

Introduction

The seven churches represent at least four different things:

- Seven literal churches which existed at the time Revelation was given;
- Seven types of churches which can exist at any time in history;
- Seven types of churches which will exist in the Last Days;
- Seven types of individual believers.

Additionally, this writer believes as many do that each church represents a 5th aspect of a sequential, overlapping period of history when the corresponding church characterizes its overall condition for that time.

This is provided in much more detail in Jacob Prasch's book, "The Dilemma of Laodicea", which says of the age of Smyrna that it characterizes the "Pre-Nicean Church" of the late 1st through 6th centuries, overlapping into the rise of the institutional church. Smyrna corresponds to a time when the Church is transitioning from its original founders to the rise of a formal, institutionalized overall structure, during which the world turned to persecution in an attempt to eradicate it. All of these churches existed and were present, but the main environment was dominated by what is written about Smyrna.

Read verse 8

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:

Q: What appears to be the main issue at Smyrna?

A: Great persecution from the world and concerted efforts to deceive from within.

Q: How does the meaning of "Smyrna" correspond to the spiritual condition of this church?

A: The name "Smyrna" comes from the word "myrrh" which was used to anoint corpses as was done to Jesus' body by Joseph and company. (Jn. 19:39) It is a product which when mentioned in Scripture is usually associated in some fashion with death and/or burial.

Q: What characteristics of Christ are emphasized for Smyrna?

A: "...The first and the last, who was dead, and has come to life..." (v.8b)

Q: What are they referring to?

A: "...the first and the last..." is a way of illustrating Christ is sovereign and in control over everything from "A to Z", so to speak. "...was dead, and has come to life..." provides His assurance for a church who is undergoing intense, literal persecution, that He has already experienced what is facing them.

Application: Christ serves as a personal example of how we should live even in times of duress because of the way He handled the same during His life.

Q: How many times is their hardship mentioned?

- (v.9) “tribulation”
- (v.9) “poverty”
- (v.10) “suffer”
- (v.10) “tribulation”

Q: What is the “good news” where their physical persecution is concerned?

- (v.9) “I know your tribulation”
- (v.9) “I know your...poverty”

Q: What is the “good news” where their spiritual persecution is concerned?

A: “I know... the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.” (v.9) Their faith is not only under attack by external antagonists, but internal as well.

Point: There was a problem with what can be called “Judaizers” who came behind the Apostles in an attempt to teach that Christians must live under both Covenants contrary to the Apostles’ decision in Acts 15 and the clear teaching of Hebrews. There has always been someone selling this during every age of the Church and today it is most visible in the Seventh-day Adventist denomination and an extreme portion of the Messianic Movement.

Q: What is absent from this shortest of all the letters to the seven churches?

A: Jesus does not correct them due to issues of bad behavior or loss of faith.

Application: The focus when under direct, intense **persecution** is to fixate on how this is leading into the next **life**.

Read verses 9-10

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.

Q: What is absent from this shortest of all the letters to the seven churches?

A: Jesus does not correct them due to issues of bad behavior or loss of faith.

Q: What is the “bad news”?

- “...you are about to suffer...” (v.10)
- “...cast some of you in prison...” (v.10)
- “...tribulation for ten days...” (v.10)

Point: Unlike other churches, the “bad news” is not about shortcomings in their behavior or faith, but putting events into their proper perspective. It is really only “bad news” from a certain viewpoint.

Q: How are these hardships collectively characterized by Christ?

A: “...you will be tested...” (v.10)

Application: While sin incurs deserved consequences, we are not the source of what comes because of trials or tests.

Q: To whom is this testing specifically attributed?

A: Satan. (v.10)

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Point: This is established in the account of Job and even when the devil tested Christ near the beginning of His ministry; Satan is the actual protagonist.

Q: What is the proposed solution to their problem?

A: "...do not fear..." and "Be faithful until death". (v.10)

Q: What is attained by such behavior?

A: "...the crown of life". (v.10)

Application: This is how one overcomes persecution and passes the test.

Q: What is the promise to all believers provided by Christ to all overcomers?

A: "...will not be hurt by the second death". (v.11)

Point: Scripture only mentions the "first resurrection" of believers and the "second death" meted out to unbelievers at the great white throne.

Q: How does this specifically relate to this particular church?

A: They are encouraged to endure in this life even to death knowing they aren't going to suffer a second death but live life eternal with Christ.

Q: What is the dramatic contrast between Smyrna and Laodicea?

A: Of Smyrna, the poorest church, He says, "...but you are rich", but of the materially wealthiest in Laodicea He says, "you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked," (Rev. 3:17)

Q: What is the information Christ reveals that is specific to Smyrna?

A: This period of persecution is going to be limited to "ten days". (v.10)

Q: How did this play out historically?

A: There are many theories, all of which seem to fall short scripturally in some way. The Bible is usually quite literal when it comes to such labels of time as "days" or "years" and specifies when it is applying something out of the ordinary. Many have tried to assign this to ten consecutive reigns of Roman emperors but it cannot be overlooked that it may have simply been ten literal days in the life of this individual church.

Q: What may be significant about the number "ten"?

A: Whereas God often works directly organizing His time of trials around a "forty", satanic efforts are most often limited to a "ten".

Q: Does Christ guarantee they will safely pass through this "ten"?

A: He specifies they need to be "faithful unto death".

Q: What is His personal promise to those who persevere in this manner?

A: "I will give you the crown of life".

Q: How does Christ say we should face this situation?

A: "Do not fear what you are about to suffer".

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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.

Application: God sets the limits on Satan's activities so that although it can be overwhelming, it cannot overcome us.

Read verse 11

Q: What is the promise to all believers provided by Christ to all overcomers?

A: "He who overcomes will not be hurt by the second death".

Q: How does this specifically relate to this particular church?

A: They may have faced temporary death in this life, but will not experience permanent death in the next.

Q: How does Christ reinforce this promise?

A: By reminding us that He "was dead and has come to life" and therefore it will be accomplished for us.

Application: Christ was the first resurrection among many more to come.

Overall Application

There will be tests of persecution which will challenge the degree to which we cling to this life or trust Him for the next.

- What would you say to those who teach that a Christian in good standing with the Lord does not experience hardship or persecution?
- Do you sometimes believe that what you're going through has been too long? How does God manage timing of such things?
- How well do you proactively fix your gaze on the next life rather than this life?

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