

THE SEVEN CHURCHES OF REVELATION 2 & 3

By Dr. Paul Fedena

NOTE: A church judged by its buildings or the crowds which attend may result in a poor evaluation. The large crowds (think charismatic churches, or a Billy Graham crusade, or a Vatican Papal audience), and beautiful buildings (think the Mormon Tabernacle, the Vatican, a Benny Hinn Crusade in a large stadium) may house deadness, while a small unimposing building and a small crowd may be a church which is very much alive. What we see as “rich” may be poor to the Lord and what we may see as “poor” may indeed be rich in God’s sight.

The next two chapters portray Christ as giving an “X-ray” of seven churches. We know that these are seven literal churches in Asia Minor, but it seems as though there is much more here than an evaluation of seven local assemblies of long ago. While it is no doubt true that these seven churches existed and were the original recipients of this letter, there seems to be a much broader message intended for a much larger audience. In fact, it seems more than coincidental that the characteristics of these seven churches so neatly portray seven periods of church history. There is a message here for the original congregations, and a message as well for the church in every part of the church age.

1. The Church at Ephesus: Fundamental 2:1-7

1. This church represents the post-apostolic church and reveals the deterioration which had already begun.

“thou art fallen...” “thou has left thy first love...”

2. This church is commended for several things, including intolerance (!) for “the deeds of the Nicolaitanes”.

NOTE: Nicolaitans, from nikao, “to conquer” and laos, “the people,” or “laity” or “to rule over the people” – an unbiblical concept of dividing the “clergy” from the “laity.” God’s pastors or shepherds are never to “lord it over the flock.” They are merely undershepherds under the Great Shepherd.

3. This church is fundamental in doctrine and in most practices, but this specter of a creeping formalism began when they left their first love, and did not see their need for repentance.

ILLUS.: Someone has said that it is possible for a church to be *“as straight – and empty – as a gun barrel.”* It is possible to believe all the right things but have no power because of a departure of that

“first love” which prevailed in the beginning, and which prompted *“the first works.”*

2. The Church at Smyrna: Fearful 2:8-11

1. This church represents the persecuted church which corresponds to the Great Persecution in the days immediately after the post-apostolic period up to the 3 century A.D.

2. The words *“suffer,” “tribulation,”* and the concept of martyrdom (*“faithful unto death”*) is presented to describe this church.

3. There is also a ripening ritualism invading this church: *“the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan”* (the Judaizing of the Church?).

ILLUS.: Formalism and ritualism are deadening influences on any church. *“The more ritual the less Bible”* is an axiom which has proven itself again and again in church history. Beware! Smyrna was the first city to build a temple to Rome with the motto *“Caesar is Lord.”* It is the first move towards a union of church and state which later deteriorates into Roman Catholicism and the *“Holy Roman Empire.”*

4. This church had many good things in it, but unfortunately it allowed these negative elements to invade it.

3. The Church at Pergamos: Faltering 2:12-17

1. This church represents the patronized church with an entrenched clericalism – *“the doctrine of Balaam.”*

2. What persecution cannot accomplish, patronization (favoritism or privileges doled out to loyal followers) often does.

ILLUS.: The sword strengthens the Church, but the favoritism which carries loyalty at the expense of sound doctrine or practice will destroy it. The **“doctrine of Balaam”** was not Satan as a roaring lion, but as the deceiving serpent. False doctrine is more dangerous than persecution. (Balaam was a true prophet who prostituted his gifts in order to earn money from King Balak, who hired him to curse the people of Israel. Through Baalam Balak was able to make friends with Israel and then invite the Jews to worship and feast at the pagan altars. *“If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em!”*) This applies to Pergamos because a group in that church said there was nothing wrong with being friendly to Rome. At least one man stood up to this philosophy and paid with his life (Antipas was martyred). Compromise and live or stand and die, were the choices. Praise the Lord for those with the backbone to stand *“in spite of fire, dungeon or sword!”*

4. The Church at Thyatira: False 2: 18-29

1. This corresponds to the Papal church or the “*mother of harlots*” or “*that woman Jezebel*” (v.20).

2. The Lord states He has “*a few things against thee*” because she “*seduce(d) my servants...*”

3. Following ritualism and formalism comes clericalism which soon introduces a heretical sacramentalism along with idolatry. “*things sacrificed to idols...*”

a. Sacramentalism is bestowing saving grace or spiritual merit to ceremonies or rituals.

b. A sacrament is any ritual which imparts grace to the soul - according to Catholicism, e.g., baptism, the Eucharist (communion), penance, confirmation, holy orders, matrimony, and extreme unction (anointing the sick, especially at time of death).

5. The Church at Sardis: Fruitless 3:1-6

1. This corresponds to the Protestant Church during the Reformation Period.

2. Here is a decadent liberalism (“...*thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead*”) v.1

ILLUS.: The Protestant Reformation was not a revival; it was a reformation of Catholicism. It still persecuted true believers. It claimed the Word of God to be the final authority (“*sola-scriptura*”) rather than simply the prime authority (“*prima-scriptura*”), but when the reformers left “*mother church*” they took many of her children with them! They continued with sacramentalism, ritualism, formalism, clericalism, idolatry, etc. They came out but didn’t come out far enough!!! Instead of crucifixes they use crosses, instead of statues, they used pictures, instead of transubstantiation they adopted consubstantiation, instead of baptismal regeneration they adopted infant baptismal dedication or confirmation, instead of a Church/State they formed a State/Church (Calvinism!), etc.

3. The rallying cry of the Reformation was “*the just shall live by faith*” but though many trusted the Lord as Savior they refused to leave the trappings of Romanism. (...a few...have not defiled their garments...)”)

6. The Church at Philadelphia: Fruitful 3:7-13

1. Here is the Powerful Church of the period of renewal; the church of the open door (v.8).

2. This is the time of an exciting revivalism and the beginning of a reemphasis on soul-winning, missionary activity, etc.

ILLUS.: ♦ This is the period of Finney, Moody, Spurgeon, Wesley, Whitfield, Talmadge, Roger Williams, Torrey, Sam Jones, George Mueller, Livingstone, Booth, Chapman, Billy Sunday, Bob Jones, Sr., William Carey, Jonathan Goforth, Hudson Taylor, Hyman Appleman, Jonathan Edwards, Gypsy Smith, Christmas Evans, etc., etc. ♦ This is a time when the door for evangelism is opened and God begins to do great things once again, akin to that of the early N.T. church. ♦ It is a period of great growth in church planting, new Bible schools and colleges, and many new missionaries. It is indeed a fruitful time.

7. The Church at Laodicea: Fashionable 3:14-22

1. Here we have the Present-day Church!

2. This church is what is left of the fruitful Philadelphian church and came through that wonderful period with new churches, new mission stations worldwide, many new schools and a resulting deadening materialism!

3. This is the period when things shall “**wax worse and worse**” and there shall be a great falling away from the church and sound doctrine. 1 Tim. 4; 2 Tim. 4

4. It is the period of lukewarm Christians, mediocre believers, soft-on-sin saints, smoooooth preaching, ear tickling teaching, worldly music, and psychological counseling in the churches with beautiful chandeliers, padded pews, wall-to-wall carpeting, and gorgeous drapes and décor. (Nothing wrong with nice comfortable buildings but not at the expense of the truth, red-hot preaching, sound doctrine, soul-winning fervor, biblical missionary activity and scriptural standards!)

ILLUS.: Someone has said that whenever the devil can't subdue the church, he seduces her! If he can't devour the saints as the roaring lion, he lulls them to sleep as an angel of light.