Revelation 2-3 • Strong & Weak Churches

Introduction
These 7 churches represent at least 4 things: (1) 7 literal, existing churches at the time of John’s writing; (2) 7 types of churches or believers that can exist at any time in history; (3) 7 historic, overlapping ages of the overall church on earth, and (4) 7 types of churches that will exist in the Last Days. The important common denominator for us is that they serve as an example of the strengths and weaknesses in both the church and believer’s walk from which we are to learn how to correct weakness and continue on the right path going forward in our walk with Christ.

[Read 2:1-7]

Q: What are the strong things and the weak things characterizing the church in Ephesus?
A: The strong things center around their good deeds, their toil for the Lord, their perseverance, their discernment as to who are the true apostles, and their opposition to “evil men” such as the Nicolaitans. (The Nicolaitans were followers of a man named Nicolas who advocated carnality and licentiousness under the guise of grace). Their weakness, however, was they have left their first love.

Q: How would you summarize the character of this type of church/believer?
A: (No single, right answer—encourage discussion.) They’re faithful in carrying out God’s work, but it is no longer from the heart.

Application: What does it mean to leave one’s first love? Is it fervor and intensity for Christ, or is it something else? If it is fervor and intensity, how does one regain that? What experiences have you had in this area?

[Read 2:8-11]

Q: What are the strong things and the weak things characterizing the church in Smyrna?
A: They are obviously in opposition to those who were practicing Satanic worship who also include Jewish rituals in the process. Their opposition was such that they were about to suffer for it, even to the point that some would die. This will prove a test for them, but it will end after a period of time. There are no weaknesses pointed out in Smyrna.

Q: How would you summarize the character of this type of church/believer?
A: (No single, right answer—encourage discussion.) They’re faithful even while being persecuted, to the point of death.

Application: What does persecution for your faith do to your faith? What awaits those who suffer for Jesus? What is the strange instruction in the beginning words of verse 10 that can encourage us? (Do not fear….)
12

And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this:
13

I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. 14But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality. 15So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth.
17

'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.'

18

And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write:

The Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and His feet are like burnished bronze, says this:
19

I know your deeds, and your love and faith and service and perseverance, and that your deeds of late are greater than at first. 20But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. 21I gave her time to repent, and she does not want to repent of her immorality. 22Behold, I will throw her on a bed of sickness, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation, unless they repent of her deeds. 23And I will kill her children with pestilence, and all the churches will know that I am He who searches the minds and hearts; and I will give to each one of you according to your deeds. 24But I say to you, the rest who are in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not known the deep things of Satan, as they call them—I place no other burden on you.

Q: What are the strong things and the weak things characterizing the church in Pergamum?

A: Notice that this is the second mention of Satan's name. Their strengths include remaining faithful to Jesus, at least in name, and not denying Him even when one of their own was being martyred. But there has been compromise. The teaching of Balaam means there are some advocating liberalism to the point of sin; that is, tempting others to sin by eating meat sacrificed to animals and participating in temple rites, probably in the name of "grace" or "forgiveness." The teaching of Balaam to Balak means to send some of the women priestesses into the Israelite camp to tempt the men into worship idols. Balaam believed falsely that God would then destroy the Israelites, seeing that he himself could not pronounce a curse of them.

Q: How would you summarize the character of this type of church/believer?

A: (No single, right answer—encourage discussion.) They’re faithful in many things but have still allowed false teaching to enter the church to such a degree that it needs to be cleansed.

Application: What are some things Christians do today that tempt other Christians to sin?

Q: What are the strong things and the weak things characterizing the church in Thyatira?

A: Their strengths include good deeds, love, faith, service and perseverance. Their weakness, however, is that some are following a woman prophetess who is encouraging them to become involved in immorality. Probably a small cult. Obviously, this woman was a member of the church and may still be in the church at the time of this writing.

Q: How would you summarize the character of this type of church/believer?

A: (No single, right answer—encourage discussion.) Wherein Pergamum was faithful in much but allowed false teaching to enter and take root in the church, Thyatira’s faithfulness—even through growing of late—has allowed sensuality to enter and take root within a smaller sub-group within the church.

Application: Can you find a common theme concerning (1) the sins involved, and (2) who is behind them? (The common theme of sin is sexual immorality and idolatry. The one behind them is Satan.) Have you ever noted a smaller group within the church that begins to act/live differently? What did/should you do?
Nevertheless what you have, hold fast until I come.

He who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations; and He shall rule them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to pieces, as I also have received authority from My Father; and I will give him the morning star.

Nevertheless what you have, hold fast until I come.

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He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars, says this:

I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God. So remember what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. Therefore if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white, for they are worthy.

He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

He who is holy, who is true, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens, says this:

Because you have kept My word and have not denied My name. Behold, I will cause those of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—I will make them come and bow down at your feet, and make them know that I have loved you. Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the church in Philadelphia.

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Because you have kept My word and have not denied My name. Behold, I will cause those of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—I will make them come and bow down at your feet, and make them know that I have loved you. Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the church in Philadelphia.

Q: What are the strong things and the weak things characterizing the church in Sardis?

A: This is a pathetic condition because it states that only a few Christians have not become involved in immorality; that there are spiritually asleep. However, there yet remains a faithful remnant.

Q: How would you summarize the character of this type of church/believer?

A: (No single, right answer—encourage discussion.) They’re mostly a church in name only, spiritually asleep except for a small remnant. Their overall work for the kingdom is, as yet, incomplete and needs to be finished.

Application: What is the common theme about what the Christians in these churches ought to do to change their ways? (Repent.)

Q: What are the strong things and the weak things characterizing the church in Philadelphia?

A: In contrast to Sardis, Philadelphia appears to have its spiritual act together. Twice the phrase is used, “Because you have kept My word…” Again, Satan is seen as the Tempter.

Q: How would you summarize the character of this type of church/believer?

A: (No single, right answer—encourage discussion.) Their faithfulness and steadfastness in God’s Word is providing an opportunity to reap a spiritual harvest.

Application: What must the church do to stand strong? Name 3 things.
whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth. 11I am coming quickly; hold fast what you have, so that no one will take your crown.

12He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will not go out from it anymore; and I will write on him the name of My God, and the name of the city of My God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God, and My new name.

13He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

14To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:
The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this:

15'I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. 16So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. 17Because you say, “I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,” and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, 18I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. 19Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent. 20Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.

21'He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. 22He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’"

[Read 3:14-22]

Q: What are the strong things and the weak things characterizing the church in Laodicea?

A: There does not appear to be any strong things noted here, and the weakness is glaring. This is a new temptation not seen in other letters. It is the spiritual complacency of laziness created by materialism.

Q: How would you summarize the character of this type of church/believer?

A: (No single, right answer—encourage discussion.) They are spiritually deceived; blind and not knowing that they’re blind.

Application: Why does materialism create spiritual complacency and a Christian that is “lukewarm”? What must the Laodiceans do to change this situation?
**Overall Application**

Q: Which of the 7 churches do you think most represents the church-at-large today and why?
   A: (Open for discussion.)

Q: Which of the 7 churches do you think most represents the local church you’re attending today and why? Is there some action you should take?
   A: (Open for discussion.)

Q: Which of the 7 churches best represents your current walk with Christ and why? Does this provide a course of action you should take?
   A: (Open for discussion.)

Q: When it comes to strengths within a church, what are some of the characteristics named?
   A: Deeds (good deeds), toil, perseverance, endurance, not growing weary; not tolerating evil people and false apostles; knowing their own spiritual riches; not denying the name of Jesus and holding fast to it; not being involved in immorality, in cults, in idolatry; practicing love, faith and service with perseverance; keeping God’s Word; surviving tests and temptations by Satan, to name a few.

Q: When it comes to weaknesses within the church, what are some of the characteristics named?
   A: The most common one is giving in to immorality of various sorts, then idolatry, then materialism. Implicit within these is also not persevering in the faith, not keeping God’s Word, and moral and spiritual laxity.

Q: What is the one word or phrase that occurs at the end of each letter as a form of instruction and encouragement to the church?
   A: “He who overcomes….”

**Application:** What is the meaning of “to overcome,” and how does one apply it today? What things does the Christian need to overcome today?

**Point:** Why did we not focus on the promises for each church identified by “…he who has an ear, let him hear…”? These promises are fulfilled when we adhere to the good characteristics of all the churches, when we persevere in the faith, keep God’s Word, and completely eliminate moral and spiritual laxity. They don’t come simply because we acknowledge them; they come as the result of living faithfully.