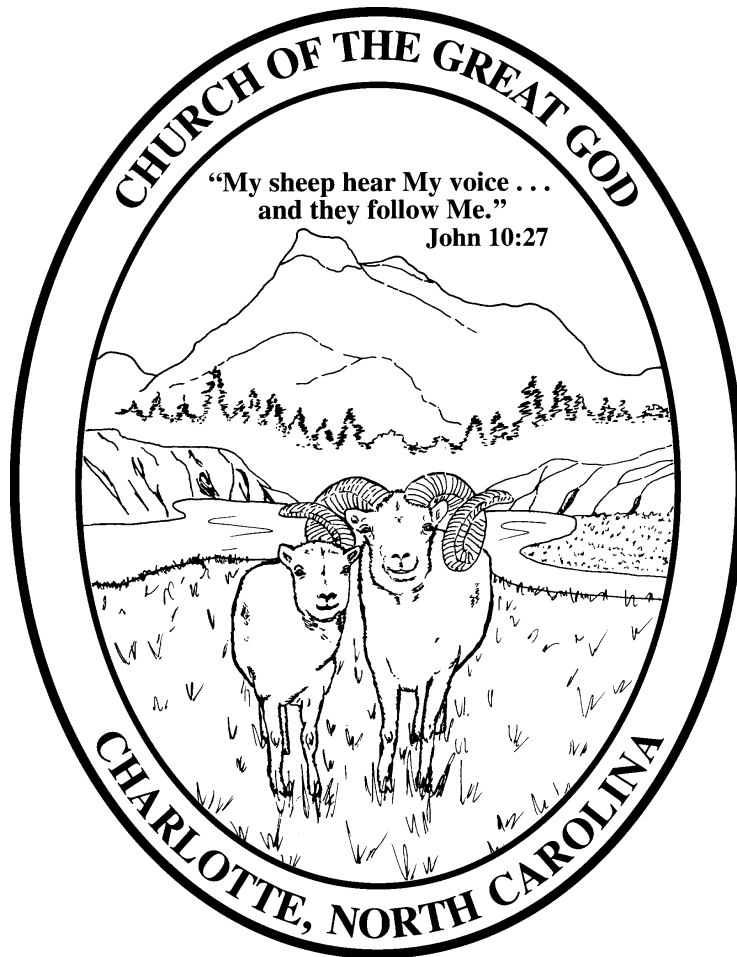


A blue-toned photograph of two hands holding a glass, with a light beam shining down on them. The hands are positioned in the center, with one hand on the left and one on the right, both gripping a cylindrical object. A bright light source from the top left creates a strong beam of light that illuminates the hands and the glass, casting soft shadows. The background is a gradient of blue and white, suggesting a bright, ethereal atmosphere.

Forerunner
Bible Study Series

The Seven Churches

The Seven Churches



Cover: PhotoDisc

The scriptures quoted in this publication are from
the New King James Version. 1979, 1980, 1982
by Thomas Nelson, Inc., Publishers

Not to be sold. Published as a free
educational service in the public interest by the
Church of the Great God.

© 2002, Church of the Great God
First Printing, August 2002
All Rights Reserved
Printed in the U.S.A.

Forerunner Bible Study Series

The Seven Churches

Contents

The Seven Churches	4	Thyatira	9
Seven Church Eras?	5	Sardis	10
Ephesus	6	Philadelphia	11
Smyrna	7	Laodicea	12
Pergamos	8	Beyond the Seven Churches	13

Introduction

In the past half century, the church of God has had a productive history of using the question-and-answer format in its Bible study materials. Not only does this method spur our curiosity about biblical teachings, but it also **MAKES US** dig into God's Word to find the answers to the great—and the mundane—questions of life. We are pleased to continue this tradition in the *Forerunner Bible Study Series*.

These concise lessons, though primarily basic material, can be helpful to both beginners and veterans of Christianity. Beginners can learn the fundamentals of doctrine, prophecy, and Christian living, while old-timers can quickly refresh their knowledge of these things. They can be a valuable resource.

The Bible studies will be more profitable if

you set aside a convenient block of undisturbed time in which to concentrate on them. Read the questions carefully, looking up—and even writing down—the verses that provide God's answers. You may wish to keep a notebook just for this purpose so your work will be accessible anytime you need to refer to it.

And do not forget the other tools of successful Bible study: prayer and meditation. Ask for God's help to open your mind to understand His teaching, and as He reveals it to you, think deeply about its meaning to you, your family, the nation, and to all mankind. This will help it become a vital part of you in your walk toward God's Kingdom.

We hope these studies of God's Word profit you and enlighten your life!

The Seven Churches

The letters to the seven churches of Revelation 2-3 have been the subject of much debate, both in secular commentaries and in God's church. Were they only churches along a Roman mail route with no present-day significance? Should we understand them prophetically as successive eras of the church from the days of the apostles to the present? Does the Bible provide any evidence that all

seven might exist together in the end time—right now—just as they did in Paul's day?

Within the letters the glorified Jesus Christ gives each of the seven churches specific instructions to overcome. In this initial study, we will examine the time element of the seven churches, and in future issues we will analyze each era individually.

"I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day and I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet, saying, 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last,' and, 'What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia: to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea.'" (Revelation 1:10-11)

1. How does the book of Revelation view the churches? Does it recognize that they have future meaning, as types of the end-time church? Revelation 1:4, 7, 10, 19; 22:7, 10, 16.

COMMENT: Christ specifically addresses the book of Revelation to the seven churches in Asia, but the introductory chapter places it in the context of the Day of the Lord and Christ's return. The visions John sees are of "things which are, and . . . will take place after this" (1:19). Since the Day of the Lord is still future, we can conclude the seven messages are valid not only for John's day, but also for ours. Revelation 22 accents this by declaring that Jesus' servants would teach this prophecy in the churches until He returns.

2. Do the seven churches exist successively from the Ephesian era during the days of the apostles to the Laodicean era at Christ's return?

COMMENT: Though history and experience of the modern era of the church indicates such a partial fulfillment, no *internal* evidence from the Bible supports this concept.

3. Does internal evidence indicate another type of fulfillment? Do all seven churches exist concurrently at the end? Revelation 2-3.

COMMENT: Notice these intriguing facts:

u Grammatically, Jesus gives the seven messages as if they exist simultaneously.

u Jesus ends each of the messages with "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches," plural.

u In Revelation 2:23, addressed specifically to Thyatira, Christ says that, by what happens to her, "all the churches shall know" He is the Judge and Head of the church. Every church must exist concurrently with her to observe her calamity—especially those that had

supposedly preceded her!

u The letters' language indicates an end-time frame of reference: To Ephesus and Pergamos, He says He will "come to [them] *quickly*." To Thyatira, He will "cast her into *great tribulation*," and her faithful should "hold fast . . . *till I come*" and "[keep] My works *to the end*." To Sardis, He will "come . . . *as a thief*" (see Matthew 24:43). To Philadelphia, He mentions "the *hour of trial*" and "I come *quickly*." To Laodicea, He says they will be "*tried in the fire*," a symbol of tribulation, and He "[stands] *at the door*," indicating immediacy.

4. Could the church's scattering into many small groups indicate all seven churches currently exist? Leviticus 26:14-16, 33; Zechariah 4:2-4, 11-14; Revelation 1:12, 20.

COMMENT: The sins, lacks and needs of each give the seven churches distinct personalities and attitudes. We find all the problems Jesus describes in the various branches of the church today. Remember, Christ addresses them individually, but advises "the churches" to heed His advice to all. The parallel prophecies of Zechariah 4 and Revelation 1 show the seven churches, distinct but existing together, at the time of the Two Witnesses.

5. Are the messages relevant to us individually? Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 26-29; 3:5-6, 12-13, 21-22; II Timothy 3:16.

COMMENT: A careful self-examination will reveal that each of us has, to some degree, every problem described in every message. All seven messages apply—today—to us! As we overcome, grow and mature, as we become more like Christ, we should see less and less of each negative point in ourselves. Christ's advice to all seven is the same: Overcome! If we heed His advice, we will avoid the threatened judgments and receive the rewards He offers!

Seven Church Eras?

The first study on the seven churches of Revelation 2-3 concentrated on internal evidence that all seven must exist at the end of the age. Though the principles contained in the book of Revelation have applied to all ages, it is written primarily to those living at the end time, and thus its message is primarily for the last days.

However, Herbert W. Armstrong established in the church the doctrine of seven successive eras, making it a cornerstone of prophetic interpretation. Did the baton of Christianity pass from era to era down through history? Have we witnessed the fall of Philadelphia and the rise of Laodicea? Is this idea of church eras valid?

1. Do the fact that all seven churches existed in John's day and the internal evidence that all seven exist at the end time contradict the idea of historical succession?

COMMENT: Herbert Armstrong taught that the newly formed, apostolic church represented the Ephesian era and that Smyrna, Pergamos and Thyatira followed respectively from about AD 100 until modern times. He believed he became involved with the fifth era, Sardis, in the early 20th century, from which he broke off and presided over the Philadelphia era, now succeeded by Laodicea. Because this approach is difficult to prove by specific scriptures, we must examine other information.

2. Can we make a valid case for a nose-to-tail succession of seven eras from the original apostle's time to the present? Matthew 16:18.

COMMENT: Upon establishing His church, Christ affirms that it would not die out, but continue until His return. This means a body of true believers has continued from Pentecost AD 31 until today. Revelation 2-3 is written in such a way that any Christian in any century could examine it and conclude he had some characteristics of each era, just as we can today.

As described in Revelation 2:1-7, the record of the Ephesian church closely resembles what happened to the apostolic church. Research done in the early days of the Worldwide Church of God also showed a close parallel between Smyrna, Pergamos and Thyatira and the sketchy history of true believers until the modern age. This information indicates a possible succession of eras.

3. How does Sardis fit the picture? Revelation 3:1-6.

COMMENT: The body of Sabbath-keepers in Oregon with whom Herbert Armstrong became involved could trace their existence back to the earliest settlements in the United States. They had much of the truth, yet to him they seemed spiritually dead. They were not growing in doctrine, devotion to God or reaching out to the world. When he compared them to the Sardis church of Revelation 3, the description fit very well. Only a "few names" from that church came with him when he broke off to start "a work" to the world.

4. Did the fruits of Herbert Armstrong's efforts fit the Philadelphia era description? Revelation 3:7-13.

COMMENT: Jesus Christ, who holds the key of David, opened the doors of true doctrine and evangelism to

Herbert Armstrong's efforts. God called and made many disciples from many nations and peoples. It appears that Christ's return is near, and many called under Herbert Armstrong who remain faithful to God's Word and Christ's name will be protected from the end-time tribulation. His work seems to fit the description of Philadelphia.

5. How does Laodicea fit this successive eras idea? Revelation 3:14-22.

COMMENT: Following a faithful work with an open door is another described as lukewarm yet proud of their perceived spirituality. Christ tells them they have it figured wrong—they are really wretched, blind and naked, unaware of the shame of their spiritual poverty. Now that the church Herbert Armstrong raised has broken up, many claim spiritual fitness as "remnant Philadelphians" while they decry others as "Laodicean." Could many today have a skewed perception of themselves—blind to their real condition while they point the finger at others? Laodiceanism seems to be the prevailing attitude of today's church!

The record of history and modern experience suggests that one fulfillment of Revelation 2-3 is a succession of church eras through the centuries. Remember, God inspired the Bible to apply to every generation until the return of Christ. No matter where in history the reader lived, God's Word applies in most passages, though the *final* fulfillment of many scriptures concerns the latter days and Christ's return.

The seven churches of Revelation may include at least three fulfillments:

1. All seven existed as church congregations in physical cities in the first century.

2. The seven successively span the church's 2,000-year history, culminating with the last three eras extant in the last hundred years.

3. All seven churches—as groups or attitudes—exist concurrently just before Christ returns.

The next studies will examine each of the seven letters more closely to see how they fit into the picture of the church we see today.

Ephesus

Having studied the letters to the seven churches of Revelation 2-3 in general, we will now begin examining each of them separately. Since God's church has recently split into hundreds of different pieces, it would be futile to seek to identify each as one of the seven. Even attempting to identify the larger ones would be fruitless and create unwise comparisons among ourselves (II Corinthians 10:12). Certainly, to try to identify ourselves as "Philadelphian" rather than any other of the seven could be spiritually self-

deceiving. After all, Christ addresses His seven individual instructions to the churches.

The best approach seems to be that we understand each letter from the standpoint that it might have personal instruction for us. Since we are undergoing similar spiritual circumstances, the attitudes and positions taken by each church could reflect our own. We would be wise to take the advice Christ offers. With this in mind, on to Ephesus!

1. Can taking the analysis of each church personally have a positive, encouraging effect? Revelation 2:2-3; Jude 4; Psalm 119:126; Romans 3:31.

COMMENT: Any saint who has sorted right from wrong doctrine, discerned good from evil leadership, and patiently continued to labor in Christ's name can identify with Ephesus! Identifying today's false apostles was not initially easy either, but many have seen how church leaders have turned true grace into lawlessness and voided God's law from their lives. If we have continued in patience and good works, we can be encouraged by Christ's initial words to Ephesus, for they apply to us in principle, if not directly.

2. The first negative comment to Ephesus can apply to many Christians today, no matter what corporate organization or "era" they identify with. Could it apply to us? Revelation 2:4; Jude 3; I John 3:18, 22; 4:18-5:3.

COMMENT: Can we remember our "first love" and "first works"? Have we slipped from our initial overwhelming zeal, excitement, desire, spirit of service and love for God and the brethren? Have we become somewhat jaded, cynical, critical, even bitter (Jude 8; Hebrews 12:14-16)? Have we turned selfish and accusing (Revelation 12:10)? Or have we maintained and increased our love and service to our Father, soon-coming Husband and brethren? Have our relationships become better or worse?

3. Locking ourselves into a "Philadelphian only" posture could make us overlook a very critical need. What happens to us if we fail to see this lack in ourselves? Revelation 2:5; Hebrews 2:1-3; 4:1-2; 10:19-27.

COMMENT: Our eternal life is at stake if we have let these things slip! Paul even reduces it to whether we care enough about our brethren and Father in heaven to meet with them on the appointed Sabbaths. Once, we were willing to drive long distances to attend Sabbath services or annual Feasts, to sacrifice whatever was required to worship before God and fellowship with our brethren. Has anything slipped in this or other areas?

4. Do we hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans as God does? Who are the Nicolaitans? Revelation 2:6; Ephesians 1-6.

COMMENT: To be included in these seven letters, "the deeds

of the Nicolaitans" are obviously very important to be understood. Bible commentaries are very confused on the Nicolaitans. Some think the name is a Greek translation of Balaam, "destroyer of the people." Others believe they were a Gnostic sect under the umbrella of Christianity. Still others suggest that the deacon Nicolas (Acts 6:5) may have begun his own group.

Perhaps a careful study of Ephesians will shed light on their problems, how the Nicolaitans may have affected them and what we need to look for today. Some of the subjects Paul addresses are the purpose of man and the plan of God, which they may have been abandoning (1:1-23); lawlessness, exhibited in fleshly sins and doctrinally defined as false grace (2:1-10); inclusion of all peoples in salvation and basic governmental principles (2:11-3:21); church unity and the purpose of the ministry (4:1-16); putting aside sin and walking in holiness with love toward one another (4:17-5:20); family and other relationships as symbols of Christ and the church (5:20-6:9); Satan as the enemy (6:10-13); and a final plea for holiness, zeal, energy and faith through the whole armor of God—characteristics Christ rebukes them for losing in Revelation 2:4-5. A closer study of Ephesians reveals other specific sins and problems.

Paul's other writings indicate an apostasy already in progress when he wrote Ephesians. By the time John received the Revelation, that apostasy was almost complete, and Christ commends the Ephesians for hating the deeds of the Nicolaitans. It would seem, then, they were throwing off the effects of apostasy but needed to return to their first love and first works—restore their zeal and service. Does this not have relevance today?

Based on Paul's admonitions, the Nicolaitans, whoever they were, surely must have been turning the Ephesians from godly principles and the understanding of God's purpose to create a divine Family. They must have been leading them toward false grace and lawlessness, worldliness, sensual lust and selfishness. God hates these things and advises us to repent if we are headed that way, lest we be destroyed. He promises to give those who overcome this problem eternal life in His Kingdom.

Smyrna

Internal evidence in Revelation shows that a fulfillment of these messages to the churches—perhaps the major one—is an end-time message to all seven at once. Though there may be an application continuously from the era of the apostles until now, that is history. The setting of the book of Revelation is the end-time Day of the Lord (Revelation 1:10) and concerns us today. Therefore, no matter the historical application, all seven messages are pertinent to the end-time church.

Since they pertain to our time, it behooves us to determine if their instruction applies to us individually. Each church, though a part of the body of Christ, is different in various ways, just as individual church members differ. The Ephesian condition, we found, contains a mixture of praiseworthy and blameworthy actions and attitudes. This will be true of all the churches—except for the one we will now analyze, Smyrna.

1. Who addresses the church in Smyrna? Revelation 2:8.

COMMENT: Lest there be any question, the message to Christians who fit the category and attitudes of Smyrna in the end time comes directly from Jesus Christ Himself. At the beginning of each letter, He makes it clear that this is not anyone else’s opinion, but is word-for-word instruction from the Head of the church. We must examine ourselves and see if the message includes any of our attitudes, problems or situations. If so, the message is for us.

2. Is it good to be classified by Christ as Smyrnan? Revelation 2:9-11.

COMMENT: Though most people in the church of God today like to think of themselves as “Philadelphian,” Smyrna is the only one of the seven to receive no criticism whatsoever from Christ! Philadelphia does not receive harsh criticism, but Christ says it has “a little [spiritual] strength,” while He mentions nothing at all negative about Smyrna.

3. Is Smyrna, then, a perfect church with perfect people? Did Christ overlook some of its problems? Revelation 2:9-11; Romans 3:23; John 15:2.

COMMENT: Our Savior is not bashful about pointing out sin—witness some fairly harsh words to the other six! Apparently, a certain number of people today fit the Smyrnan category: They have no major flaws worth mentioning. They are not self-righteous, for that would be pointed out as a major flaw, as said of Laodicea. The Laodicean church is wealthy in physical goods and assumes spiritual wealth, but this is a false self-assessment. Smyrna is apparently of little material wealth, but rich spiritually, as Christ attests (Revelation 2:9).

However, Christ commands those of Smyrna to overcome just like the others if they will be in the Kingdom of God. No one is without sin, so Smyrna must grow in faith, love and obedience like the rest. Some in Smyrna will be tried in tribulation and persecution—jailed and tried to the point of death. Some of them may even die as martyrs! As Christ says, He will prune even a good branch that it might bear more fruit.

4. Does Smyrna have enemies? Revelation 2:9-10; II Timothy 3:12; Daniel 11:32-35.

COMMENT: Both Smyrna and Philadelphia are beset by

those who claim to be Christian but are not. Because Smyrnans are more truly righteous than some others in the end-time church, Satan hates them and brings heavy religious persecution on them. They may be some of those in Daniel 11 who show strength in the face of such persecution and “carry out great exploits.”

5. Smyrnans suffer persecution for ten days. How long is that? Revelation 2:10; Daniel 1:12, 14; Numbers 14:34; John 16:33.

COMMENT: Daniel and his companions ate vegetables for ten literal days, so maybe this persecution will last ten days as well. On the other hand, God sometimes uses a day to represent a year, so maybe Smyrna will face ten years of persecution. Daniel 11:32-35 indicates “many days,” “some days” (*The Emphasized Bible*) or “for some time” (*The New American Bible*). The commentaries say it could be metaphorical, meaning “a short while.” In such a case, we should hope for the best and prepare for the worst! Jesus says those who are His will suffer persecution, but we should not fear, for He has overcome the world. He will see us through it.

6. Though Smyrna is not criticized, her faithfulness is tried. Is it “worth it” to be righteous, given the Smyrnans will be severely tried? Revelation 2:10-11; 3:18-19; Matthew 10:28; Deuteronomy 30:19.

COMMENT: God will heavily chasten Laodicea and try them “in the fire” of the Great Tribulation. Is it not preferable to be righteous, with God allowing persecution by men within His limits, rather than face God’s wrath for sin? Job faced heavy trials, but God, on his side throughout, made them turn out beautifully. Jesus says, “Do not fear those who kill the body. . . . But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell”!

Being truly righteous will bring its problems from outsiders and Satan, but the reward is worth the effort! Smyrna is promised a crown of life and protection from the second death for remaining faithful. If we could choose which of the seven churches we would prefer Christ to consider us part, Smyrna just might be the top choice. We have that choice—by making righteous choices daily. God has set before us the choice of life and death, blessing and cursing, and He urges us to choose life—eternal life!

Pergamos

In examining the seven churches of Revelation 2-3, we have found that Christ usually commends them for their good works, though He also includes some negative analysis and correction. Pergamos is no exception: He compliments them for holding fast to His name and not denying His faith, while criticizing them for tolerating the “doctrine of Balaam” among them. Christ finds good and bad mixed fairly consistently throughout the whole church and warns all to overcome.

Whatever branch of God’s church we belong to, we need to take a long, hard look at ourselves, lest we deceive ourselves into thinking we are better, more special and more divinely favored above our sisters than we really are. Some seem to think there is one Philadelphia group and six Laodicean ones, but Christ describes seven distinct attitudes and approaches. In this study we will concentrate on the third of these, Pergamos.

1. Christ says Pergamos is “where Satan’s throne is” and “where Satan dwells.” What could He mean? Revelation 2:12-13; 12:9-10; Job 41:34.

COMMENT: Pergamos was no more wicked than other cities of the day—consider Corinth and Ephesus, for example. Some commentators say the governor of Pergamos, like Satan, heavily persecuted the church, and likely oversaw the martyrdom of Antipas. Satan, king of all the children of pride, deceives the whole world and is the accuser or persecutor of the brethren. The lesson for us may be that where criticism, put-down and persecution of others are common, Satan spends a great deal of time, taking bizarre, twisted pleasure in accusation and negativity. Satan dwells where pride and self-exaltation are present, attitudes we need to avoid diligently.

2. Christ notes that Pergamos undergoes very difficult circumstances—persecution, idolatrous and immoral people and Satanic influence. Does He take this into account? Revelation 2:14-16; Hebrews 4:12-13; Psalm 103:13-17; Luke 12:48.

COMMENT: God knows all and sees all. He can read the intents of the heart and understands our frame. These people were faithful and held fast His name under trying circumstances and great temptations, but they also tolerated evil. He instructs them to repent or face “the sword of My mouth.” To whom much is given much is required.

3. Christ criticizes Pergamos for tolerating those who teach the doctrine of Balaam, the eating of things offered to idols and fornication. Does this apply to the church today? Revelation 2:14; Exodus 20:3-5; Romans 8:35-39; I Corinthians 15:31-34.

COMMENT: No one in today’s greater church of God overtly teaches we should worship idols of wood or stone and eat meat offered to them, as occurred among the early churches Paul administered. Nor does anyone openly teach fornication as a personal or religious practice, as

happened in the Temple of Diana at Ephesus. However, anything that comes between us and devotion to God, including self-worship, is an idol, and any concourse with this world that diverts our attention from Him is spiritual fornication. Paul slew the idol of self daily. We too often tolerate spiritual idolatry and fornication in ourselves and others, giving Christ plenty of fodder for His criticism.

4. Some in Pergamos also held the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, as in Ephesus. What about it does Christ hate so much? Revelation 2:6, 15; Ephesians 1-6 (especially 2:1-3; 4:17-22, 30-31).

COMMENT: Though no one seems to know just who these people were, an examination of Ephesians, written by Paul to “the church at Ephesus” may give some important clues. A frequent companion of idolatry is illicit, sensual pleasures. If we place anything ahead of God, it is generally for personal pleasure and self-fulfillment, centering on the works of the flesh, vanity, pride, power and social standing. These Paul decries in Ephesians (for more detail, see the study on “Ephesus” on page 6).

5. Christ will allow those of Pergamos who repent to eat of the hidden manna, and He will give them a white stone engraved with a new name, known only to themselves. Does this set them apart as special? Revelation 2:17.

COMMENT: The manna that fed Israel was spread on the ground for all to see and gather (Exodus 16:4, 35). Hidden manna, symbolizing God’s Word, is concealed from the rest of the world; it is special insight from God that feeds the soul and sustains spiritual life. In the ancient world, a white stone was given to one under judgment as an absolution from guilt, a black stone to the condemned. A white stone signifies innocence through forgiveness and grace to enter the Kingdom of God. The new name reflects the holy character built by the repentant overcomer. These gifts, though certainly special and wonderful, are available to every true child of God.

“ . . . To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it.” (Revelation 2:17)

Thyatira

The messages to the seven churches are intended for those whom God has called in the end time wherever they are fellowshiping today, whether in an organized church or scattered as individuals. The attitudes of one or several of these messages, then, could reflect our character traits and should be approached as such, Thyatira included. This middle message among the seven contains considerable internal evidence that all the messages are written to the end-time church, culminating in the return of Jesus Christ.

The letter to Thyatira is the longest of the seven, containing more detail of the Thyatirans good and bad characteristics. Though their works increase and they display love, service, faith and patience, they also allow “Jezebel” and her teachings among them. This mixture of good and evil displeases our Savior, who seeks their wholehearted devotion. Yet to those who repent, He promises eternal life and positions of rulership in His Kingdom. This study will concentrate on the attitude Christ discerns in the church at Thyatira.

“. . . Hold fast what you have till I come. And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations . . .” (Revelation 2:25-26)

1. If allowed to choose which church we would be part of, most might overlook Thyatira. Is this a fair analysis? Revelation 2:18-19.

COMMENT: Christ compliments these people for their works, love, service, faith and patience. He mentions “works” (*ergon*, “deeds, doings, labor”) twice, probably for emphasis. These five traits are among the most highly prized of New Testament admonitions to Christians. Not only do these people have them, but they have continued to grow in them—even during the confusion, scattering and apostasy the church is suffering! What a compliment, considering the woeful spiritual downfall and lackadaisical approach of so many!

2. Is the message to Thyatira for today or for the church during the Middle Ages? Revelation 2:23; 1:4, 7, 10.

COMMENT: Revelation is written for the time just preceding and including the return of Christ, the Day of the Lord. Unless Thyatira repents, *all* the churches will see the fruit of her lack of repentance, thus they all must exist at the end to witness Christ’s judgment. The message to Thyatira, then, may apply to the historical church, but only in type.

3. What is Christ’s greatest criticism of Thyatira? Revelation 2:20-21; 18:4; Jeremiah 3:10; 24:7.

COMMENT: The world’s corrupt, godless society influences God’s people beyond our realization, and spiritual fornication and idol worship in particular have long been the bane of both physical and spiritual Israel. For instance, when Judah’s exile ended, only a remnant of the people (42,360) returned to Jerusalem (Ezra 2:64); the vast majority chose to remain in pagan Babylon. How many of us today put the things of this world ahead of God? The Bible suggests only a small faithful remnant will pay the price to return to God

with their whole hearts and “come out of her” in the end time (Isaiah 1:9).

4. Is God fair in allowing opportunity for improvement? What happens to those who continue to put the things of this life before God? Revelation 2:21-23; II Peter 3:9.

COMMENT: God mercifully provides time and opportunity for repentance from idolatry and spiritual fornication with this world. If He does not receive a proper response, He promises great tribulation and martyrdom—not necessarily as punishment, but as an inducement to repent.

5. Is all of Thyatira affected by the idolatry and fornication of “Jezebel”? Revelation 2:24; Haggai 2:12-14.

COMMENT: Some in Thyatira apparently do not allow themselves to imbibe of Satan’s society to the extent that others have, denying the doctrines of Jezebel. That Christ considers these people part of Thyatira implies that they have compromised somewhat, though not to “the depths of Satan” as have others among them.

6. Are these Thyatirans who avoid “that woman Jezebel” in good spiritual condition and standing with God? Revelation 2:24-26; Jude 3; I John 2:24; I Timothy 4:16; 6:20; Ephesians 4:13.

COMMENT: Having been commended for their deeds, love, service, faith and patience, those who reject Satan will be fine if they hold fast the doctrines and character they have shown. Christ lays on them no further burden beyond holding fast. He does, however, give the same admonishment to them that He gives to all the churches: Overcome and keep Christ’s works to the end. No matter what our spiritual state is, we all must continue to grow in the stature and fullness of Christ throughout our walk to God’s Kingdom.

Sardis

In dealing with the first four churches of Revelation 2, we have examined churches that the church of God has considered to have existed before the “end-time era.” We have generally taught that the last three churches exist in this age. Many have pigeonholed them as Sardis, the church Herbert

Armstrong began with in the church of God; Philadelphia, Herbert Armstrong’s work and the one most consider to be their group; and Laodicea, everyone else today. Let us first examine Sardis, an era few would knowingly choose for themselves, to see if Sardis fits this perceived pigeonhole.

“He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.” (Revelation 3:5)

1. Sardis has a “name” that they are living. Is this something in the name itself or in the reputation? Revelation 3:1.

COMMENT: If we consider only the Church of God, Seventh Day that Herbert Armstrong affiliated with, nothing in its name or reputation indicates life. Herbert Armstrong saw it had most of the basic doctrines correct, but judged the organization as not really doing a work. Hence, he called it dead, not alive. Perhaps it did have a Sardis approach, but since neither its official name nor reputation indicates life, we must look elsewhere for a larger fulfillment of Christ’s words.

Somewhere within the church of God are people who—either by name or reputation—appear to be living, yet whom God judges essentially spiritually dead, save a few names. How easy it is to deceive ourselves about our true standing with God!

2. Does God indicate *why* He judges Sardis mostly dead? Revelation 3:2-3.

COMMENT: Christ warns these people to take heed because what they have received is about to die in them. Spiritually, they are “dead men walking.”

3. Is their problem doctrinal or in their relationship with God? Revelation 3:2; James 2:17-20; I Peter 2:5; Matthew 24:2.

COMMENT: God first addresses their “works.” While they may still have the truth, their dead works indicate a lack of living faith. This indicates a people who perceive themselves to be alive, but who apparently are basically standing still, spiritually catatonic and comatose. They may exist as stones in the Temple, but not as “living stones.” Perhaps this is why Christ says “not one stone will be left upon another”!

4. Though Christ addresses Sardis’ works as the first problem, is there another? Revelation 3:3; Jude 3; I John 2:24.

COMMENT: Not only in deeds or works is Sardis deficient, but the people are in danger of losing what they have “received and heard.” Many people today are straying

from what God gave us through Herbert Armstrong. This includes not just many of those who remained in the Worldwide Church of God, but also some that left who are allowing sound doctrine to be eroded and lost.

5. What danger does their spiritual coma present? Revelation 3:3; Matthew 24:42–25:13.

COMMENT: A characteristic of the dead, physically or spiritually, is that they are unaware. Perhaps those of Sardis are not aware of what is really happening in the church and world. Maybe they think Christ “is delaying His coming” and have relaxed spiritually. Whatever the reason, they are standing still and not growing, slowly losing what life they had. In this spiritual state, end-time events could catch them by surprise like a thief in the night.

6. Is it possible to be among Sardis people and still be alive? Revelation 3:4.

COMMENT: A few names in Sardis are still alive spiritually. One might judge himself of another group entirely if he judges himself alive, but God says some are living among the dead. Are any of us really willing to call ourselves dead? We all judge ourselves as part of *any* group but Sardis! Yet God says Sardis exists, maybe not “alive and well” but it exists nonetheless. We all need to examine ourselves. Would God judge our works as lively, our faith as living? Are we slowly losing what we originally received and heard? Today, many tend to criticize and malign Herbert Armstrong, but is he not from whom we “received and heard”?

7. Is there hope for Sardis? Revelation 3:4-5; 19:8; Acts 24:15; I Peter 1:3.

COMMENT: There is hope even for the dead! They can be resurrected, physically or spiritually. Christ offers Sardis the same hope He gives the other six churches: Overcome and inherit the Kingdom of God. In this case, He offers them white garments, since most in Sardis have soiled their “fine linen.” If they repent and overcome, Christ will confess their names to the Father, who will gladly accept them into His Family!

Philadelphia

The letter to the church at Philadelphia is the one to which most current church members relate. Upon analyzing Revelation 2 and 3, most of us consider it to be the best of the churches through the ages. This rosy evaluation is suspect from the standpoint that we also think it is the church era to which we believe we belong. Is our evaluation of Philadelphia justified, or have we allowed our bias to color our understanding?

Is Philadelphia a faithful church? Does she have any faults? Should every Christian strive to be “Philadelphian”? Could spiritual pride have entered this church, causing God to scatter her to see who is truly faithful? We need to examine the letter to Philadelphia honestly, considering recent church history before and since the death of Herbert W. Armstrong, to see if our bias is warranted.

1. Did Philadelphia have the key of David? Is it possible other organizations have this key following the scattering of Worldwide Church of God (WCG)? Revelation 3:7; Isaiah 22:22; 9:6; Matthew 28:18.

COMMENT: A misunderstanding of this symbol may have fostered abuses of church or ministerial authority. For decades, the church interpreted Revelation 3:7 to mean the church had “God’s government,” and the ministry too often wielded this club with a heavy hand (Ezekiel 34:1-10; Jeremiah 23:1-3). Revelation 3:7, however, is clear that the key of David belongs, not to the church, but to the One who is holy and true, Jesus Christ. He alone has the authority to govern the church and to open and shut doors before it.

Jeremiah 23:20 predicts that we will fully understand this problem “in the latter days.” Having experienced man’s misuse of Christ’s authority and the church’s scattering, we should now see that in its administration the church must be very careful to stay within the bounds of true Christianity and not usurp God’s prerogatives. Have we learned this lesson?

2. Recent history appears to show that Philadelphia had an open door. Is it still open? Revelation 3:7-8.

COMMENT: Christ says He has the power both to open *and to shut*. WCG grew incredibly fast for several decades, we thought, because of this “open door.” However, WCG has declined to the point that she has repudiated the doctrines of the true church. In the past decade the daughter churches that split from her have had scant success in reviving what she was and did. With apostasy and scattering still in progress, it appears that Christ has slammed the door in the Philadelphia church’s face.

Late in his life, Herbert Armstrong postulated—and it has since become apparent—that all seven churches exist as end-time attitudes, not just as a succession of eras over the past 2000 years. Individuals still have Philadelphian characteristics, but the Philadelphia “era” seems to have ended. When Christ shuts a door, *no man* can open it!

3. Philadelphia has some fine characteristics: She keeps God’s Word and upholds His name. But is she strong? Revelation 3:8; Matthew 24:2, 9-12.

COMMENT: Due to the open door, WCG grew rapidly

and God called many through her. However, Christ says she has only “a little strength.” We see this proved by the apostasy, offense, betrayal, deception and iniquity that has thrived in the scattering of the church. Jesus’ end-time prophecy of not one stone being left upon another in the spiritual Temple, the church, is occurring apace. Thus, it is not the Philadelphians’ spiritual strength but Christ’s opening of doors that empowers the church’s accomplishments.

4. Both Smyrna and Philadelphia are beset by those who claim to be Jews but are not. Who are they? Revelation 3:9; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43.

COMMENT: Before WCG’s apostasy, this prophecy was mystifying, but it is now obvious that many members and ministers entered the church as wolves in sheep’s clothing. They were not Philadelphian at all, nor apparently even converted. Ultimately, these harmful tares will worship before the feet of the faithful.

5. Does patience pay off? Revelation 3:10; 12:14-16; Matthew 24:13-22; Luke 21:34-36.

COMMENT: God will protect those who patiently cling to His Word from the imminent Great Tribulation. Though her small spiritual strength caused her destruction, a remnant from Philadelphia will faithfully endure to the end.

6. Does Philadelphia have what God requires for salvation? Revelation 3:11.

COMMENT: True Philadelphians have enough doctrinal truth, devotion, obedience and the grace of God to attain salvation if they hold fast. As an organization and era, Philadelphia has virtually disappeared, but individual Philadelphians can ensure their salvation by guarding the truth God reveals (I Timothy 4:16; II Timothy 1:13-14; 3:14; Jude 3). Sadly, a majority of them have already apostatized.

7. Is “just being there” enough? Revelation 3:12; I John 5:4.

COMMENT: Because Christ criticizes Philadelphia very little, opens doors before her and offers protection from the Tribulation, it is easy to think we “have it made” if we were or are part of Philadelphia. Yet Christ admonishes Philadelphia just as He does the other churches: Overcome! A Christian must never rest on his oars, no matter what his situation or era. We all must overcome the world, our nature and Satan to be granted salvation, and if we do, entrance to God’s Kingdom is an absolute promise!

Laodicea

Very few among us wish to be associated with “the church of the Laodiceans.” Among the seven churches, Laodicea is the last before the return of Christ, and it is unquestionably dominant today. Philadelphia, both chronologically and organizationally, has now virtually disappeared from the scene, leaving only patiently enduring individuals scattered through many church groups. The far-reaching works conducted under the direction of Herbert W. Armstrong are fading memories.

What is so bad about Laodiceanism? Why is Christ, the Head of the church, so angry with this church? Laodiceans have an infectious spiritual malaise that, if left to fester, will seriously jeopardize their eternal life! Moreover, this infection blinds them to their true spiritual condition! Those who consider themselves Philadelphians must now contend for their spiritual welfare or succumb to Laodiceanism. This study will examine this seventh church and its implications for all Christians.

1. Christ calls Laodicea “lukewarm.” Where does this condition originate and to whom does it apply? Revelation 3:15-16.

COMMENT: Herbert Armstrong said he first noticed Laodiceanism in the church in 1969. Fervent, zealous Christians began to cool off. A feeling of “we will automatically qualify for the Place of Safety and the Kingdom of God simply by being here” began to affect God’s people. This lukewarm approach was in and among “Philadelphians.” Either Philadelphians were morphing into Laodiceans, or new members were Laodicean from the beginning.

2. Can a person change church “eras”? Did some “on fire” Christians turn lukewarm so that Christ had to spew them out? Revelation 3:16.

COMMENT: One can indeed change eras. Anyone in the Worldwide Church of God (WCG) over several decades has observed many ministers and lay members alike turn from zealous crusaders to complacent deadbeats. After years of diligent service, some ministers became merely tired hirelings.

3. How did this happen? Can one believe he is Philadelphian when he is actually Laodicean? Revelation 3:17; Hosea 12:8.

COMMENT: Part of the “Philadelphian psyche” is that Philadelphia “has it made”—that it is the golden age of God’s fondest affections, and simply being a part of it guarantees a spot in the Place of Safety and a high position in the Kingdom. This exaltation of the era and the accompanying personal pride create complacency and poor, biased judgment of themselves. Some still consider themselves Philadelphian and that those in any other church group are Laodicean. This is a dangerous spiritual position to take.

4. What does this approach indicate? Revelation 3:17; Matthew 25:1-13; Jeremiah 17:9; James 1:22-27.

COMMENT: Just as with Sardis, those in Laodicea are completely self-deceived. Their view of their spiritual state is diametrically opposed to that of Jesus Christ. Laodiceans think they are okay; they generally do not know they are Laodicean. In most cases, they think they are still Philadelphian and thus in good standing with God. They believe everyone has been asleep but themselves, yet Christ says, “They *all* slumbered and slept”!

One of Laodiceanism’s major characteristics is utter self-deception. Each of us must look carefully into the

Word of God for a true test of our spiritual condition, not presuming our evaluation of ourselves is the same as our Savior’s. He is the ultimate Judge.

5. How do we know Philadelphia has lapsed into Laodicea? Revelation 3:16; Lamentations 2:1-8; Romans 3:10-23; Deuteronomy 28:15-47; Leviticus 26:33; Jeremiah 3-5 and especially 3:10.

COMMENT: Christ’s grotesque use of vomit spewing from His mouth captures the violent and repulsive scattering of the church. No part of His church has escaped the scattering of God. We have all sinned and come short of His glory. None have been righteous, no, not one! Among the curses for following the Word of God improperly is scattering and withdrawal of blessings. Some still claim God is blessing them greatly, but these are mainly empty words and false hopes. The scattering continues and will do so until God is satisfied that repentance has been achieved. God’s objective is to show us that we are still far too complacent, not having turned to Him wholeheartedly, merely feignedly.

6. Can any in the church today honestly deny his participation in the rebuke and chastening of the Lord? Revelation 3:17-19.

COMMENT: The Laodicean’s problem is that he does not even grasp that he is one, nor does he seriously consider the possibility. He *really believes* he is Philadelphian. He is blind to his nakedness and instructed to salve his eyes so he might see. This should cause anyone who considers himself a Philadelphian to take a long, hard look at himself in the light of Scripture. Could we be deceiving ourselves about our true state? Jesus Christ says so. It is somewhat paradoxical, but in this day of scattering and chastening, if we think we are of Philadelphia, we are probably Laodicean. If we think we are Laodicean, we may be waking up and beginning to see our faults. If we do something about them, we will be donning garments of true righteousness.

7. Do we hear the analysis of the One who can read the thoughts and intents of the heart? Is He knocking on our door? Do we hear His voice? Revelation 3:20; Isaiah 52:1-2, 11.

COMMENT: Laodiceanism is not the end of the world. It can be overcome. Those who wake up to what Christ is saying here, who really hear Him, will overcome this spiritual blindness, nakedness and self-deception and sit with Him on His throne in His glorious Kingdom!

Beyond the Seven Churches

This series on Revelation 2-3 has shown from internal biblical evidence that the seven churches all exist in the end time. It has also agreed with our traditional understanding that the seven churches form a chronological chain stretching from the days of the apostles until today. The last of the seven, Laodicea, is the most prevalent right now.

But what happens next? As Christ spews us from His mouth for the sin of Laodiceanism, can we expect improvement in the days ahead? As the church falls down, stone by stone, do we have any hope for the future? In closing our study on this topic, we will examine what the Bible indicates will happen in the near future.

“Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast to what you have, that no one may take your crown.” (Revelation 3:11)

1. Does the Bible say how far this scattering will go? Matthew 24:1-2; Isaiah 5:1-15; 1:8-9; Ezekiel 5:1-4; Amos 5:3; Zechariah 11:1-14.

COMMENT: These scriptures show the stones of the Temple, spiritual houses, vineyards and flocks being scattered and destroyed. While it is impossible for us to fit the hundreds of organizations that comprise God’s church into a specific Revelation 2-3 church, it should be clear that the seven churches cover all the basic attitudes of the groups and individuals of the entire church. Christ instructs all of them to hear and overcome.

2. The above passages suggest God will reduce the church (and in the Tribulation, Israel) to about one-tenth of its original size. What does He do with this tithe of His church? Haggai 1-2.

COMMENT: Haggai prophesies that God will stir up a remnant of His people to come together with Zerubbabel and Joshua to rebuild the Temple just before He shakes the earth for the final time. Some among them are old enough to compare the former Temple (the church during its Philadelphian heyday) to the latter Temple (Haggai 2:3), composed of the remnant of the churches.

3. Who are Zerubbabel and Joshua? Zechariah 3-4; Revelation 11; comparing Zechariah 4:14 to Revelation 11:4.

COMMENT: Revelation 11:4 interprets Zechariah 4:14, showing that Zerubbabel and Joshua are types of the Two Witnesses of Revelation 11. Notice in Zechariah 4:1-4, 11-12 that they feed all seven of the end-time churches (compare this with the seven lampstands or candlesticks in Revelation 1:12-20, which symbolize these same churches). This introduction of the Two Witnesses shows their main responsibilities to be building the latter Temple and providing “oil” for the churches (compare Matthew 25:1-13). Revelation 11:1-2 indicates they do not go to the world at all initially, but they first measure the church of God, its ministry and people. Later, during the Tribulation, they witness to the world.

4. How and where does this remnant come together? Isaiah 4:1-6; 41:19.

COMMENT: No single verse or passage dogmatically gives

us the answer, but biblical imagery provides some hints. All seven women (churches) take hold of one man. The leader of the Two Witnesses, typed by Zerubbabel, seems to be the main one they clutch in desperation. This remnant church is motivated to join in the work of the Witnesses, whom God stirs to rebuild the spiritual Temple. Isaiah 41:19 shows seven major trees (churches) being planted in the wilderness, as compared to three major trees and shepherds being cut down in Zechariah 11:8. Within the context of Isaiah 40-45, Isaiah gives the same warnings and encouragements that Haggai does in Haggai 2:4-5: Be of good courage, fear not, work, etc.

5. Do these scriptures refer to the time before or during the Millennium? Same verses.

COMMENT: A primary rule of Bible study is not to lift a verse out of its context. Isaiah 4 continues the thought of chapter 3, God’s judgment on His people. Verses 2-5 show Zion being made holy and protected, much like Israel in the wilderness. Isaiah 41 illustrates the same scenario, events that occur before the Millennium. God will prepare a table in the wilderness for His church, a place prepared for her with Millennial conditions. What will occur in the Millennium to the nations of Israel begins with the church in the wilderness, which gets a foretaste of what will soon become a worldwide phenomenon.

6. If the latter Temple of Haggai is only a remnant of the church, what happens to the rest? Zechariah 13:9; Luke 21:36; Revelation 2:22; 3:10, 18; 12:17.

COMMENT: When the remnant latter Temple under the leadership of Jesus Christ and the Two Witnesses goes to a Place of Safety, the rest of the church will be left behind, having been accounted unworthy to escape (Luke 21:36; Revelation 3:10). They must face the refining fire of tribulation. Perhaps they will face extreme persecution and martyrdom, but God’s purpose is to purify them and restore their zeal and devotion to Him so that they will turn to Him with their whole hearts. Certainly, they are not lost, and if they overcome, they will enter God’s Kingdom and experience the joy and glory of being members of God’s Family!

The Seven Churches

The seven churches of Revelation 2-3 have intrigued Bible students down through the centuries. A debate has resulted over their meaning. Are they the seven historic churches of Asia Minor? Are they seven distinct attitudes that can be found in the church at all times? Are they seven churches that will be extant in the end time?

The answer is "all of the above"! Elements of all these past, present, and future manifestations must be considered for a full understanding of their meaning to us.

Perhaps the most significant way we can understand them, however, is their meaning to us personally. Do we have attitudes and traits as Jesus mentions in these letters? Are we more like an Ephesian or a Smyrnan in attitude? Do we live like a Thyatiran or a Philadelphian? Could we be more Laodicean than we think?

This Bible Study will review the seven letters collectively and then individually. An in-depth study of these churches and their characteristics should help us prepare for God's soon-coming Kingdom!

CHURCH OF THE GREAT GOD
POST OFFICE BOX 471846
CHARLOTTE, NC 28247-1846
(800) 878-8220 / (803) 802-7075
FAX: (803) 802-7811
<http://www.cgg.org> or <http://www.sabbath.org>
or <http://www.worldwatchdaily.org>