

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.

¹“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says this:

²I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; ³and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. ⁴But I have this against you, that you have left your first love. ⁵Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent. ⁶Yet this you do have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

⁷He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God.’

⁸“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life, says this:

⁹I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

¹¹He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death.’

[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.

[Read 2:12-17]

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?*

[Read 2:18-29]

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?*

²⁵Nevertheless what you have, hold fast until I come.

²⁶‘He who overcomes, and he who keeps My deeds until the end, to him I will give authority over the NATIONS; ²⁷AND 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; ²⁸and I will give him the morning star. ²⁹‘He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

^{3:1}“To the angel of the church in Sardis write:

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. ²Wake 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. ³So 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. ⁴But 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.

⁵‘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. ⁶‘He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’

⁷“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:

⁸‘I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have kept My word, and have not denied My name. ⁹Behold, 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. ¹⁰Because 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

[Read 3:1-6]

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.)*

[Read 3:7-13]

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.

¹²‘He 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.’

¹⁴‘To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:

The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this:

¹⁵I 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 will dine 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' 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.