

How to Read Revelation
Session 3 - Notes
City of God Church

Revelation 2-3: What the Spirit Says to the Churches

Introductory Issues

Each of the letters to the seven churches follow the same basic format:

1. It is addressed to the “angel” of each church.
2. An identification of Jesus. All of these elements are found in Revelation 1.
3. Jesus says that he “knows” something about them.
4. An assessment of their status is given. This leads to commendation or condemnation.
5. An exhortation or an encouragement.
6. A promise for the one who conquers. All of these promises are rooted in Rev. 21-22.
7. Each letter ends with a call to “hear what the Spirit says.” Where else does Jesus use this language?

Question: Do the Seven Churches in Revelation Predict Future “Ages” of the Church?

So, what does this look like?

From Gorman, Reading Revelation

Text	Church	Age	Date Range
2:1-7	Ephesus	Apostolic Church	Start of the church – 150 AD
2:8-11	Smyrna	Persecuted Church	100-312 (rise of Constantine)
2:12-17	Pergamum	Compromised Church	312-606
2:18-29	Thyatira	World, lax, medieval church dominated by the Papacy	606-1500 (beginning of the Reformation)
3:1-6	Sardis	Reformation churches, still too medieval	1517-1750
3:7-13	Philadelphia	True church, loved by Christ	1750-early 20 th century
3:14-22	Laodicea	Lukewarm, apostate, anti-supernatural	1900-the tribulation

Issues with this approach:

- Revelation gives no hint, interest, or knowledge of various eras of the church. It’s hard to find this theme in the text.

- These letters are primarily focused on real churches facing real problems. That doesn't mean we can't learn from them.
- This kind of framework uncritically reflects the perspective of only one small branch of the church which finds its heroes in the earliest church and the Protestant missionary movement.
- For the most part, segments of the Protestant church have not handled church history well.

The Seven “Letters”

Again, why “seven”? Seven is a number of completion or fullness. These seven churches represent the church in its entirety.

Ephesus (Revelation 2:1-7)

Smyrna (Revelation 2:8-11)

Pergamum (Revelation 2:12-17)

Thyatira (Revelation 2:18-29)

Sardis (Revelation 3:1-6)

Philadelphia (Revelation 3:7-13)

Laodicea (Revelation 3:14-22)

Reflection

The main overarching issue throughout these letters is, “Will the church compromise?”

Jesus reminds them that he is in their midst calling them to renewed devotion.

“The message of these seven addresses from the risen Christ is not a call to death but to discipleship, including abstention from all that defiles. This costly discipleship, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer described it, is much more demanding than many Christians in the first century (or any century) realized or desired.” – Gorman

What do these texts teach us about the marks of a true church?

From John Stott

- Love for God and others
- A willingness and readiness to suffer for Christ
- A desire to guard and keep the truth
- A desire for holiness
- Authenticity
- Clear vision of the mission that Jesus has given us
- Whole-hearted devotion to Jesus

For Further Study:

Beale, G.K. *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015.

Gorman, Michael J. *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness Following the Lamb into the New Creation*. Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011.

Metzger, Bruce M. *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019.

Wood, Shane J. “Revelation 2:1-3:22.” www.shanejwood.com/the-book-of-revelation.