

Introduction to Revelation 2-3

It has been calculated that one-eighth of the entire book of Revelation is contained in **chapters 2-3** in which we read seven letters to seven churches. This certainly shows us that this church data is extremely significant to the book.

Dr. Merrill Tenney accurately observed that, “Rigid inspection, powerful protection, and loving evaluation must precede the day of judgment on the world, for judgment must ‘begin at the house of God’ (I Peter 4:17). Christ cannot judge the world until He has purged His church and made it ready for taking it to Himself” (*Interpreting Revelation*, p. 55).

What we have in these chapters is the only unedited direct address by Jesus Christ to His churches in the entire Bible. This is sacred and it is significant. **There are seven very important preliminary observations we want to make before we introduce these chapters:**

Observation #1 - The order in which the churches are addressed and listed by Jesus Christ is the order of the logical travel route from Patmos (Ephesus - Laodicea). This order is stressed in Revelation 1:11 and in **Revelation chapters 2-3**. Certainly we see by this that God is a God of systematic, logical order that is consistent with the existing man-made travel route.

Observation #2 - The average distance between the churches is approximately 33 miles. This was a time when travel was done by donkey, horse, or foot so travel time between these churches could be as much as two days. We observe from this that God’s true churches are spread out. They are not one or two miles down the road from each other. Multiple churches a couple miles from each other doesn’t square with God’s written Word.

Observation #3 - There are places of religious worship in these cities that Jesus Christ does not acknowledge as being His church. For example, in Smyrna, there was a Jewish synagogue which Christ called the “synagogue of Satan” (**Rev. 2:9**) and He identified another religious place the same way in Philadelphia (**Rev. 3:9**). **What this tells us is that Satan does his great work in religion that is not focused on carefully and accurately understanding God’s written Word.** There are many religious churches that are truly satanic from God’s assessment.

Observation #4 - The best churches by evaluation of Jesus Christ were the smallest churches that had the least amount of money (Smyrna - **Rev. 2:9**; Philadelphia - **Rev. 3:8**). Obviously, the size of the congregation and the size of the offerings do not mean a church is great by classification of God. Christ esteems the church that is focused on God’s written Word and faithfully endures in times of troubles and trials.

Observation #5 - The worst church by evaluation of Jesus Christ had the biggest numbers and the most dollars (Laodicea - **Rev. 3:17**). Laodicea was a big church with big crowds, and big dollars, but it was a detestable church in the sight of God.

Dr. Warren Wiersbe really captured this point when he wrote: “If you have ever moved to a new community and had to select a new church home, you know how difficult it is to examine and evaluate a church and its ministry. Imposing buildings may house dying or dead congregations, while modest structures might belong to virile assemblies on the march for the Lord. The church we think is ‘rich’ may turn out to be poor in God’s sight (Rev. 3:17), while the ‘poor’ church is actually rich” (2:9) (*Be Victorious*, p. 24)!

Observation #6 - Satan is specifically said to be very active near four of the seven churches:

1) Smyrna (2:9); 2) Pergamum (2:13); 3) Thyatira (2:24); 4) Philadelphia (3:9). In analyzing the satanic work in these churches we may observe that his attacks may come from outside the church (2:9-10), or they may come from inside the church (2:24).

We may assume from this that wherever God has His church, Satan will also have his work. Satan and his forces are very much aware and interested in attacking a true church of God. Since this book was to be sent to all of the churches, we may assume that even though Satan is not specifically named in three of the seven churches (Ephesus, Sardis and Laodicea), Satan and his forces were also very active there.

Observation #7 - Jesus Christ has full knowledge of everything and everyone in the church.

Jesus Christ knows everything about everyone in the church including right down to what is in their minds and hearts (Rev. 2:23). Jesus Christ knows every person intimately. He knows every thought; He hears every word; He sees every sin.

Having made these observations, there are four key preliminary questions we want to ask and answer prior to journeying through the seven churches found in **chapters 2-3**:

PRELIMINARY QUESTION #1 – How have these churches been interpreted in history?

There are four ways these seven churches have been interpreted:

Interpretive Way #1 - Extreme Literal .

This view says these are seven literal churches to whom John is writing and there is no prophetic element to any of them. We get church truth but no prophetic truth.

Interpretive Way #2 - Extreme Futuristic .

This view says these are seven churches that will exist in the future when Christ returns. This is simply a prophetic prediction, which eliminates anything literal or historical. One negative thing that this does is to take away the value of the immediate warnings to the local churches. Why would Christ warn a church like Ephesus or Pergamum or other churches if there was no real historical problem?

Interpretive Way #3 - Extreme National .

This view states that these are seven churches which represent seven different stages of Israel's history. The first three represent Israel in the O.T. and the last four represent Israel in her Promised Land. This is pure allegory for Israel doesn't specifically show up until Revelation 7:4 and then she is literally named.

Interpretive Way #4 - Historical/ Futuristic .

These are seven literal, historical churches that existed at the time John wrote, and they are also representative of the complete Church Age because of the number seven.

PRELIMINARY QUESTION #2 – How will we approach these seven churches?

Churches are like people, there are no two that are alike. Each person has his or her own personality, size, and shape and each person has strengths and weaknesses. So it is when it comes to local churches.

We will approach the seven churches from the “Historical/Futuristic” perspective. These were seven literal churches but they also paint God's picture of the entire Church Age. We will examine each church from four perspectives:

Perspective #1 - Each church will be examined literally and historically.

John was writing to real churches in a real location with real problems. He gave these churches a real message from Jesus Christ and each church was literally accountable to respond.

Perspective #2 - Each church will be examined prophetically .

Each church represents a key part of Church History. There are some remarkable similarities between the chronology of Church History and the chronology of the church order. We will examine this. For example, there has been an Ephesian period of time, a time when church was well taught; a Smyrna period of time, a time when the church was suffering; and now we are in the Philadelphia period, when the church that really loves the Word of God is small; and that is leading to the Laodicean period of time in Church History which features wealth and success and also unbelievers.

Perspective #3 - Each church will be examined representatively .

Each church represents a type of church that you will find in any time period and in any location. All types of churches of all time are found in these seven churches. Each church is a type of church that you will find today.

Perspective #4 - Each church will be examined individually .

You will find these types of believers in every church. You will find an Ephesian-type who has a problem with priorities; you will find a Smyrna-type who is being attacked by Satan; you will find a Pergamum-type who always wants to compromise; you will find a Thyatira-type who struggles with immorality and idolatry; you will find a Sardis-type who has become spiritually apathetic; you will find a Philadelphian-type who loves God's Word and defends faith in Christ and walks through open doors; and you will find a Laodicean-type, one totally focused on material and financial wealth and doesn't even know Jesus Christ. You will find these kinds of believers in almost every church.

PRELIMINARY QUESTION #3 – What may we use for a basis to determine that this is the correct way to view these churches?

There are five interpretive indicators that this is the legitimate way to approach these churches:

Indicator #1 - It is obvious that John's list of churches is very selective .

There were many other N.T. churches in existence and some were far more impressive than those listed here - Antioch, Rome, Alexandria, Corinth. In fact, there were many other churches in Asia to whom John could have written - Colosse, Miletus or Troas, for example.

It is very clear that there is something very special and very unique about these seven selected churches picked out by Jesus Christ. Why aren't other churches included? Didn't every church need instruction, rebuke, encouragement, and even warning? The answer lies in that all churches are included in these churches.

Indicator #2 - It is obvious that John's list is a list of seven .

Seven is a critical number which represents God's completed work (i.e. Genesis 2:3). We may assume that these seven churches represent God's completed work and program for the entire Church Age.

Indicator #3 - It is obvious from the opening words of Revelation that it is unusual .

The introductory words "revelation" (1:1); "communicate" or "signified" (1:1) and "prophecy" (1:3) indicate this will be a different kind of book. We must never forsake sound principles of hermeneutics (interpretation), but we do have a right to expect that this book will be different in scope.

Indicator #4 - It is obvious that each message ends with the plural “churches.”
(2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22)

When Jesus Christ addressed each church, He had more than just one church in mind. We have a very legitimate right to think in terms of examining each church from a plural perspective.

Indicator #5 - It appears that the flow of the book and Church History agree with this approach.

After **chapter 3**, the church is not mentioned again until the end of the book (22:16). Chapters 4-19 are very chronological in the way the future unfolds. We may assume that **chapters 2-3** are also. If chapters 6-21 unfold future history, **chapters 2-3** may unfold Church History.

One illustration establishes this point. **Revelation 3:10** is a clear reference to the Rapture of the Church and it comes just prior to chapter 4 which ultimately leads us to a scene in heaven which leads to chapter 6 which begins the Great Tribulation. This cannot be a mere coincidence. This would clearly lend itself to the view that the seven churches unfold Church History because after chapter four the Church is gone.

Many of the great Biblical students and scholars of prophecy have viewed the book this way:
1) Walter Scott; 2) Merrill Tenney; 3) G. Campbell Morgan; 4) H. A. Ironside; 5) J. Dwight Pentecost; 6) John Walvoord; 7) Charles Ryrie; 8) Charles Spurgeon; 9) Lewis Sperry Chafer; 10) C. I. Scofield; 11) J. Vernon McGee; 12) M. R. DeHaan.

PRELIMINARY QUESTION #4 – What is the format that we will use for examining each church?

We will notice that when each church is addressed by Jesus Christ, there is no typical grace and peace introductory formula. Christ’s address to each church is very different. He gives threats, warnings, and praise. He scolds and He encourages. He is the head of the church and He does not shy away from pointing out what is wrong with each church.

There have been various attempts to outline and systematize a format and with a few exceptions, there are 9 distinct parts to each address:

Part #1 - The identification of the specific angel and the specific church . 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14

Part #2 - The command for John to write to each specific church. 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14

Part #3 - The identification of a specific feature of Jesus Christ, who is speaking to each church. 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14

Part #4 - The assessment of things positive in each church. 2:2-3, 9, 13, 19; 3:4, 8, 10

Part #5 - The assessment of things negative in each church. 2:4, 14, 20; 3:1, 15-17

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Part #6 - The command for obedience. **2:5, 16, 22; 3:2, 18-19**

Part #7 - The promise of pending judgment for disobedience. **2:5, 16, 22-23; 3:3, 16**

Part #8 - The message to the believer. “one with ears to hear”

Part #9 - The message to the unbeliever. “one who overcomes”

As we said, there are some exceptions to this little outline. For example, Jesus Christ does not say one thing negative to the churches of Smyrna or Philadelphia. He does not say one thing positive to the church of Laodicea.

In the first three churches, Christ addresses the unbeliever first (“he who overcomes”) and the believer second (“he who has an ear”). However, in the last four churches the order is inverted and the believer addressed first and the unbeliever addressed last.

One thing is very clear; Jesus Christ carefully and closely watches each church and specifically in regard to how each church applies God’s Word. He sees and knows every person. He knows what a person thinks in his mind and in his heart. He sees obedience and He sees disobedience.