

“REVELATION: DOES IT DESCRIBE OUR DAYS?” SERIES

#7: “Chapter Two”

INTRO:

As I’ve already mentioned, there are those who see the seven churches as representing seven chronological stages of the church age. In other words, the church started out being like the Ephesian church and chronologically became like the remaining six, meaning that we are in the Laodicean church stage today.

It sounds good, and even makes some sense, but the fly in the ointment of this interpretation is that at any given time the church has been like any of the seven, and at any given time, individual churches may be like any one of the seven. So, the interpretation falls on its face.

I see the seven churches as different characteristics of the church throughout the church age or different characteristics of individual churches during the church age, which leads me to ask what church characterizes today’s church? Or which church represents Village Christian Church? Think about these questions as we work our way through chapters 2 and 3.

First, let’s consider...

THE CHURCH AT EPHESUS (2:1-7).

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

2 “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. 3 I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary. 4 But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. 5 Remember therefore from where 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. 6 Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. 7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.’

The congregation at Ephesus gathered on the Lord’s Day in the shadow of the temple of the goddess Diana. So prominent was the worship of Diana that silversmiths could earn their living by making and selling miniature images of her.

The church was established by the apostle Paul, probably on his third missionary journey. After he guided the church there for a time, he turned the leadership over to his protégé Timothy.

First, note the commendation. Christ commends the folks at Ephesus for their works, toil, and patient endurance. He also commends them for their stand against evil and their testing of those who were false apostles.

Wow! That's a pretty good record. They do a lot of beneficent work. Probably provide for the needs of the poor and the sick. Toil: what could that be? The NIV has this: ***"I know your deeds, your hard work, and your perseverance."*** The word translated ***"toil"*** and ***"hard work"*** means labor that results in weariness. ***"Works"*** or ***"deeds"*** has to do with an activity undertaken for Christ.

But then there is condemnation: ***"you have abandoned the love you had at first."*** What was the love the church had at first? Whatever it was, it resulted in ***"works"*** that Christ wanted them to do again. What could that "first love" be? The church was more than forty years old at this time – time for a whole new generation of members and leaders. Could it be that they no longer functioned with the same intense enthusiasm and devotion to Christ than they did in their earlier years? A lot of churches begin with intense enthusiasm for evangelism and various ministries, only to lose it within a few years, when a younger generation takes the reins. This seems to be the case at Ephesus.

But wait! There is this consolation: ***"Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate."*** But who are the Nicolaitans? They were followers of a man named Nicolas, who taught what was known as "the doctrine of Balaam," which resulted in various forms of immorality and self-indulgence. So, the Ephesian church stood up against immorality of all kinds. Christ says that that's a good thing.

But, because Ephesus has left its first love, it is to repent and return to being what it once was.

Second, we have...

THE CHURCH AT SMYRNA (2:8-11).

Just as Ephesus was a bustling metropolis, so was Smyrna. It was a rival to Ephesus. The church was probably established by the apostle Paul on his third missionary journey.

It's thought that the bishop or head elder of the Smyrna church at this time was Polycarp, the venerable leader who was burned at the stake in 155 A.D. When he was asked to deny Christ, his answer was: "Eighty and six years have I served him, and he never did me any injury; how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?"

Such were the conditions that the church functioned amid during the first and second centuries. This was especially true for the Smyrna church, which is known as the persecuted, suffering, and poor church. They were victims of the first century Roman “cancel” society. *“Becoming a Christian was, from an earthly point of view, a real sacrifice. It meant poverty, hunger, imprisonment, often death by means of the wild beasts or the stake”* (Hendriksen, p. 80).

But the Lord tells them not to pity themselves – not to take on the role of victims. While they were poor in material things, they were rich in spiritual possessions – in grace and its fruits.

As for ***“those who say they are Jews and are not,”*** is a reference to Jews who have not only rejected Jesus as the Christ but have also been unfaithful and hypocritical as far as the Law was concerned. They are, in essence, ***“a synagogue of Satan.”*** Many of today’s Jews are guilty as well, I’m sorry to say. They are not God’s people.

Jesus warns the Smyrna Christians that the hardest of time is coming for them, and He tells them, ***“Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation.”*** It would be ridiculous to take ***“ten days”*** literally, so He’s saying that such treatment would be for a relatively short time. ***“Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life”*** (2:10). In other words, “Be faithful, even if it costs you your life.”

Then He says, ***“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death”*** (2:11). What is ***“the second death”***? Well, the first death is what we see almost every day. People die. The second death is spiritual death or death of the spirits or souls of unbelievers or the unfaithful.

Third, we have the letter to...

THE CHURCH AT PERGAMUM (2:12-17).

Pergamum, or Pergamos, was the capital city of the province. The primary god of the people of Pergamum was Aesculapius, the god of healing. His physical likeness was that of a serpent. Does this rod of Aesculapius look familiar?



Maybe you've seen it like this:



Looks familiar, doesn't it? It should. We see it quite often.

As the capital, Pergamum was the center of emperor worship. All citizens were required to burn an offering of incense to the image of Caesar while saying, "Caesar is Lord." Of course, Christians wouldn't comply, so they were imprisoned and/or faced wild beasts in the arenas. Living as a Christian in Pergamum was quite a test. Talk about your "cancel" culture!

Christ has a sharp two-edged sword called a "great sword" or Roman "broad sword." He is going after the Nicolaitans unless they repent.

The believers at Pergamum were, for the most part, bravely faithful, but they had this weakness: while they were individually faithful to Jesus as Lord, they weren't as concerned about their brothers and sisters in the faith as they should have been, in that they neglected to discipline those who were attending pagan festivals and feasts and teaching false doctrines. Christ warns that those who persist in compromising with the

world – trying to hang on to Christ with one hand and the world with the other – He will destroy.

He who is faithful in the midst of all this will receive **“some of the hidden manna”** according to verse 17. This is Christ, hidden from the world but revealed to believers. Christ is the bread of heaven.

The faithful are also promised **“a white stone”** and **“a new name.”** What could that be? There are several theories about this, two of which seem most reasonable.

The first is that the stone represent the purity, beauty, holiness, and imperishability of the person receiving it. The new name represents the person, who is new in Christ.

The second is that the stone is a diamond with the name of Christ on it, representing the glorious fellowship with Him the believer will enjoy in eternity.

Take your pick. Or come up with your own idea.

Fourth, we come to

THE LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT THYATIRA (18-28).

Thyatira was a city of trade, settled by woolworkers, linen-workers, dyers (such as Lydia, whom we read about in Acts 16), leatherworkers, tanners, potters, etc. And each trade had its own guild or association, along with its own guardian god. The result of this was that if you wanted to do business in Thyatira, you had to belong to a guild, and if you belonged to a guild, you had to recognize the god of that guild, which was something Christians could not do, so they were ridiculed and persecuted in various ways. They were “canceled.”

Now, there was a woman by the name of Jezebel in the church there – she called herself a prophetess – whose teaching was resulting in some of the members getting involved in immoral behavior. And the church leadership wasn’t doing anything about it!

What was going on? Well, this Jezebel was encouraging the Christian trade people to attend the guild parties, even the orgies that followed, and still attend church on Sundays. This way, they could enjoy the best of both worlds.

Christ says He will **“throw her onto a sick bed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent . . . and I will strike her children dead.”**

Those of the Thyatira church who resist her and remain faithful will be given **“authority over the nations.”** They will reign with Christ. And on the day of final judgment, the wicked will be as **“earthen pots”** that **“are broken to pieces.”**

Those faithful to the end will be given **“the morning star,”** which is Christ Himself. They will join Him in heaven.

IN CLOSING:

So, we come to the end of chapter two. Of course, the chapter breaks are man-made, so they're there simply for convenience – that is, they provide a place for me to stop before I terribly exceed your capacity for listening.

Did you find any of the characteristics of these four churches to be descriptive of Village Christian at some given time? Could you identify times when the churches of the United States resembled any of the four?

Next Sunday, we'll consider the letters to the last three churches...