruit of the tree of life (Lang).

The tree of life: this is a return to Eden... to the final remaking of the relationship with God, just as it was in the very beginning of time.

Smyrna

8 And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of the first and the last, who was dead and came to life:

Smyrna: Smyrna is today called the city of Izmir, it lies about 35 miles north of Ephesus on the Aegean coast of Turkey. It has an excellent harbor. It had a strong allegiance to Rome and in 195 BC it became the first city in the ancient world to build a temple in honor of Dea Roma. Later in 23 BC, Smyrna won permission to build a temple to the emperor Tiberius. It was known for its games and had a large stadium. The strong allegiance to Rome plus a large Jewish population which was actively hostile to the Christians made it exceptionally difficult to live as a Christian in Smyrna. The most famous martyrdom of the early church fathers was of the elderly Polycarp, the 'twelfth martyr in Smyrna', who, upon his refusal to acknowledge Caesar as Lord, was placed upon a pyre to be burned (Mounce). There is still an active church in the city today.

First and Last, dead and alive: This a repetition of his self designation, see Rev 1:17-18. He is the first and the last word in human history and therefore is sovereign over what is in between (xxxx). Through him the world was created and human history will end when he comes again. He died and came to life again and hence conquered death, he is the firstborn of many brothers, this should be of comfort to those in Smyrna who are about to be persecuted and some will die.

9 I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

Poverty: Physically the church in Smyrna suffered from persecution from the Jews and they were poor, they had few luxuries and possessions. They were poor often because they had been excluded from the guilds that set employment because they refused to participate in offerings to the appropriate gods and goddesses that were the patrons of the guilds.

Rich: yet spiritually they were rich in the sight of Christ. Jesus sees their affliction, he knows about it, this must be of comfort to this persecuted church.

Slander: This was the beginning of the real separation of the Jews and the Christians. In some parts of the Middle East the Christians continued to worship in synagogues until around AD 130. However in some places such as Smyrna, there was an early great antagonism. The Jews wanted to maintain their place in the Empire and so were adverse to being seen with Christians who were considered atheists. So the Jews would accuse them as heretics.

And are not: the idea here is that if Jews were really the people of God, then they would see the truth of Jesus Christ as the messiah, but since they do not then they are those who work for Satan. John always had a difficult time with the Jews which can be seen in the gospel itself.

10 Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Do not fear: In John 16:33 Jesus tells his disciples that in world they will have tribulation, but to take courage; he has overcome the world, cf. 3:21, 5:5. In Luke 12:4 Jesus warns us not to fear man who can kill the body but do no more, we should fear God who, when the body is dead, can cast us into hell. 1 Pet 3:13-18 tells us not to be afraid if we suffer for doing right, we have the example of Jesus who died for doing right but he was raised again (cf. 1 Pet 2:19-25, Isa 51:7-8).

Devil is to throw you into prison: Notice that this is not the Romans doing this but Satan. This is one way apocalyptic works in that there is this close association between earthly events and their spiritual causation.

So you may be tested: One of the great themes of Revelation is that believers must live up to their faith even in the face of persecution. It is in persecution that our faith is forged. This is part of what Peter is talking about.

Ten Days: Ten days is a limited, but complete, period of time known by God, note that Daniel asked to be tested for ten days to see whether he would still look well on a diet of vegetables (Dan 1:12).

Faithful unto death: this can mean faithful while you die for Christ, or it can mean you will be out of prison but remain faithful until you die of old age.

Crown of life: a nice metaphor that reminds people of the crown of laurel wreaths that are given to victors in the games. The word is victors' crown and not royal crown.

11 Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death.

Conquers: John is talking about being faithful. You have conquered temptation, your fears, the desire to be safe rather than to be faithful.

Second death: this is spiritual death. This means after the final resurrection and judgment one is condemned to hell.

Pergamum

12 And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword:

Pergamum: this was the most impressive of all the cities. It had a 200,000 volume library (the name Pergamum means parchment). It had many temples, with the most impressive being a white marble temple to Zeus, perched on a 1000 ft hill above the city. Again one of the Seven Wonders of the World. The serpent, the symbol of healing of the pagan god Asclepius is everywhere. People came from all over the empire to be healed at this temple. Emperor worship was also part of the city culture
Two edged sword: Pergamum had the right to conduct capital punishment.

13 I know where you are living, where Satan's throne is. Yet you are holding fast to my name, and you did not deny your faith in me a even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan lives.

Satan - In the case of the other church (except Smyrna) Jesus says 'I know your deed' here he says 'I know where you live--where Satan has his throne', he knows that they are living where Satan seemingly reigns, this must bring comfort to the church. Pergamum was a centre of both pagan religion and Caesar worship, Asclepius the serpent God of healing was worshipped there and so the city can truly be described as one where Satan reigns, i.e. has his throne. However this is precisely the place where Christians are to witness, c.f. 'Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified' (11:8).

Antipas - The Greek word used here for witness is martyrs, thus by the witness of his life and death Antipas bore witness to Jesus, becoming an example for much of the book later. Jesus knows our circumstances, he knows that the church at Pergamum is where Satan has his throne, he knows about the martyrdom of Antipas this should bring comfort to the saints. Jesus is the faithful witness (1:5), Antipas is one who followed the example of Jesus and remained faithful unto death (2:10, 14:12), just as Christ remained faithful until death, and is called here my faithful witness; being faithful under persecution is one of the key messages of revelation. Antipas means against all.

14 But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice fornication. 15 So you also have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

Balaam - see Numbers 22:1ff and 31:7ff There are two traditions about Balaam. The first is that he was hired to curse Israel and then, led by the Word of God, blessed them instead. There is a second tradition that implies that Balaam was a prophet who infiltrated the people of Israel and caused them to sin...this led to a plague. The idea is that there is an inside job to lure God's people away. Balak was a king of Median who wanted to curse the Israelites who were coming into the land. This was difficult in the time of Revelation because Roman religion had many festivals and sexual immorality.

16 Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and make war against them with the sword of my mouth.

Repent - they have to weed out those who are trying to lead them astray. This is in a sense true theology.

Sword of my mouth - this is the very word of God which cuts to the heart.

17 Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.

Hidden manna - (Ex. 16:33-34) it was designed to remind Israel of God's gracious care in the wilderness... the people here are to refuse the banquets of Rome in order to depend on God's provision.

White Stone - this was an invitation to a banquet.

New Name - This was the name of Jesus Christ, one became a new person and thus had a new name, and no one could know your name meaning that they could not gain power over you. To know another's name was power. Christ shares his name with us.

18 And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These are the words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze:

The city of Thyatira is now Akhisar. The city was on the trade route south east of the capital Pergamum and a period of great prosperity and increase was only beginning when the seven letters were written. More trade guilds were known in Thyatira than any other Asian city. The inscriptions mention the following: wood workers, linen workers, makers of outer garments, dryers, leather workers, tanners, potters, bakers, slave dealers and bronzesmiths. The woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth came from the city of Thyatira, (Acts 16:14). Each guild had its own god and to work then you had to participate in the work of the guild, which meant the work of the gods and the feasts of the gods. After one ate there were sexual antics.

Son of God - Apollo was supposed to be the son of god because he was the son of Zeus and there were temples to Zeus there.

19 I know your works--your love, faith, service, and patient endurance. I know that your last works are greater than the first.

Works - the believers in Thyatira were living in community as they were supposed to do. They showed forth the love of Jesus Christ one for another.

20 But I have this against you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols. 21 I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her fornication. 22 Beware, I am throwing her on a bed of suffering, and those who commit adultery with her I am throwing into great distress, unless they repent of her doings; 23 and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve.

Jezebel - This was a church that had love and lost its love for the truth, rather than loving truth but having lost love. There was a prophetess in their midst who was preaching heresy. Since sexual immorality and eating sacrificed food to idols are mentioned in Acts 15:20 and in Corinthians 6:18, 8:1, we should take it literally. Eating food offered to idols would be a temptation with respect to the trade guilds which would have feasts involving food offered to idols and possibly sexual immorality. Once again spiritual compromise is warned against, James 4:4 warns that friendship with the world is hatred towards God, it is a form of spiritual adultery. In 18:4 the saints are warned to come out of Babylon so that they will not share in her sins or her punishment.

Refuses to repent - the church believed that what mattered was not sin but continuing in sin. There were always opportunities to repent. Both Jesus and Paul remind believers that we are to go to those who sin and try to get them to see the light.

Bed of suffering - they suffer because they cause God's people to suffer. To commit adultery is akin to OT ideas in Hosea. There God's people are represented by a prostitute.

Strike children dead - this is eternal death. It is that they are moving away from God.

Works deserve - this is justice being meted out.

24 But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call 'the deep things of Satan,' to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden; 25 only hold fast to what you have until I come.

Who hold - To those who resist sexual immorality and eating food offered to idols, and do not compromise with the world he does impose any other burden on them, see Acts 15:28. To learn Satan's so called deep secrets one has to plumb the depths of wickedness in order to appreciate God's grace.

Do not lay any other burden - there are no more rules to follow, they have love and good doctrine

26 To everyone who conquers and continues to do my works to the end, I will give authority over the nations; 27 to rule them with an iron rod, as when clay pots are shattered-- 28 even as I also received authority from my Father. To the one who conquers I will also give the morning star. 29 Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

Conquers - this is a battle and they need not only to resist but to overcome

Give authority over the nations - Psalm 2 messiahs reign will be shared with his followers, this is what the disciples were looking for

Clay pots - this is a dramatic turnaround...the powerful are now as fragile as a clay pots

I receive - Jesus will be receiving authority from God, who was the first and the last and the ruler of all things. The time is not yet but is coming

Morning star - image of the morning star heralding the onset of the coming new day. Jesus is the one who brings the new future.